

## *Talk It Up. Lock It Up!™* Column

Hidden in Plain Sight

*Paige Schildkamp, Program Assistant*

*Orange Partnership for Alcohol and Drug Free Youth*

Hidden in Plain Sight (HIPS) is an interactive display for parents and other guardians to learn how to spot the signs of risky behaviors by the youth in their lives. The exhibit is set up like a “typical” teen bedroom: a little messy, with lots of items all out and around. The goal of the event is twofold. First, to expose parents to the many seemingly mundane items they may see in their youth’s room that could suggest mental health concerns or substance use. Second, to encourage parents to keep their eyes open to these possibilities and speak to the youth in their lives about it. According to research sponsored by the NC ABC Commission in 2014, almost two thirds of surveyed NC parents do not feel fully prepared with the information or resources they need to properly address underage drinking with their children. HIPS addresses this issue and helps parents gain the knowledge and confidence necessary to address substance use with their children.

On December 16-17, Orange County Schools, with support from Orange Partnership, co-hosted a HIPS event in conjunction with the annual Toy Chest event at the Department of Social Services. Over 1000 people attend Toy Chest each year and, after registering, parents and guardians must wait until their number is called to select gifts. The goal was to have the HIPS room available to adults present as they waited, along with the entertainment and refreshments that are normally provided. This plan was a great success, and with assistance from the DJ making announcements about HIPS display, there was a consistent line to enter the room, with over 300 people visiting the interactive exhibit.

Participants were escorted into the room and given a checklist. They were allowed to move through the room to identify signs of alcohol, drugs or other risky behaviors they could find. Explanation and assistance from trained volunteer docents was provided during and after the parents’ exploration. Some of the items on the list are more obvious, like cans of alcoholic beverages (although these sometimes look just like soft drinks now and it can be hard to tell the difference!), while some are harder to spot, like keychains or other small metal items that, when rearranged or put together, can be used for smoking. Some items are seemingly innocuous, but can be used for more deceitful purposes, like books that have been hollowed out in order to hide substances or paraphernalia.

Participants were also given additional information and resources. Handouts that describe other warning signs to look for that might precipitate or be a result of substance use are provided and explained. Examples include changes in school behavior, like skipping classes or inattentiveness/sleepiness in class, changes in friend groups or “hang out” times/activities, changes in personality, like extreme mood instability or sleeping/eating patterns, or changes in physiology and routine, like memory lapses and bloodshot/pinpoint/dilated eyes or decreases in participation in extra-curricular activities. These, and other, indicators are presented as signs to watch for and, if noticed, should push the parents to next steps. Resources on what those next steps should be, options for what parents could do or who they could contact if they do find any suggestion or proof of substance use, were also provided.

Information on how to make sure the home is a safe environment for their own children and any other youth who may visit was also given out. Parents and guardians were invited to make a pledge to become

a Safe Home, and become part of the Orange County Safe Homes Network; a “virtual” network of parents and guardians committed to providing healthy environments and supporting families in doing so. Finally, resources were available to help guide participants through starting a conversation with their youth on these topics. It can be intimidating and difficult, but part of the goal of HIPS is prevention. An idea of what could be out there is introduced, but parents are encouraged to talk with their kids about these dangers early, *before* there are any signs. Early and open communication from trusted adults is key in preventing youth substance use.

The HIPS organizers were very excited by the turnout and enthusiasm at the event and were happy to see the thought and conversation that the experience sparked. Member of the planning staff Sherita Cobb, Director of Student Support for Orange County Schools, said “I felt that it was an effective manner to help parents see the need to begin or continue to have the conversation around drug and alcohol usage by teens. Parents stated that they felt empowered and more confident about what to look for and how to begin to have these conversations [...] I feel what was learned most is that is never too early to start the conversation and seek support.”