

By Emily Moser

The New Year is a time to clean the slate and maybe make a resolution or two. Strengthening - and maintaining - strong connections with our children is one of the most effective ways we as parents can nurture their healthy development, and in the process reduce the risk that they'll get involved in harmful behavior such as experimenting with alcohol and other drugs.

As you mull your goals for the coming year, consider these resolutions that can help you strengthen the connections with your child and help them make good decisions:

- If you haven't had it already, set a date to have the "alcohol and drug talk" with your child and, equally important, resolve to make it a regular conversation. Learn the latest about substance abuse and its dangers to kids, and share these facts with your son or daughter. This opens the door to let your child know where you stand, to be clear that alcohol and other drug use will not be tolerated, and to establish rules and consequences.
- Plan a fun event with your child. Go bowling or head outdoors for a hike. Take a day trip to the mountain to ski, snowboard or just play in the snow. Getting away on a regular basis – even for a couple of hours – creates opportunities to better connect with your child in our busy, I-needed-it-yesterday world. Even doing a project together around the house – like painting a room or working on a puzzle – can help you better connect.
- Invite the parents of your child's best friend to dinner (If you don't know your child's best friend, ask!).
- Resolve to have a weekly "homework meeting." Together, go through your child's notebook. This will help you get a better sense for how they are doing on assignments and what school projects are coming up. Beyond that, it helps them stay organized. You can even preface these homework meetings by saying it's a chance to clean out their notebook.
- Commit to volunteering at your child's school in any way that fits your schedule, whether as a regular classroom helper or an occasional field trip chaperone.
- Encourage your child to set and reach a short-term goal or two, like learning a new song on an instrument, making the baseball team or getting a better score on the next math test. This can strengthen their self-confidence and give them something greater to focus on outside of the peer pressure and other day-to-day challenges they face.
- Resolve to volunteer alongside your child in a cause that improves others' lives. Allow them to help decide on the volunteer opportunity so that they are invested in it, and make it a regular activity.
- Take a look at the example you're setting with your kids. Are you spending enough quality time with them? 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.
- Form a support network with other parents of kids your child attends school or participates in activities with. This is a great way to share the challenges of raising kids (many of us struggle with the same things!), to find out if other families share your values when it comes to underage drinking and other drug use, and to identify other adults with whom your child can contact in case you can't be reached in an emergency. Good parents can help each other become better parents, plus you might develop a few new friends in the process.

Parents and other caregivers in the Rogue Valley seeking resources about keeping their kids free of alcohol and other drugs may contact Southern Oregon Drug Awareness (SODA) at 541-789-4028. More information on SODA can be found at www.sodaweb.org.

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 talking with your child about the harms of youth alcohol use, please visit www.faceitparents.com, or www.orpartnership.org.