

Nurturing connections can help keep parents, kids on same wavelength

By Emily Moser

As parents, we work hard to keep in tune with our kids and provide guidance and discipline when it comes to the challenges of growing up – from doing well in school to making good choices in terms of friends and how they spend their time.

But it's natural to sometimes feel as though we're on a completely different wavelength than our son or daughter. If a 2008 survey is any indication, lots of parents and kids are, in fact, on different wavelengths.

Parents of teenagers overestimate how important social pressures are for teens and underestimate the degree to which alcohol and other drugs concern them, according to the national survey.

More than 40 percent of parents said social pressures and relationships, such as fitting in, peer pressure and sexual issues, were the top concern of teens, compared with just 22 percent of teens. In contrast, parents underestimated the importance of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs in teens' lives. More than one in every four teens reported that drugs are the No. 1 problem facing people their age, compared with only 17 percent of parents.

It seems the survey results aren't just an anomaly, because the organization that reported the findings, the Center for Substance Abuse Research in an information piece adapted from a National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse survey, said they are similar to survey findings two years ago.

This gap underlines how important it is that we continually talk with our kids about what's happening in school and what they and their friends are up to, and ask lots of open-ended questions about how they feel about their successes and challenges. And that requires creating an environment that makes effective communication possible.

Does your family eat dinner together regularly? Do you capitalize on those natural moments, like after the ballgame, before music rehearsal or at the end of the day when your child is working on homework in their room, to chat? Do you set aside time to just hang out with your kids, doing something they enjoy? Oftentimes, connecting with our kids about tough subjects – alcohol and other drugs, among them – can happen best when the conversation isn't framed as the "big talk," but instead occurs in the ordinary course of conversation.

The fact that more than one-quarter of teens say alcohol and other drugs are their top concern can mean many things. Maybe they have yet to try alcohol or other drugs but have been asked to by friends or acquaintances. Perhaps they're unsure of how they will fit in if they take a stand against using alcohol or other drugs. Maybe they have experimented and are afraid of what they've done or where it may lead. And it could be that they have lots of unanswered questions.

That's where you come in. The fact is, parents are their child's best information source – and biggest influence – when it comes to the reality of alcohol and other drugs and making healthy choices. At the same time, your kids can be *your* best source for a wealth of information about the pressures young people face today.

So, how do you ensure you're on the same wavelength as your kids? Ask open-ended questions, listen without interruption, and encourage them to share their experiences and feelings by using phrases such as, "Tell me more about that." Remind them that you really do understand what it's like to be an adolescent or teen, and encourage them when make good decisions.

Be flexible, as well, about where the conversations go. Remember that talking with your child revolves in large part around what they have to say and their perspectives. You can then tailor your messages based on your knowledge and experience and your family's values.

Take a look at the example you're setting. What message are you sending about such things as your alcohol use? If you don't drink, explain to your child why. If you enjoy an occasional drink, talk 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.

Remember to be clear and consistent about your family's rules against youth drinking and other drug use. Talk about rules and consequences as a family, making your child a part of that conversation. And start early so that your son or daughter understands your family's zero tolerance stance, before they encounter a situation that involves alcohol or other drug use.

Emily Moser is director of parenting programs at Oregon Partnership, a statewide nonprofit that provides substance abuse prevention education and treatment referral. To learn more about Oregon Partnership, and for parenting resources, please call 503-244-5211, or visit www.orpartnership.org or www.faceitparents.com.