

## Parents: Rules for your kids to live by

A few years ago, a high schooler who had struggled with substance abuse revealed that her parents never asked where she was going when she left the house. The teenager, speaking to adults and peers at a community meeting to prevent youth drinking, told the audience how much she *wished* her parents had cared enough to ask.

That teenager's experience underscores the deep need our kids have for love and security – and for boundaries that can keep them safe. When it comes to kids not using alcohol and other drugs, establishing clear rules and consistently enforcing fair consequences is critical. In fact, research shows parental influence is the key to keeping them alcohol free.

An important step to making rules and consequences effective is to involve your kids in establishing them. Talk with your kids about your family's beliefs and values, seek their input and commit to making the topic an ongoing conversation. Involving them reinforces that you are interested in what they have to say and, in turn, will help them be more open to the important messages you have to communicate.

What messages work in helping kids steer clear of alcohol and other drugs? Here are a handful:

- *No drinking until age 21.* Making this a hard and fast rule is a great opportunity to reinforce with your kids that consuming alcohol before age 21 is against the law. Hearing this important message from you – on a regular basis - is powerful. Equally important, communicate the fact that drinking before 21 can have serious health consequences. Compelling health research shows that regular drinking by youth may harm their developing brains.
- *Respect your body.* Consider making this not just a rule, but a core family value. Discuss the health and safety benefits of avoiding drinking at a young age in the context of other healthy habits, such as eating right and getting enough sleep. Consider, too, putting the conversation in the context of your child's activities. Encourage a conversation about how alcohol or other drug use would impact their success on the field or in the classroom.
- *If you find yourself in an uncomfortable or potentially dangerous situation where alcohol or other drugs are present, contact me, a relative or family friend we've agreed is part of our "safety net."* Despite our and their best attempts, kids may end up in a dicey situation they themselves didn't expect to be in. Be proactive and discuss such situations with your child before they occur. Consider agreeing on a strategy that results in their removing themselves from the situation without embarrassment, but be clear that they still may face consequences from you. This rule is also a

prime opportunity to talk about the people in your family's circle of relatives and friends your child feels safe contacting if you are not available.

- *Never get into a car with someone who has been drinking.* Despite consistent media messages about the dangers of intoxicated drivers, too many youngsters continue to put themselves in harm's way. About 12 percent of 11<sup>th</sup>-graders say that in the last month they rode in a car driven by a teenager who had been drinking, according to a survey of Oregon schoolchildren. The figure jumps to about 15 percent when 11<sup>th</sup>-graders were asked if they rode in a car with a parent or other adult who had been drinking. These statistics highlight the importance of communicating this message early and often, and of establishing with your child a plan if they find themselves in a dangerous situation.
- *No driving with a newly licensed driver.* Being firm, and enforcing family consequences if this rule is broken, is key – and the law backs you up. In 2000, Oregon passed graduated licensing laws aimed at keeping teens safe and, according to the state, the number of fatalities and crashes has been reduced. Among the restrictions for new drivers under age 18: In the first six months of getting their license, they may not carry passengers younger than age 20 in the car unless they are an immediate family member.
- *If you're out after curfew, contact us and tell us why.* The prospect of sitting at home, worrying that something has happened to our kids because it's late and we haven't heard from them, sends a chill up every parent's spine. If your child has a cell phone, or if you are considering allowing them to have one, consider making this rule – and a mandate that they keep the phone on and answer it when you call - a condition of it.
- *No hanging out at friends' houses if parents are not home, unless it's agreed to in advance (And, a related rule, no spending the night at someone else's house if you, the parent, don't know the other parents).* It's crucial that kids, especially at younger ages, have responsible adult supervision when they are at friends' houses. As our children get older, and as they mature and show they can make responsible decisions, it may be that you adjust this rule and allow visits that are agreed to beforehand. These two rules are a great opportunity for us as parents to meet and get to know the parents of our child's friends, and to share family rules and expectations about such issues as underage drinking.

Parents can't be everywhere, but you are the biggest influence in their life. That's why it's important to keep the lines of communication open, be firm about where you stand, and educate them so that they are equipped to make healthy choices when it comes to alcohol and other drugs.

*For parenting resources and information about keeping kids alcohol and drug free, please contact Oregon Partnership, a nonprofit that provides substance*

*abuse prevention education and treatment referral, at 503-244-5211, or log on to [www.orpartnership.org](http://www.orpartnership.org) or [www.faceitparents.com](http://www.faceitparents.com).*