

Underage Drinking - A Parent's Challenge

by Karen Wheeler

You've seen the statistics: Nearly every alcoholic began drinking before age 21. And kids who start drinking before age 15 are five times more likely to have alcohol problems than those who wait.

Yet getting kids not to drink can be challenging. Beer is almost as cheap as soda pop. And there's the peer pressure.

Now you're facing a summer when they have no classes, no homework and fewer sports, clubs and other activities to keep them occupied. They're likely to watch more TV, and that means more exposure to beer and liquor ads. In fact, they're likely to see more beer and liquor ads than their parents will.

As a parent, what to do?

First, acknowledge that ours is a year-round responsibility. Our job is not to be our kids' friends, but their parents. We can't be lazy about it.

Know where your kids are at all times. Take the time to get to know their friends. When you take them to an activity, get out of the car and meet the other parents. When your children and teenagers go to other kids' homes, talk with the parents and learn their addresses and phone numbers.

Set expectations. I began talking to our daughter and son about alcohol before they entered grade school. As is true of many parents, I was able to tell them that our family is genetically at risk of alcoholism, so alcohol isn't something we want to risk experimenting with.

At our house, we've never had that "uncomfortable talk" about drinking and drugs; it's a part of our normal conversation. We talk about how ridiculous ads are that, besides exploiting women, show alcohol as a fun activity when the consequences of irresponsibility can be anything but fun.

With expectations come incentives and consequences. When my daughter was 12, we told her that if she did well in school and didn't drink she'd get a phone. Our teens know that if they do poorly in school, they'll be grounded with no TV, no phone, no Internet; if they drink, the consequences will be greater and the family will seek counseling.

Music, sports and other activities are great alternatives to alcohol. My 14-year-old son plays the electric guitar, so we identified rockers who don't use alcohol or drugs or who did and quit.

He starts high school and our 18-year-old daughter starts college in the fall. We've talked with them about not only our expectations, but also the advantages of doing well in school, not impairing brain development and establishing how they want to be viewed by their new peer group.

Refusal skills ("thanks, but I don't want to get kicked off the team") can be learned by discussing everyday challenges, such as how to kindly turn down someone asking for a date.

If you drink, set a good example. Practice moderation. Don't drive after drinking. More help for parents can be found on the Oregon Department of Human Services Web site <http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/addiction/underage-drinking/main.shtml> or at www.stopalcoholabuse.gov.

If it sounds hard, it's because we parents are afraid our kids will hate us. Love means caring enough to keep them clean and sober. They will thank us later.

Karen Wheeler is addictions policy manager in the Oregon Department of Human Services. She can be contacted at karen.wheeler@state.or.us

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