Many 12 year-olds in the “tween” generation, yearning to become teenagers, are already using illicit drugs. Their drug of choice is inhalants. This is the conclusion of a new report by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), revealed today at a press conference by the National Inhaling Prevention Coalition (NIPC) to kick off the 16th annual National Inhalants & Poisons Awareness Week (NIPAW). The data show that 3.4 percent of 12 year-old children used inhalants in the past 12 months, outpacing use of marijuana (1.1 percent) and misuse of prescription pain relievers (2.7 percent).

Inhalant use increased to 4.8 percent for 13 year-olds, use that is more common than use of marijuana (4.0 percent) or misuse of prescription pain relievers (3.9 percent). The data, which reflect an annual average of combined 2002-2006 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), indicated that by age 14 use of marijuana and prescription pain relievers increases, leaving inhalants ranked third. But regardless of age of use, inhalants can cause “Sudden Sniffing Death” or lead to addiction and other health risks.

A companion SAMHSA study on admissions of adolescents to substance abuse treatment found that it was more likely that adolescents reporting inhalant use suffered also from psychiatric disorders (45 percent) compared with adolescents who abused other drugs but did not use inhalants (29 percent). This study, “Adolescent Admissions Reporting Inhalants: 2006,” determined that while adolescents ages 12 to 17 accounted for only 8 percent of substance abuse treatment admissions in 2006, they represented 48 percent of all admissions reporting use of inhalants, whether used exclusively or along with other drugs of abuse. Teenage girls comprised 41 percent of adolescent admissions involving inhalants, but only 30 percent of admissions not involving inhalants.

“Inhalants are everywhere in the house and garage, and parents often do not realize that the glue and paint are not being used for crafts or science projects,” SAMHSA’s Director of the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, H. Westley Clark, M.D., J.D., M.P.H., said. “While the data show that often children move away from using inhalants as they grow older, they often move on to other illicit drugs. Inhalants are a health hazard that can damage the brain, heart, liver or kidneys. Children may think of inhalants as fun, but adults need to know they cause severe damage and even death.”

Harvey Weiss, executive director of the National Inhalant Prevention Coalition, said, “Inhalants are a danger to public health. Young children are risking death or a lifetime of illness for a temporary high. Even if a child does not die, get addicted or otherwise develop health problems that will have a life-long effect, that child is using a gateway drug and could be on the way to years of drug use, and a long, difficult path to recovery.”

“Today, the substance abuse threat our children face frequently does not come from a sinister dealer on the street, but rather from products commonly found in our own homes,” said John Walters, Director of National Drug Control Policy. “Despite a 24-percent reduction in youth drug use since 2001, inhalants abuse remains a serious and potentially deadly problem. Parents must be vigilant in protecting their children from threats that may be hidden in plain sight.”

Inhalants are common household products such as shoe polish, glue, aerosol air fresheners, hair sprays, nail polish, paint solvents, degreasers, gasoline or lighter fluids. Youngsters intentionally inhale these substances to get high. As adolescents age from 12 to 17, choice of inhalants among new users migrates from glue, shoe polish or other toluene products among 12 year-olds (29.6 percent of those who began using inhalants in the past year) to nitrous oxide or whippets among 17 year-olds (59.3 percent of new inhalant users).

“Parents have to protect their children from so many external threats, real and perceived, that it is easy to overlook those hiding in their own homes,” said Nora D. Volkow, M.D., Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, National Institutes of Health. “One of the reasons inhalants present such a difficult challenge is their ready availability to children and adolescents, who are largely unaware that a single huffing session can kill them.”

The NSDUH study, “Inhalant Use across the Adolescent Years,” shows that an annual average of 593,000 adolescents ages 12 to 17 had used inhalants for the first time in the year before their survey interview, and
approximately 1.1 million adolescents used inhalants in the past year. Among all adolescents ages 12 to 17, 20.9 percent used an illicit drug in the past year. Among those ages 12 or 13 who used illicit drugs in the past year, 45.5 percent used inhalants, 36.5 percent abused pain relievers, 28.4 percent used marijuana; and 9.8 percent used other drugs. Among drug users ages 14 or 15, 25.1 percent used inhalants; 34.2 percent used pain relievers non-medically; 66.2 percent used marijuana and 26.3 percent used other illicit drugs. At ages 16 or 17, the surveys show that 12.4 percent of past-year illicit drug-users used inhalants in the past year; 35.2 percent used pain relievers non-medically; 81.4 percent used marijuana; and 34.2 percent used other illicit drugs.

Debbie Goldman, who wound up with permanent health problems from inhaling nitrous oxide, and is now in recovery, told the press conference: “My addiction was so severe that I ended up with peripheral neuropathy from vitamin B12 deficiency as a result of excessive nitrous oxide inhalation. Getting clean from nitrous oxides was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do — harder than graduating NYU Law School cum laude, or Columbia Business School, or even passing the New York State Bar Exam.”

Stephen J. Pasierb, President and CEO, Partnership for a Drug Free America, unveiled the 2008 Partnership Attitude Tracking Survey, which showed: “While teens are increasingly aware of the dangers of illicit street drugs, they continue to underestimate the risks of abusing products that can be found in the home, like inhalants and prescription and over the counter medications.” He emphasized that “despite the disturbing prevalence of inhalant abuse, parents have an unprecedented opportunity to protect their teens and prevent this behavior, as most teens report easy access to these products in their home or in friends’ homes. Parents must learn which products can be abused, safeguard access to them at home, and most importantly, have frequent conversations about the risks of inhalant abuse with their kids.”

Cheri Vallery of Spring, Texas, outside Houston, whose 16-year-old daughter, Kaitlyn, died from inhaling computer keyboard cleaner, told the press conference: “I made a promise to Kaitlyn the night she died that her death would not be in vain. That is why I urge kids to tell an adult if a friend is using inhalants. Her friends did not tell because they did not want Kaitlyn to be mad at them. Kaitlyn’s not mad, now. She’s dead.”

Jordan Paul, a 17-year-old youth from Ohio, talked about his experiences using a series of inhalants, gasoline, hair spray, cleaning supplies—whatever was available. He is being treated for addiction at Pathway Family Center in Milford, Ohio.