



**PATS • 2004**

**New Findings on Inhalants:**  
**Parent and Youth Attitudes**

**March 17, 2005**

## **The Partnership**

The Partnership for a Drug-Free America is a nonprofit coalition of communication, health, medical and educational professionals working to reduce illicit drug use and help people live healthy, drug-free lives.

**Mission: The Partnership for a Drug-Free America® exists to reduce illicit drug use in America.**

For more information about the Partnership and its research-based programs, please go to [www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org).

## **Partnership Attitude Tracking Study**

The Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (PATS) is the largest drug-related attitudinal tracking study in the country. PATS 2004 is the 17<sup>th</sup> wave of this annual survey.

Conducted by Roper Public Affairs and Media, Inc., the PATS 2004 adolescent sample includes a sub sample of 7,314 youth in grades 7 through 12 in public, private and parochial high schools nationwide. The margin of error for this sample is +/- 1.5 percent. PATS 2004 also includes a sub sample of 3,840 youth in grades 6 through 8 in public, private and parochial middle schools nationwide. The margin of error for this sample is +/- 2.8 percent.

The 2004 Parent Study was conducted with 1,205 parents of children under 19 in their homes nationwide. The margin of error for the parent sample is +/- 2.8 percent.

The surveys were fielded in the spring of 2004. African- and Hispanic-American populations were oversampled and then weighted to reflect the national population. Questionnaires were

anonymous, self-administered and completed under the supervision of Roper Public Affairs and Media. Results are nationally projectable.

## **Background**

Inhalant abuse is the intentional inhalation of a volatile substance for the purpose of achieving a euphoric state or psychoactive (mind-altering) effect. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, there are four general categories of inhalants: volatile solvents, aerosol, gases, and nitrites. Hundreds of household and industrial products can be misused as inhalants.

**Volatile solvents** are liquids that vaporize at room temperatures, including paint thinners and removers, gasoline, glues, correction fluids, and felt-tip marker fluids.

**Aerosols** are sprays that contain propellants and solvents such as spray paints, deodorant and hair sprays.

**Gases** include medical anesthetics, such as ether, chloroform, halothane, and nitrous oxide or "laughing gas," and gases found in butane lighters, propane tanks and whipped cream dispensers.

**Nitrites** are different than other inhalants because they primarily dilate blood vessels and relax the muscles. They include cyclohexyl nitrite in room odorizers; amyl nitrite and butyl nitrite both called "poppers."

Prolonged sniffing of solvents or aerosol sprays can lead to heart failure and death within minutes of a session of prolonged sniffing. Known as "sudden sniffing death," this can result from a single session of inhalant use by an otherwise healthy young person. Chronic exposure to inhalants can cause long-lasting

damage to the brain and significant damage to the heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys.

Younger adolescents are more likely than older adolescents to abuse inhalants.

## **The Problem**

In 1995, too few adolescents were aware of the serious dangers of inhalant abuse. Only two-thirds (64%) knew inhalants can kill. Twenty three percent of 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> graders reported abusing inhalants. Further, trends in the University of Michigan's *Monitoring the Future* survey showed that trial use of inhalants among 8<sup>th</sup> graders had increased from 18 percent in 1991 to 22 percent in 1995.

At the same time, parents had a limited understanding of the inhalants problem. They believed the behavior was limited to model airplane glue-sniffing and did not realize how easily children could obtain this wide range of products - only 38% knew inhalants were very easy to obtain. Only one-third (34%) had spoken to their child about inhalants.

Low levels of perception of risk are an important indicator because attitudes drive behavior. According to *Monitoring the Future*, perception of risk (how dangerous consumers view a particular drug) has a negative correlation with drug use. Generally speaking, when people see increasing risk in using drugs, drug use declines. Similarly, the opposite holds true.

Increasing adolescents' perception of risk was key to reducing inhalant use.

## **A National Response**

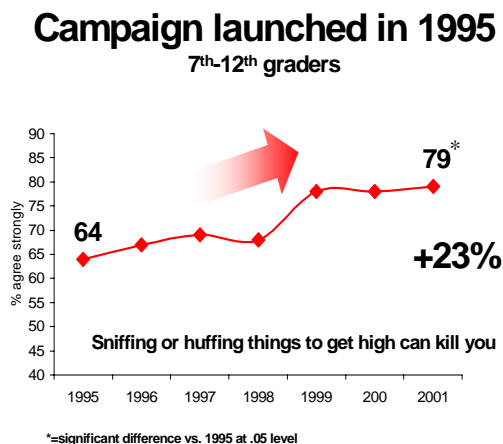
In April 1995, the Partnership launched the first national media-based education campaign to

combat inhalant abuse among adolescents. The program targeted kids aged 9-17 in two separate groups younger/older as well as their parents. Separate campaigns each with a progressively greater level of detail were created for these each segment to avoid educating youth about the behavior. The goal of the youth campaign was to increase perception of risk and reduce inhalant abuse. The goal of the parent campaign was to increase awareness and motivate parents to talk to their children about inhalant abuse.

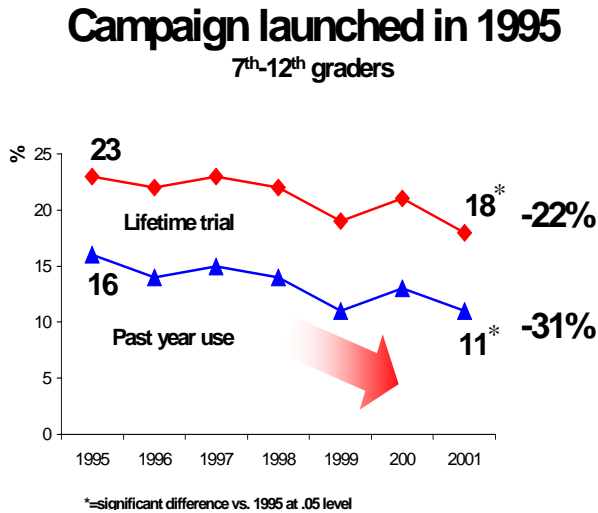
To accomplish this, the Partnership developed television, radio and print messages, worked with television script writers and talk shows to get the issue on air, and developed a special *Reader's Digest* supplement on inhalants.

## **Significant Progress Achieved**

Between the 1995 peak in inhalant abuse and 2001, teen (7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders) perceptions of risk in inhalant use increased significantly:



Correspondingly, teen inhalant abuse declined significantly:



The Partnership inhalant program received a gold “EFFIE Award” for proven effectiveness in the marketplace (the most significant award in advertising, recognizing creative achievement in meeting and exceeding campaign objectives).

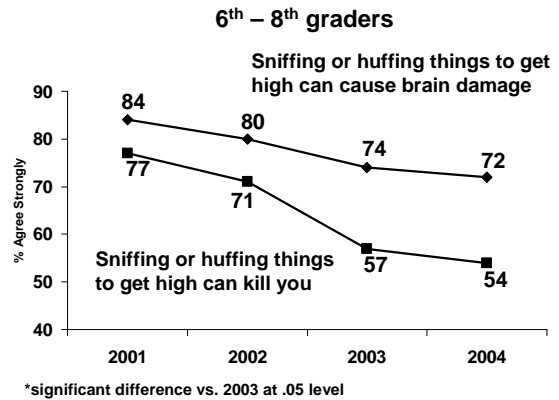
### Current Situation

Over time, other drugs of abuse came to the fore and national campaign focus shifted to address emerging threats such as the spread of Ecstasy and methamphetamine.

However, it is important to realize that each year a new cohort of youth is exposed to inhalant abuse as they enter middle school. Today’s youth were simply too young to benefit from successful efforts of the 1990’s.

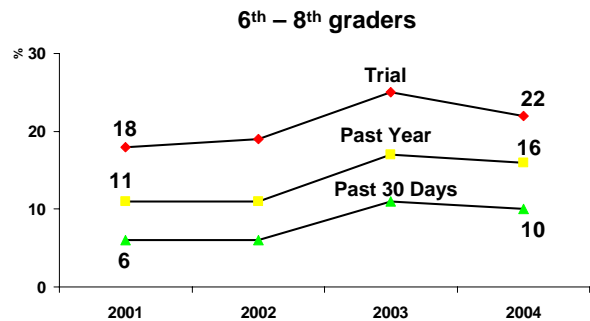
During the past few years, middle school students’ perception of risk of inhalant abuse has fallen:

### Falling Perception of Risk



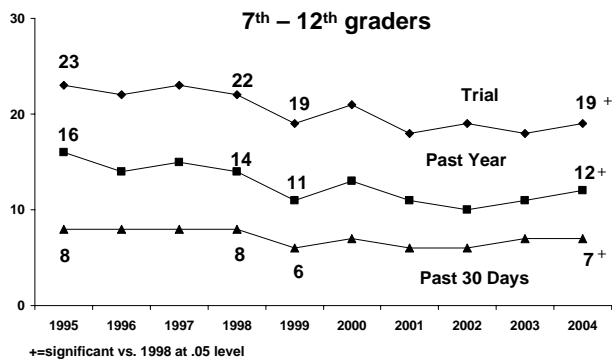
Correspondingly, all measures of inhalant abuse by 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> graders increased in 2003 and have remained at these elevated levels:

### Increase in Inhalant Abuse



Inhalant abuse among the entire 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade sample remains stable and below 1998 levels. However, past year use has increased slightly since 2002:

## Inhalant Abuse

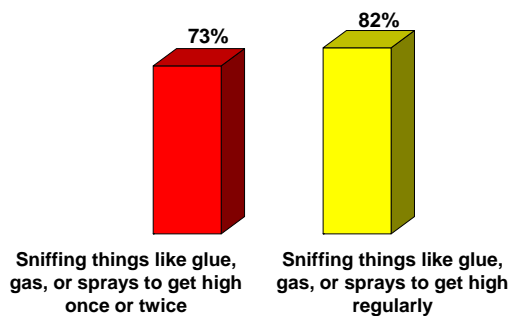


## Parental Awareness & Actions

Parents, for the most part, are aware of the risks in inhalant abuse:

### Perception of **Great Risk**

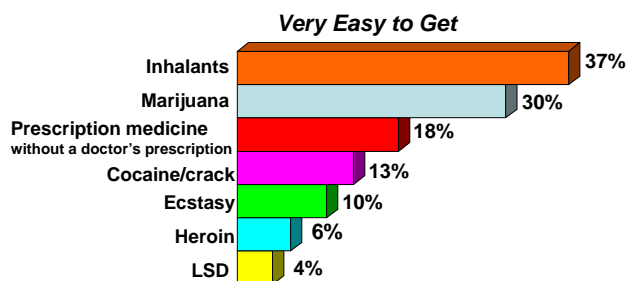
Parents of 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> graders



Parents are also aware that inhalants are the more available to their child than other drugs:

### Parents Aware of Availability

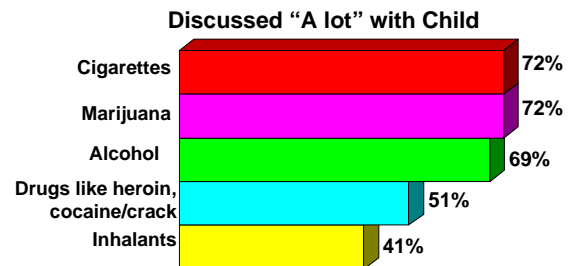
Parents of 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> graders



In spite of this awareness, parents are **less likely** to discuss inhalants with their child than they are to discuss cigarettes, marijuana, alcohol or other drugs:

## Not Educating their Children

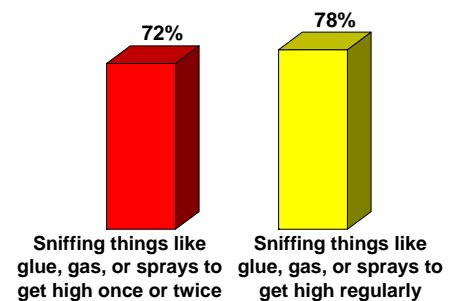
Parents of 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> graders



Why is this? Parents mistakenly believe their children see as much risk in inhalant abuse as they do. Believing their children know the risks of inhalants removes the perceived need to educate them:

## Parents Incorrectly Feel Their Children are Aware of the Risks

Perception of Child's Perception of Great Risk



As with other drugs, few parents believe their child has tried inhalants. **Only four percent of parents of 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> graders believe their child has tried inhalants. Youth are five**

**times as likely to have tried inhalants; 22 percent of 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> graders report having tried inhalants.**

This “disconnect” between parents and adolescents is a consistent finding in PATS. Parents significantly underestimate the vulnerability of their child to substance abuse. There are two components of this. Parents overestimate the risk they believe their child sees in drug use, and they underestimate the likelihood that their child has tried.

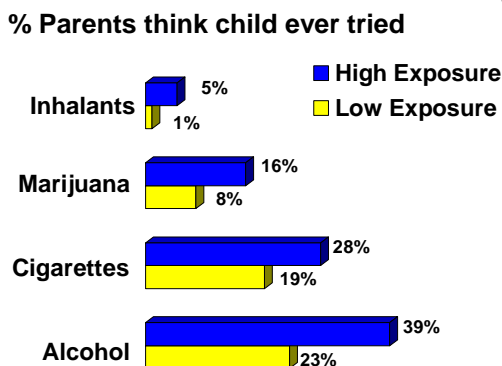
This “disconnect” represents a serious barrier to prevention: if parents don’t perceive their children to be vulnerable to drug use they are less likely to take steps to prevent the activity.

### Anti-Drug Messages Help Decrease the Disconnect

Parents who receive frequent messages about the risks of drugs are more likely to be aware that their child may have tried inhalants and to address the issue.

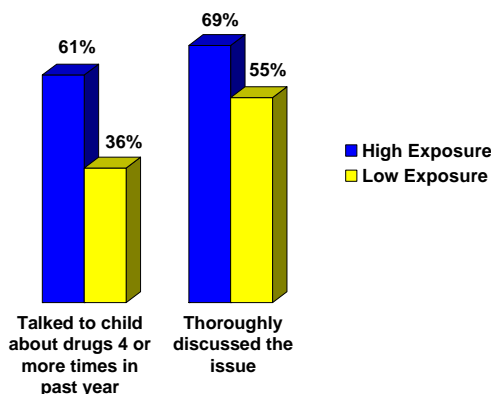
Parents who are exposed to prevention / education messages in the media almost everyday or more are more likely to think their child has tried inhalants than parents who see the advertising less than once a week:

### **Greater Awareness of Vulnerability**



Parents who are more exposed to messages are also more likely to have taken action by discussing drugs with their children frequently:

### **Greater Parental Involvement**



These parents are also more likely to have discussed specific drugs, including inhalants, with their child:

### **Greater Discussion of Specific Drugs**

% discussed topic “a lot”	<u>Heavy Exposure</u>	<u>Low Exposure</u>
Drugs in general	75	65
Cigarettes	71	60
Alcohol	67	60
Marijuana	67	51
Drugs like heroin, cocaine, crack	46	35
Inhalants	38	32
Ecstasy	36	23

### Conclusion & Recommendations

In 1995, an alarming one-quarter (23%) of teens had abused inhalants. After substantial progress in reduced teen inhalant abuse, which fell 22 percent between 1995 and 2001, recent data show that a new generation of children is vulnerable.

Youth who are exposed to inhalants as they enter middle school today were too young to

have learned the risks of inhalants from campaigns of the 1990's. This group is increasingly less aware of the risks of inhalants and more likely to abuse inhalants than students just a few years ago.

Inhalants are in every home, but not every youth is aware that these products can be used to get high. Therefore, youth targeted anti-inhalant advertising must be careful not to educate kids about the potential behavior and inadvertently increase use.

Educating parents about the risks of inhalant use so that they educate their children is an important step in addressing inhalant abuse. Research from PATS has consistently shown that teens who learn a lot about the risks of drugs from their parents are up to 50 percent less likely to use drugs. Yet too few teens (only about 32 percent) say they learn a lot about the risks from their parents.

While parents are aware of the dangers of inhalant abuse and the availability of these substances, they are still not educating their children about the risks. Their inaction is fueled, in large part, by **the mistaken belief that their child knows the risks and is not trying.**

Efforts to educate parents about inhalant abuse must work to correct this misperception. Parents need to get the message that *their own* middle school student is unaware of these risks (which include sudden death) and is *five times* more likely to have tried inhalants than they think. Research suggests that media messages can help to accomplish this goal.

In June 2004, the Partnership re-launched messages in television, radio and print via a nationwide distribution to its network of statewide and city alliances. Since that time, the number of inhalants messages reaching

young people and parents has increased significantly.

Concurrently, an effort sponsored by the Alliance for Consumer Education (ACE) delivered inhalant abuse prevention materials to schools in select states across the nation.

The nationwide inhalant media campaign to deliver prevention and education messages must be sustained and also refreshed with new messages in order to continue to capture attention, change attitudes and reduce abuse. Specifically, the Partnership has recommended a new effort to specifically serve parents utilizing messages in magazines and newspapers to provide in-depth information to parents and caring adults on the risks of inhalant use facing their child.

Further, the Partnership has recommended and is actively exploring expanded resources for parents delivered via the Internet; consumer public relations to deliver educational content via news and earned media; and, new television and radio messages to expand and refresh the existing inhalant prevention / education campaign. Funding is currently being sought to support these important forward steps.

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This report was prepared by Adelma Lilliston, Associate Director of Research and Steve Pasierb, President and CEO.

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