

Talk It Up! Column

Alcohol and the Media

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In our June article we looked at the positive impact parental media restrictions could have on youth substance use. If you'll recall, a recent study showed that when youth were not allowed to watch movies with adult content, like rated-R movies, they were less likely to start using alcohol and marijuana. That's a great, and easy, prevention tool to help keep our youth healthy. But on its own, it's not enough. Movies are only one of the many places youth are exposed to alcohol and other substances.

The alcohol industry has a set of voluntary guidelines that all alcohol marketing is supposed to follow, including a standard that advises against advertising on programs where 1 in 3 viewers (or more) are underage. But the reality is that those guidelines are not being followed. From October 2013 to September 2015, underage viewers saw an alcohol ad on a cable TV program that violated the industry guidelines 3.8 billion times. And these ads were shown on stations ranging from ESPN to BET to Comedy Central to FX – all channels that teens and younger kids commonly watch.

This may not seem like a big deal on the surface, but think about what we learned from last month's article. And think about this: studies have shown that the more young people are exposed to alcohol marketing, the more likely they are to start drinking and, if they already drink, to increase their alcohol intake. Then, think about how these are just numbers for commercials on cable TV, which does not include any marketing on the internet, ads on social media sites like Instagram, Snapchat, Youtube, etc., references (either direct or indirect) in music, and more.

The reason we bring this up is not to scare anybody, but to make everyone aware of the reality of today's world. Even if you follow all possible recommendations and make all realistic restrictions on media for your youth, there is no way to completely stop the flow of alcohol advertising. So, what *can* you do?

The most important step you can take is to communicate openly with the youth in your life. Talk to them about alcohol. Talk to them about the dangers particular to underage drinkers, whose brains and bodies are still developing. Talk to them about your expectations. Talk to them. Surveys show that almost 75 out of 100 youth under 18 cite their parents as the primary influencers in their decisions on whether to drink. Clearly, and consistently, communicating your expectations that youth *not* consume alcohol underage *does* make a difference.

Another important step in protecting your youth is to create a safe environment for them. For example, make sure that any alcohol in your home is kept secured, so youth cannot get to it. Also, meet and talk with any parents of friends whose homes your youth may be spending time in. Check that they understand and respect your views on underage drinking and are making their home a safe space as well. Still, sometimes things happen, so you want to ensure that your youth know they can come to you if they need help getting out of a sticky situation safely. To that end, have a contingency plan in place.

Given that youth receive alcohol messages from a variety of sources, it is imperative that the adults in their lives are one of those sources. Use your influence for good. Create a space where your youth can grow into their best potential futures. Talk it Up! Lock It Up!™