

Family rules, strong connections can help kids steer clear of alcohol use

By Pamela Erickson

“There was nothing wrong with drinking in my house.”

“We say we want to be left alone, but talk to us about the dangers of youth alcohol use. We have enough friends. We need parents.”

“Explain, relate and educate.”

Those are the sentiments of some Oregon teenagers, underscoring the powerful role parents play in either helping them steer clear of alcohol or enabling them to drink.

Although many kids may not always admit it, time and again they say their parents are the most significant influence in their lives. And the fact is, a child whose family has clear rules against alcohol and other drug use is much less likely to experiment.

Clear family rules are vital in light of the fact that advertising messages are all around us promoting the notion that everybody drinks, all the time. In the last few weeks, for example, your kids no doubt trekked to the mall or scoured online sites to do their back-to-school clothes shopping. They may have seen T-shirts or other products promoting alcohol on store racks or Web sites.

Oregon Partnership, the nonprofit organization for which I work, has monitored retailers for the last few years, asking them to pull such offending products when they appear on store shelves, online or in advertising to which youth are exposed. These days, T-shirts reading “Draft Beer Not People” and “Beauty is in the eye of the beer holder” have hit the marketplace with ads that target young women.

For parents, the unfortunate presence of such products provides an opportunity to begin, or continue, a crucial conversation with your child about alcohol, the dangers of underage drinking, and your family’s rules about it.

Although such promotion might seem harmless, research shows that alcohol advertising via clothes and other means impacts our children. A recent study by the nonprofit research organization RAND Corporation involving children in the sixth and seventh grades found that those exposed to alcohol advertising at high levels - from television, magazines, in-store displays and promotional items such as T-shirts and posters - were 50 percent more likely to drink and 36 percent more likely to intend to drink than children whose exposure to alcohol advertising was very low.

The stakes are incredibly high when it comes to influencing our kids and helping them steer clear of alcohol. Alcohol is the No. 1 drug of choice for teens, according to a survey of Oregon schoolchildren, and the rate of alcohol use among children and adolescents has increased in recent years. One in four eighth-graders and nearly half of 11th-graders

report drinking in the last month, according to the Oregon Healthy Teens Survey. And young girls are drinking at higher rates than young boys.

Research shows that if a child starts drinking before age 15, their chances of addiction are four times greater than if they start at 21. And through studies using magnetic resonance imaging, we know that regular alcohol use impedes brain development and learning.

But there are many ways parents and caregivers can help keep their kids safe and alcohol free. Here are a few ideas to consider:

- **Talk early, and often**, with your child about the harms of alcohol use. Use the T-shirts and other promotional items – as well as the ads - you and your child see that glamorize alcohol as teachable moments and opportunities to encourage critical thinking about them. As Rebecca Collins, a RAND senior behavioral scientist and lead author of the study, put it: “Getting kids to think critically about ads may lessen any effects the ads have.”
- **Listen to your child** and try to understand his or her concerns. Paraphrase what he or she says to you and ask for input about family decisions.
- **Establish clear, consistent rules and consequences** about youth alcohol use and other inappropriate behavior. For example, create an environment in which youth drinking is unacceptable, enforce consequences consistently, and make sure your child always tells you where they are going and who they’ll be with.
- **Praise your child and reward good behavior consistently and immediately.**
- **Promote healthy, creative activities** such as arts and sports, and encourage your child to tell you about their hopes and dreams.
- **Get involved with school activities** as much as you can.
- **Establish “together time,”** a regular weekly routine for doing something special with your child.

Pamela Erickson works with Oregon Partnership, a statewide nonprofit that provides substance abuse prevention education and treatment referral. For more information about keeping your kids safe, healthy and alcohol free, visit faceitparents.com, or orpartnership.org.