

By Pamela Erickson

There's good news when it comes to youth alcohol use in Oregon: Most kids do not drink. However, among those who do, a state survey released in the fall revealed some troubling trends: 8th- and 11th-graders say they "usually" drink hard liquor more than any other type of alcohol.

Beer was the second most popular alcoholic beverage among 11th-graders who drank, while flavored beverages such as hard lemonade were the second most popular type among 8th-graders.

Hard liquor as the alcohol of choice for youth is not unique to Oregon. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a report last year that found bourbon, rum, scotch, vodka and whiskey were consumed more than beer by high school students who drank in Arkansas, New Mexico, Nebraska and Wyoming.

The researchers suggested several reasons why teens might prefer hard liquor over beer, including the fact that it's easier to hide alcohol consumption by pouring it into a soft drink, and that it might taste better to beginning drinkers. In Also, the alcohol level is higher in liquor, which means teens – many of whom binge drink – feel the effects faster, according to researchers.

All types of alcohol undermine the health and safety of children, and parents who lock their liquor cabinet and make beer and other alcoholic beverages less accessible to their kids in the home are taking a major step in protecting them from alcohol's harms. Here are a few additional tips to help keep your children safe and alcohol free:

- Dispel the myth that most kids drink. In fact, about 70 percent of Oregon's 8th-graders, and about half of 11th-graders, say they do not. Most children want to fit in with the crowd. Underscoring that they are in the majority by being alcohol free can lessen the influence of peer pressure.

- Brainstorm and role play with your kids so that they are well equipped to refuse alcohol when presented with opportunities to drink. For instance, shy children and adolescents might be more comfortable saying, "no thanks" or "I have to go" when presented with the opportunity to drink alcohol. Those more outgoing might say something like, "forget it!" or "no way!"

- Promote positive peer pressure. Acknowledge when your child and his or her friends make good decisions together. Talk with your son or daughter about the benefits that come with choosing friends who can help them move in a positive direction.

- Remember that you're the biggest influence in your child's life, from preteen even through the late teen years. Enforce family rules against underage drinking, and stand your ground when it comes to consequences.

- Talk with your kids – early and often - about the fact that alcohol is a drug and convey the dangers of youth drinking. For example, new research shows regular drinking can harm the developing adolescent brain. Yet 45 percent of Oregon 8th-graders, and about 40 percent of 11th-graders, said there was no risk or a slight risk that people would harm themselves by taking one or two drinks of alcohol nearly every day, according to a 2007 survey.

- Get to know the parents of your children's friends. And restrict youth parties or gatherings in houses when adults are not there. Make sure responsible adult supervision is provided when your children visit other kids' homes.

Remember that parenting doesn't have to be done in isolation. Organizations such as Oregon Partnership, a statewide nonprofit that provides substance abuse prevention education and treatment referral, offer a host of resources for parents and other caregivers.

Pamela Erickson works with Oregon Partnership and can be reached at perickson@orpartnership.org. For more information about keeping your children safe, healthy and alcohol free, please visit www.faceitparents.com, or www.orpartnership.org.