

Knowledge, practice important when equipping kids to resist offers of alcohol and other drugs

By Emily Moser

Picture this: Your 13-year-old daughter is asked to hang out at a friend's house after school. When she shows up, her friend is there – but so are a couple of older teens she doesn't know. And, the strangers have brought alcohol.

In reality, your daughter would not have gone to her friend's place had she known more about the situation beforehand. As parents and caregivers, equipping your kids to think critically and ask questions about an activity or place they are invited to – and helping them feel comfortable with what they say to resist negative peer pressure – are important skills that can help them steer clear of risky situations.

An important component is teaching your child to take four critical steps when they are asked to do something or go somewhere with their peers:

1. Find out the details. Emphasize with your child the importance of knowing the plan. The more information they have up front, the better prepared they will be to resist negative peer pressure and a situation that could put them in harm's way.

2. If the situation involves, say, youth alcohol use, equip your child to state the problem to their friend. For example, your child can respond with, "So, there's going to be drinking going on?"

3. Mention the consequences. Help your child so that he or she is comfortable with what they can say. If the situation involves youth and alcohol, some kids may prefer, "It's against the law." Others may be more comfortable saying, "I'll be grounded if I drink."

4. Suggest an alternate activity. Again, help your kids with phrases they feel comfortable saying, such as, "Why don't we rent a movie instead?" Or, "I'd rather go to the mall."

Despite your and their best efforts, young people sometimes find themselves in potentially harmful situations they could not foresee. Helping them develop the skills to refuse things such as offers of alcohol or other drugs can keep them safe and healthy. Sometimes a simple "No" or "No, thanks" is effective. However, together with your child explore other phrases he or she can use that communicate the same thing as "no." Some possibilities include: "I'd get kicked off the team if I was caught around drugs," "Why would I want to mess up a good thing? I am cool the way I am" and "I tried drinking once and I threw up." Humor can be effective as well.

It's also important to remind your kids that sometimes they can simply remove themselves from an unsafe situation by walking away. Consider talking with your son or daughter about the fact that they can contact you, a family friend or relative to pick them up if they find themselves in such a situation, but that they may face family consequences nonetheless.

When it comes to refusal skills, practice is invaluable. Role-play with your child so that he or she feels comfortable responding to the type of situations that might arise. The fact is, growing up is a challenge, and for many kids resisting negative peer pressure is difficult. The important thing is to help them prepare, building a strong foundation so that how they handle situations is almost rote – like the way they call on their multiplication knowledge to solve more advanced math problems.

And continue to communicate your values and rules - often. Parents are the biggest influence on their kids. Talk with them on an ongoing basis about where you stand when it comes to youth drinking and other drug use, and be clear and consistent about the consequences if family rules are broken. And offer praise when they make good decisions.

Some of the refusal skills above are from the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign's Behavior Change Expert Panel. Emily Moser is director of parenting programs at Oregon Partnership, a statewide nonprofit that provides substance abuse prevention education and treatment referral. For parenting resources, please contact Oregon Partnership at 503-244-5211, or visit www.orpartnership.org. For more about underage drinking prevention, please visit www.faceitparents.com.