

Talk It Up. Lock It Up!™ Column

The Power of Parents to Make This Summer Safe

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The number of students drinking underage has been steadily decreasing over the past few years. And we know that the majority of our local youth are making good choices and do not drink alcohol. To help continue this trend, an effort to spread awareness and understanding of the harm alcohol can have on the maturing brain helps influence their decisions. As with anything, the more messages heard, the greater the influence. While youth get messages from a variety of sources, including peers and the media, messages need to come more frequently from parents. Orange County students have reported in surveys that *they view parents as one of the most reliable sources of information about alcohol*, second only to healthcare professionals. This is so important. Even though it may seem like your teen is not listening, they really are! As parents or trusted adults, you must take this opportunity to facilitate your teen in making wise decisions: be clear about expectations when it comes to underage drinking or other substance use.

With the end of the school year around the corner, this communication is imperative. Summer means less stress, no homework, and more free time spent with friends. With this extra free time, there is a correlated increase in risk taking and the temptation to experiment with alcohol, marijuana or sexual activity. Looking at the stats, the average age for an adolescent to take their first drink is 13. During an average *summer* day about 3,000 *more* adolescents will take their first drink of alcohol compared to during the school year. About 1,000 more students will smoke marijuana or cigarettes for the first time during the summer than during the school year. As for students who have already begun drinking and smoking, many are known to indulge more often and more heavily during June and July.

What can parents and caregivers do to mitigate these risks? Talk with the children in your home, including any friends who visit. Be clear about your rules and expectations. Have a plan. Orange Partnership wants everyone to enjoy the long summer days happily and healthfully, so here are some tips to navigate summer with your teen:

- **Stick to advanced planning.** Teach your teen to make plans in advance and stick with the 24-hour notice rule for activity outside of the home. If they do make last minute plans, make sure that you know the friends/places that they'll be with/at. If an event or friend is really that important to your teen, they'll make plans within your guidelines.
- **Remove temptation.** Lock up, or better yet throw out, any excess alcohol. Part of the maturation process is risk taking, which sometimes means experimentation. It will be with the stuff you're least likely to look at or touch. This also applies to cigarettes and prescription medication: be sure to safely secure (lock up) or dispose of any cigarettes, vape products, and/or prescription meds in your home to ensure that they are not accessible by youth.
- **Know the parents/guardians of your teen's friends and talk with them.** Surveys indicate that when teens drink, they often do so at a friend's home. Some parents believe that providing a safe environment for adolescents to drink is ok, even if it is against the law. It is time to start having conversations with parents of our kids' friends and asking direct questions, and letting your expectations be known.

- **Talk to your teen.** If your teen has a summer job, recognize they may make new friendships with older, legal drinking-age individuals. Plan on talking to your teen about work relationships, new friends and your expectations of them while they are working for the summer, including curfews and work hours. If there is a sibling or friend who is of legal age, remind them that there are laws against providing alcohol to underage youth, which can incur charges, penalties and fines.
- **Plan for fun and down time.** Numerous surveys show teens today are more worried, more stressed and more over-extended than any other teen generation that has come before them. A little rest and relaxation is needed and well-deserved, but too much downtime (especially when unsupervised) can be hazardous to an adolescent's health. Hanging out with an approved list of friends may be just what they need to decompress and refocus. Plan in advance for ways that you and your teenager can do just that – relax.

Don't delay; get your summer plan of action underway today!