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January 26, 2026

Straight Talk

Welcome to the latest edition of the **Steered Straight Newsletter**—and to a defining moment in our mission.

As we move boldly into 2026, our purpose remains clear but more urgent than ever: to educate, inspire, and empower young people to make positive, life-changing choices. That mission hasn't changed—but it has intensified. And we have no plans of stopping.

Across the country, Michael DeLeon and the Steered Straight team continue to stand on the front lines, reaching communities, families, and young people who need truth, hope, and direction now more than ever. This year, Michael has even more reason to fight—and that fight fuels everything we do.

We are deeply grateful to have you with us on this journey. Your support makes this work possible, and in 2026, we are asking you to stand with Michael, with Steered Straight, and with every life we are committed to impacting. Together, we will continue to inform, educate, and inspire—relentlessly.



January Is a High-Risk Month — Not a Fresh Start

January is not the reset adults want it to be.

When teens return to school after winter break, risky behavior doesn't automatically stop. It often just gets quieter. Structure returns, but habits don't disappear on cue.

Holiday breaks create ideal conditions for substance use: loosened supervision, disrupted routines, increased access, and social normalization. Some teens experiment. Others escalate. And some come back to school carrying patterns that didn't exist a few weeks earlier.

What makes January risky is how *normal* everything looks.

School resumes. Schedules fill up. From the outside, it appears that life is back on track. Adults relax. Attention shifts. Early warning signs — irritability, fatigue, disengagement, mood changes — get written off as stress, winter blues, or typical teen behavior.

This is also the psychological halfway point of the school year. Motivation drops. The end feels far away. Many teens move into survival mode: *just get*

through it. For some, substances become a coping strategy rather than a social experiment.

January isn't dramatic. There's rarely a crisis. Instead, there's a slow slide — subtle changes that are easy to excuse and easier to miss.

The biggest mistake adults make is assuming that getting back to school means the risk has passed. In reality, this is often the window when patterns either solidify or get interrupted.

By the time consequences show up, the behavior is already more established.

This isn't about panic. It's about timing.

January is when noticing matters more than reacting — and when waiting for a “real problem” usually means waiting too long.

On the blog <https://www.michaeldenonblog.org/blog/january-is-one-of-the-most-overlooked-high-risk-months-for-teens> I break down why January is one of the most overlooked high-risk periods for teens, what signs adults commonly dismiss, and what proactive support looks like right now — before small patterns become bigger problems.

- Michael DeLeon

Founder, Steered Straight

Road Warrior



How the Miles Make a Difference

Very emotional day today - was kinda unprepared for it too.... Spent all morning training Correctional Professionals and all afternoon empowering and inspiring inmates. It really dawned on me how far I've come and how much more I desire to do!

Paintsville, Kentucky - AWESOME, AWESOME DAY!!! How incredible is it when students are so inspired by your previous visit that they request their administration to bring you back! This

amazing group of students led by an incredible School Nurse is working hard to educate and empower their peers!

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In The News



Governor Hochul proposes new tax on nicotine pouches in part of her budget plan

Hunter Wright News10NBC

January 21, 2026 - 4:18 PM

ALBANY, N.Y. — Gov. Kathy Hochul proposed a new tax on nicotine pouches in New York as part of her budget plan. The proposal aims to include pouches like the popular brand “Zyn” in the state’s definition of taxable tobacco products. Hochul’s administration estimated that this tax could generate \$54 million in revenue. New York State’s budget director described nicotine pouches as a public health concern.

The health effects of nicotine pouches are still being studied. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stated there are no safe tobacco products.

The American Cancer Society reported that nicotine pouches can increase heart rate and blood pressure, potentially damaging blood vessels. They can also irritate gums and cause cavities.

The 2024 National Youth Tobacco Survey found that nicotine pouch use is rising quickly among teens and young adults.

On the Road to Recovery

Bonnie Scott's Story — From Personal Struggle to Purpose

Steered Straight and Recovery Army sat down with Bonnie Scott.

Bonnie Scott's life was deeply shaped by both her own experience with addiction and an unimaginable loss that many families know far too well. A native of Kent County who spent many years in recovery herself, Scott lost her only son in May 2012 to a heroin overdose — a moment that changed her life's direction and inspired her to take action in her community.

At the time, Scott saw a gap in recovery supports on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Traditional facilities often isolated residents in institutional settings far from their families, which she felt did little to promote meaningful long-term rehabilitation. With that in mind, she helped create **Rising Above Disease (RAD)**, a nonprofit and **women's recovery house in Easton** that opened in November 2016.

RAD was built on a simple but powerful idea: recovery shouldn't require uprooting someone from their community. Instead, Scott and her collaborators worked to create a **home-like environment** where women could heal close to their support systems, jobs, and families. The house offers supportive peers, life skills assistance, and access to medical, dental, and mental health services — all essential components for stability in early recovery.

Scott's work goes beyond bricks and mortar. She has shared her story at recovery rallies and grief support events, helping others who have lost loved ones to overdose and providing hope through her lived experience.

Her journey — from addiction and personal heartbreak to advocacy and sober-living support — underscores a core truth of recovery work: **healing isn't just about sobriety, it's about community, purpose, and compassion.**

To hear her story in her own words please click the link below.

To see more stories of hope and inspiration please visit:

www.recoveryarmy.com



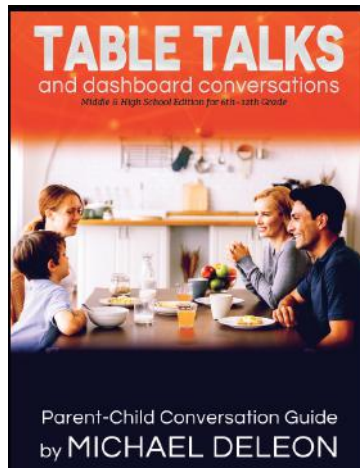
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TABLE TALKS

Michael has created workbooks for parents and children that guide them in managing relationships and discussing difficult topics beyond drug and alcohol abuse. Each month, he focuses on a different subjects and offers many different topics of conversation and activities you can do with your children to help foster that deep connection and communication that is so vital.



Table Talks and Dashboard Conversations is an in-depth conversation guide for parents and kids. You can order through [Amazon](#) or the [Steered Straight website](#).



The Month of January: Drug Epidemic Month

The focus of January is the drug epidemic. Through this month we will highlight certain aspects of the drug epidemic and what to discuss with your children but make no mistake, the drug epidemic is a 12 month, 365 days a year problem and should always be on the table for discussion.

This week of January I would like to encourage you to have a conversation with your child about realistic peer-pressure scenarios they might face. Brainstorm with them to come up with practical refusal strategies.

Scenario 1: The “Everyone’s Doing It” Party Offer

Situation:

At a party, a friend offers your teen a vape, saying, “Come on, everyone’s trying it — don’t be the only one missing out.”

Parent Conversation Ideas:

- **Normalize saying no:** “It’s okay to be different. You don’t have to do what everyone else does to have fun.”
- **Provide a confident response:** “No thanks, I don’t do that.” or “I’m good — I like to stay healthy.”
- **Offer an exit strategy:** Suggest bringing a soft drink or snack to hold in your hand so refusing feels less awkward.
- **Role-play:** Practice saying no in a calm, confident voice so your teen feels prepared.

Scenario 2: Stress Relief or Coping Offer

Situation:

A friend notices your teen is stressed about school and offers a prescription pill or vape: “This will help you chill out — it’s no big deal.”

Parent Conversation Ideas:

- **Acknowledge feelings:** “I get that it feels stressful, but substances are a shortcut that can cause bigger problems.”
- **Teach a script:** “I have my own way to deal with stress, thanks.” or “I don’t need that — I can handle this.”
- **Brainstorm alternatives:** Exercise, listening to music, talking to a friend, journaling, or calling a parent/mentor.
- **Reinforce trust:** Remind your teen they can come to you when they feel pressured.

Scenario 3: The “I’ll Make You Cool” Offer

Situation:

During lunch or a social hangout, a classmate offers your teen a substance with a brag: “If you try this, you’ll fit in better.”

Parent Conversation Ideas:

- **Question the reasoning:** “Do you want to be friends with someone who pressures you?”
- **Give a polite but firm response:** “No thanks, I’m not interested,” or “I don’t need that to have fun.”
- **Empower social identity:** Encourage your teen to define themselves by their choices, not peer approval.
- **Practice humorous deflection:** Some teens like witty responses, like “Nope, I’ve got my own style.”

Key Takeaways for Parents to Emphasize

1. **Saying no is normal** —
most teens will respect honesty.
2. **Plan responses ahead of time** — preparation reduces stress and second-guessing.
3. **Offer alternatives** —
redirect attention or provide an out for the situation.
4. **Encourage reflection** —
after refusing, talk about how it felt and reinforce confidence.

Please educate yourself and have these valuable conversations with your kids. It can literally change their lives!

Spend the week connecting, educating, and building your kids up! The more we open up with kids, the more they will open up to the important adults in their lives.

Headlines We Are Following

<https://www.michaeldeleonblog.org/blog/a-13-year-old-was-found-with-1500-suspected-fentanyl-pills-in-a-minnesota-middle-school-and-every-parent-in-america-should-be-alarmed>

<https://themarijuanaherald.com/2026/01/tennessee-bill-would-make-kratom-possession-a-felony/>

<https://www.whcc.com/top-news/governor-hochul-proposes-new-tax-on-nicotine-pouches-in-part-of-her-budget-plan/>

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Contact Steered Straight

Michael and his team of professional Steered Straight speakers are eager to meet you in person and make a profound impact on your

students, staff, and community. To bring their inspiring message to your next event, contact Steered Straight to schedule.

[CONTACT STEERED STRAIGHT](#)

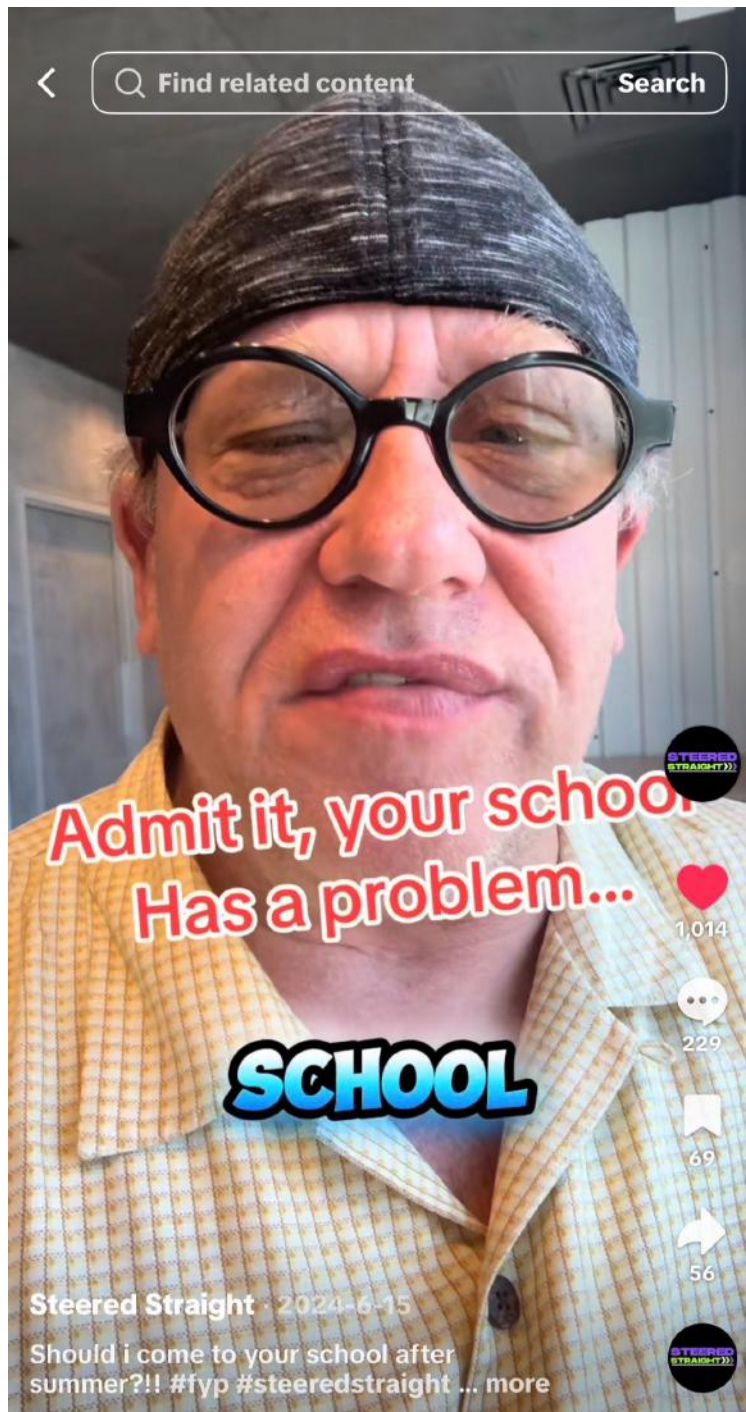


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Watch now on TikTok

@steeredstraight

Click on the photo to view the post!

Michael in his element on Instagram. No more important legacy than kids!!!

A great reminder on TikTok....Does your school have a vaping issue? Let's stomp out vaping and let Steered Straight help! Bring one of our amazing presentations to your school.

Michael DeLeon and the team at Steered Straight are working hard to ensure this generation gets what they need to change the world. No other program like it and no one delivers the message better. All for the kids! Follow Michael and Steered Straight on social media so you don't miss a beat!

#steeredstraight #motivator #explore #advice #drugfree #antivaping #recovery #quitvaping #stayingyourlane



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