

*Talk It Up. Lock It Up!™* Column

Risky Business – Underage Drinking and Risk Taking Behaviors

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According to the National Institute of Health and Human Services, alcohol is the most commonly used drug among youth in the United States. I'm sure we can all name at least some of the negative consequences of underage drinking without having to think hard. These consequences can affect youth in a frighteningly wide variety of ways, from the personal, to the social, to the legal. The health costs alone are staggering and, on top of that, studies have shown that the changes and disruptions in an adolescent's brain development that occur as a result of drinking are permanent.

As if that wasn't enough, there is another category of consequences that must be considered as well. The adolescent brain is still in a period of development, one that will continue until the mid to late twenties. Part of the brain that develops the latest is the prefrontal cortex, the home of "decision making," which is why youth are more likely to make decisions without much planning. So for teens, when lowered inhibitions and distorted perception from consumption of alcohol, and other drugs, are combined with this still developing prefrontal cortex, risk taking behaviors increase. Some common dangerous decisions made by intoxicated adolescents include drinking and driving or engaging in physical altercations.

In addition to those more familiar consequences, there are some that are discussed less often. For example, risky sexual behavior. Multiple studies have shown links between underage drinking and risky sexual behavior, specifically an increased number of adolescents engaging in sexual activity, as well as a decreased use of safe sex practices. In the US in 2015, 30% of high school students reported that they had had sexual intercourse during the last 3 months and, of those, 43% did not use a condom, 14% did not use any method of pregnancy prevention at all, and 21% had drunk alcohol or used drugs prior to their last sexual intercourse. Studies have also shown associations between alcohol use and earlier ages of first sex and increased number of sexual partners.

These risky sexual behaviors can lead to even more far reaching consequences. According to the CDC, in the US in 2015, young people (aged 15-24) accounted for 50% of the almost 20 million new Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) reported and nearly 230,000 babies were born to adolescent girls (aged 15-19). In the same year in Orange County, there were 46 pregnancies reported among 15-19 year old girls. And studies show that young women who associate with female friends who smoke or consume alcoholic beverages have a 1.5 to 2 times greater risk of unplanned pregnancy. Both STIs and pregnancy can lead to lifelong changes and challenges. Adolescent pregnancy, in particular, is associated with a number of further adverse outcomes, including poor pregnancy outcomes like preterm birth or low birth weight babies, chronic socioeconomic disadvantage, lower educational attainment, marital instability and children's behavioral problems.

Although there are many factors that can affect a youth's decision to use mood altering substances or engage in sexual activity, and the consequences can be scary, there is something you can do! Family

attachment and involvement in schools and communities are protective factors against both substance use and risky sexual behavior. As a parent, a coach, a mentor, and even (especially) as a friend the same age, you can help keep someone from making risky decisions. Talk to the adolescents in your life about risky behavior, model and support making good decisions, and help your teens and each other find healthier ways to spend time."