

# HOW HELPING KIDS FIND THEIR NATURAL HIGH LEADS TO HEALTHY CHOICES

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A RESOURCE GUIDE  
FROM NATURALHIGH.ORG



# HOW HELPING KIDS FIND THEIR NATURAL HIGH LEADS TO HEALTHY CHOICES

When it comes to harmful substances, adolescents are particularly at risk of making choices that can ruin their lives. Parents and educators have a keen opportunity to guide kids to find and organize their lives around healthy activities and expressions.

**Research has shown one of the single most effective protective factors for helping youth thrive and lowering addiction risk is to inspire them to identify and pursue their Natural High.**

## SO, WHAT IS A NATURAL HIGH?

It's an interest, an activity, or a talent that sparks a feeling that only comes from savoring joyful moments and pursuing your passions in life.

The concept of a 'natural high' is supported by one of the most powerful studies ever done on how to help youth thrive.





We'd like to introduce you to the groundbreaking work from Peter Benson. At the time of his research, Benson observed that our nation's approach to children was all about deterring them from negative behaviors.

Prior to him, the predominant approach to youth development was **naming youth problems and trying to prevent them.**

So instead he developed the assets approach — focused on building strengths.

Benson's developmental assets framework became the predominant positive youth development approach in the world, cited more than 17,000 times, and the framework and surveys developed to measure the assets have been used with more than 3 million youths in more than 60 countries.

In developing his approach, Benson interviewed thousands of kids and tracked them over early childhood to adulthood. His research is easily summarized as this:

**Kids that find their 'spark' — another word for their Natural High — are far more likely to lead happy and successful lives. They're more likely to make healthier choices, avoid harmful, life-altering, substances, and much more likely to thrive.**

It just makes sense: rather than try to scare kids away from drugs and alcohol, steer them towards positive action, feeling, and interests.

## TAKE IT FURTHER:

Watch Peter Benson's powerful TED talk. It might be the most important twenty-one minutes of your life as a parent or educator.



<https://youtu.be/TqzUHcW58Us>



Benson's Search Institute has identified over 220 types of sparks. A spark, says Benson, "gives energy and joy."

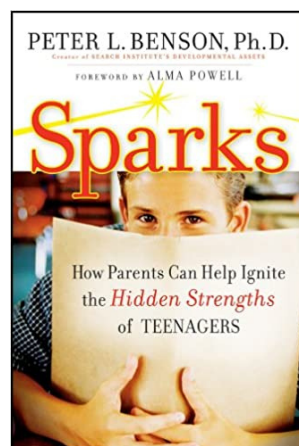
Some specific examples of sparks include — music, art, writing, dance, crafts, building, design, leadership, entrepreneurship, sports, athletics, learning, teaching, relationships, volunteering, nature, animals, computers, comedy, speech, spirituality, drama, photography, film, being committed to living in a specific way, reading, advocacy, family, outdoor life, journalism, engineering, and solving social problems.

Any of these sound familiar? Maybe you've seen your child's eyes light up when they do a certain activity. Maybe they're already familiar with what gives them that feeling like no other. Or maybe they're still looking for that spark.

**Identify your child's natural high and help it grow until it becomes the core of who they are and helps them make the right choices in life. It's simple — and it saves lives.**

## TAKE IT FURTHER:

Read [Sparks: How Parents Can Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teenagers](#) Benson gives hands-on advice for parents and educators on how to recognize a child's spark and what to do once you do.





## THE SCIENCE OF A NATURAL HIGH

Matt, Bellace, psychologist and comedian, explains the science of a natural high in his Natural High Storyteller video.

In it, you will learn about how drugs affect brain development and how teens can use this knowledge to make healthy choices. This Storyteller video is a perfect content piece to share with the kids in your life.



[www.naturalhigh.org/storyteller/matt-bellace-nh/](http://www.naturalhigh.org/storyteller/matt-bellace-nh/)

Finding your natural high can be as simple as thinking about what you enjoy and making an effort to spend some time doing it. We have an activity designed to get you thinking about what you already enjoy or would like to try: [Research Your Natural High](#)

## YOU MIGHT BE THINKING, DOES IT WORK?

Yes!

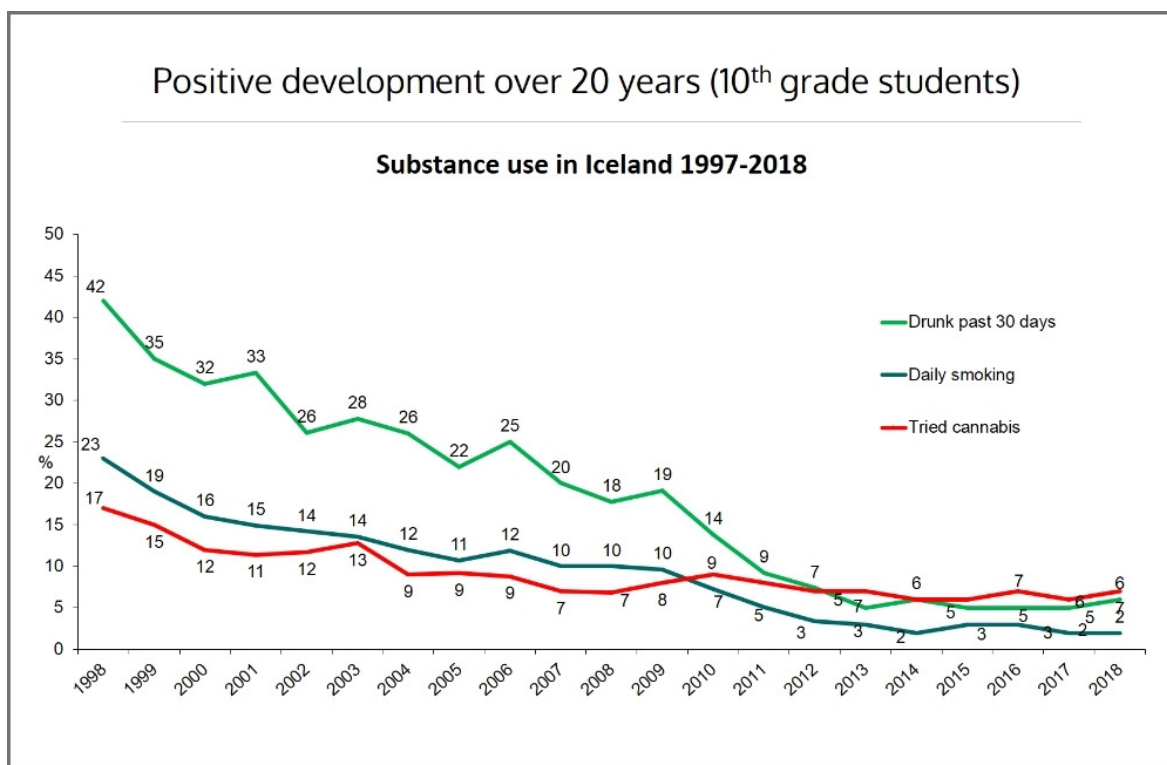
In 2017, [headlines came out of Iceland](#) and swept through the prevention community. A radical, seismic, change had occurred.

**They'd discovered a proven way to reduce the number of teenagers engaging in risky, dangerous, and life-altering behaviors with substance use.**

15 years ago Iceland had one of the worst youth drug and alcohol abuse rates in the world.

But as these headlines reported, Iceland over the last decade has somehow gone from the highest drug and alcohol abuse rate in Europe to the lowest.

**OVER 10 YEARS ALCOHOL ABUSE RATES AMONG TEENS  
DRASTICALLY DECREASED FROM 42% TO 6%.**



When the news first hit the headlines we had to know — How'd they do that?



## HERE'S HOW.

An American named Dr. Harvey Milkman came along to help Iceland orchestrate a national prevention campaign centered around the concept of Natural Highs.

Instead of investing time and money in a scared-straight approach or education about the harmful side effects, they took an upside down approach and invested in the passions and interests of kids. The results were shocking.

**Some called this countrywide revolution the single most significant social milestone in drug and alcohol prevention ever.**

It wasn't a silver bullet, of course. Milkman's work expanded to include four key pillars of intervention and support: facilitate involvement in extracurricular activities, provide targeted educational opportunities for life skills and general wellbeing, encourage family bonding and time together, and provide positive interaction opportunities for peers (contrasted with hanging out on the streets at night with no supervision).

## TAKE IT FURTHER:

Learn more about the Iceland study [here](#).



**ICELAND'S RADICAL TRANSFORMATION  
OF TEEN SUBSTANCE USE**

Perhaps as simplistic as it sounds to create policies and strategies around common sense, we know it works — it's the basis for our prevention program, too.

No group of teenagers throughout the course of history have responded well to threats, fear, or warnings. But, if you come alongside them, listen to them, and encourage them to double down on what makes them come alive — that's where the transformation occurs.

## CREATING A NATURAL HIGH MOVEMENT

**There were 3 basic factors that contributed to the Iceland program's success:**

### 1. FACILITATE KIDS FINDING THEIR NATURAL HIGH

Dr. Harvey Milkman researched the chemistry of behavioral addiction for years before concluding that substituting a natural high for drug and alcohol abuse wasn't just a nice idea — it could work.

As he said: "We didn't say to them, you're coming in for treatment. We said, 'we'll teach you anything you want to learn: music, dance, hip hop, art, martial arts.' These distinct classes could provide a variety of alterations in the kids' brain chemistry, and give them what they needed to cope better with life."





## 2. CULTIVATING LIFE SKILLS

Schools supported Milkman's vision and the government allocated increased funding for youth activities that taught young people **valuable life skills as they pursued their natural highs.**

This is why we talk at Natural High about the principles that create protective factors for youth. Finding the natural high is the first.

We also have to encourage strong mentor relationships, positive peer influence, belief in oneself, the ability to set goals, and resilience.



## 3. BUILDING GUARDRAILS

Iceland recognized that young people would only change in an environment conducive to change. This meant that laws had to be strengthened, teen curfew had to be initiated, and perhaps most

importantly, the environment at home had to change.

Parents agreed to a commitment that they would work to postpone their child's first drink until the age of 18, spend more time with their teenagers, get to know their teen's friends, and not let them have unsupervised parties.

## SIMPLY DELAYING A CHILD'S FIRST DRINK CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE!

Kids who are initiated early to drinking are drastically more prone to experiencing a lifelong struggle with addiction and substance abuse problems.

Throughout the many years and research studies on substance abuse prevention, one initiative has emerged over and over again as the **single most important preventive measure: delay a kid's first drink.**





**In the end, Milkman offered a three-part recipe for adults seeking to help curb youth drug abuse:**

1. Help them find their natural high. Invest in their interests and enroll them in activities.
2. Spend more time at home together as a family.
3. Get to know your teen's friends.



Let's put some of these simple principles to work in our own homes and schools!

## **HOW DOES ALL THIS CONNECT BACK TO NATURAL HIGH'S DRUG PREVENTION TOOLS AND RESOURCES?**

Important research emerged in the prevention scene a few years ago called the [Social Norms Approach](#), and it is one of our strongest pillars of prevention.

The simple idea is this — kids inevitably assume that “everyone is doing it”— that most kids are using drugs and alcohol.

But, the facts are far different than perception. Most kids aren't.

**The Social Norms Theory is an attempt to educate kids about the facts and realities of what's really going on — how many other kids are actually drinking, vaping, and doing drugs.**

What the research has found over the years is when kids discover the truth that not as many kids as they think are doing those things, then they're less likely to do them, too.

### TAKE IT FURTHER:

Watch our [free video series](#) to help you better understand the social norms theory. In the series, you'll learn how to guide teens to see clearly and make wiser choices, even if you think they won't listen to you.

CHECK OUT THE SERIES



As [Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation](#) reports, “sharing healthy truths can reduce student use of alcohol and other drugs. The reality is that many students around the world do not regularly use alcohol or other substances. By sharing this information with students, their parents, schools, communities, and especially peers, young people are taught to hold healthier, more realistic, beliefs and to feel less pressure to "fit in" by using substances.”





If we can correct misperceptions and misinformation, our kids will be better off. If we can offer to them positive and aspirational examples of people who are deemed ‘cool’ and lead remarkably healthy, clean, lifestyles — and deliberately point that out to kids — then we can actually alter their normal instinctual habits.

All of us remember those key individuals who made a difference in our lives when we were growing up. These role models are the backbone of a kid’s protective measures when it comes to drug and alcohol use.

A kid presented with the choice to use drugs will often find themselves asking — ‘what would my role model do?’

That’s it. That’s what we’re all about and what we’re trying to do with our videos and curriculum.

**This is why at Natural High we engage the role models that kids look up to the most. Our Storytellers are cultural icons, heroes — the people that kids aspire to be like.**



They range from Olympians and sports champions to fashion designers to the musicians that are at the top of young people's playlists.

When these Storytellers talk about their own experience avoiding drugs and alcohol, their own passions and how they found the courage to pursue them, you can bet that kids listen.



Let's do it together — let's put the correct information and role models in front of our kids deliberately so they can have the best opportunity to make the wisest decisions for themselves.

Our collective responsibility is to guide kids through adolescence so that they have every opportunity to build a thriving life. Understanding key parts of their development and brain reconstruction, as well as their identity formation will help us intervene in critical, relevant, and timely ways.

We hope you found the content in here to be useful as well as empowering. Thank you for your partnership with us to give kids what they need to make the best possible decisions and build the healthiest habits to start lives on their own on the best path.

Natural High is a drug prevention nonprofit that inspires and empowers youth to find their natural high and develop the skills and courage to live life well. We educate teachers and parents to guide students to understand themselves better and make healthier choices so they can thrive.

## DID YOU ENJOY THIS RESOURCE?

Share this valuable guide and refer a friend or colleague to join the Natural High movement.

[REFER A FRIEND NOW](#)



### POWERFUL STORYTELLING

Positive stories from key influencers have a powerful part to play in helping young people make the right choices. Natural High shares these stories via short, free videos for educators to use in the classroom and for parents to watch with their kids at home.



### POSITIVE ALTERNATIVE TO DRUGS & ALCOHOL

When it comes to issues around substance abuse, kids need to be engaged in a positive way, to be steered towards that which inspires them rather than simply deterred. Natural High is dedicated to bringing the power of positive example to young people's lives by delivering stories that help kids find their own 'natural highs' and that give them the skills to live life well.



### TOOLS FOR EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Our curriculum includes activities that directly engage young people through two-way communication and that have a lifespan beyond the initial viewing of a video or hearing of a story. Each piece of content we offer has relevant questions and discussion topics associated with it.



### SKILLS TO LIVE LIFE WELL

It is not any one thing but rather a combination of factors that ultimately leads young people to have the courage to avoid drug and alcohol abuse. Our curriculum focuses on these protective factors, giving young people a well-rounded skill set that is rooted in the latest research on drug prevention.

**OUR MISSION IS TO INSPIRE AND EMPOWER YOUTH TO FIND THEIR NATURAL HIGH  
AND DEVELOP THE SKILLS AND COURAGE TO LIVE LIFE WELL**