

## **The Power of Parents: Adolescents, teens say parents a leading influence in helping them stay alcohol free**

“Peer pressure is overrated; parents are huge.”

That comment came from an Oregon teenager, who said parental influence was a major reason she chose to be alcohol free. That teen is far from alone. A survey a few years ago by the respected Roper organization found that 76 percent of youth ages 8 to 17 said parents were a leading influence in their decision about whether to drink.

It can be easy for parents to dismiss the enormous power they have to educate and equip their kids to steer clear of alcohol. Our culture is awash in alcohol advertising that promotes the false notion that everyone drinks, with no consequences, and it can make parents feel undermined when it comes to helping their children make the healthy choice to not drink.

But research underscores that parental influence is *the* key to keeping kids alcohol free. Among the most important steps parents and other caregivers can take are to educate themselves about the harms of underage drinking, to share those facts with their children, to express on a regular basis their strong disapproval of youth alcohol use, to establish rules and clear consequences for their behavior, and to take opportunities to strengthen the connection with their kids.

It's critical that parents start talking with their kids when they are young about the harms of underage drinking because alcohol is the No. 1 drug problem among youth. About one in three eighth-graders and half of 11<sup>th</sup>-graders consumed alcohol in the past month, according to the Oregon Healthy Teens Survey. And too many teens who drink aren't just having a cocktail at the end of the day; they are drinking a lot in one sitting.

The risks associated with youth drinking are serious. Alcohol is a major cause of death among young people. The part of the brain that controls planning, delayed gratification and judgment develops last. Pouring alcohol on top of that affects a youngster's ability to make sound decisions, like whether to ride in a car with a driver who has been drinking. Beyond the sobering safety consequences, underage drinking has serious health risks. Scientific research has found that regular drinking can harm a child's brain. Studies show that tremendous brain development occurs during the adolescent and teens years, and that the brain is not fully developed until our mid-20s. For parents, helping kids make the healthy choice to stay alcohol free falls into the same category as making sure they wear a helmet when they ride their bicycle or a seat belt when they get in a car.

Concern about underage drinking has risen to such a level that the U.S. surgeon general, the nation's top doctor and public health officer, has issued a call to action that emphasizes the critical role that everyone, including families, plays in addressing the issue.

It's important to emphasize that underage drinking is not an inevitable rite of passage. Although the rate of alcohol use among adolescents and teens is cause for tremendous concern, the statistics show that *most* children do not drink. Indeed, parents who are proactive - taking the preventative steps such as sharing the facts about alcohol's harms and establishing family rules and consequences – surround their children with a

protective framework that can keep them from using alcohol at a young age and avoid the problems that accompany underage drinking.

What strategies can parents apply today to protect their kids from alcohol and other drug use? A strong family bond is proven to be one of the most important factors. Here are a few suggestions to help build closeness and trust – even through everyday activities:

- Spend time doing fun things as a family, like cooking and eating dinner together, playing board games, watching a movie, shooting baskets or going to community events.
- Take advantage of everyday moments to tell your children that you love them and to share your values and expectations. Children may not always admit it to their mom and dad, but as stated before parent influence is the biggest factor in their decision about whether or not to use alcohol and other drugs.
- Your child may have opinions, fears and concerns about substance use. In addition to sharing with your son or daughter the facts about alcohol and other drug use, ask them open-ended questions and listen to their perspectives.
- Help your child develop the skills to refuse offers of alcohol from their peers and others. Together, practice responses they are comfortable saying.
- Take a look at the example you're setting with your kids. What message are you sending about things such as your own alcohol use? If you do not drink, explain to your child why. If you enjoy an occasional drink, talk with your child about moderation and why the legal drinking age is 21 (studies show the law has saved lives on the road and prevented injuries, and it has kept countless adolescents and teens from drinking at early ages). And let your son or daughter see you say "no" to a drink from time to time, too.
- Remember that parenting doesn't have to be done in isolation. Consider spending time with the parents of your child's friends. Meet at a coffee shop or park. You'll find other parents share many of the same concerns and challenges about raising kids. Together, you can establish standards of behavior, explore ways to build your parenting skills through classes and seminars, and become an even better parent.