

Talk It Up! Column

Parental Media Restrictions Make a Difference

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As we have said so many times before, when substance use behavior begins during adolescence, that individual faces a higher likelihood of a myriad of negative consequences throughout their life. This early initiation can lead to permanent damage to the brain, higher and more chronic continued substance use and increased chance of addiction. For alcohol specifically, this means a 5x greater likelihood of developing an alcohol use disorder later in life.

At the same time, we know that the alcohol industry is targeting youth more and more. The main avenues for this are through development of more sugary, flavored beverages that attract a younger consumer, as well as increased marketing and brand placement aimed at youth and shown on youth focused channels and media. Concerningly, research shows that exposure to this kind of mature media content is associated with initiation and increase in alcohol use.

Think back to all the rated-R or adult movies you have seen. Think especially about the popular ones, or ones that might appeal to younger viewers. Think about their themes or focuses. Now, consider this: how many of them had alcohol featured? How many portrayed alcohol in a positive way – showing that it associated with fun times or idealized social situations? How many showed the negative consequences of drinking too much? And of those, how many showed those consequences in a serious way, and not as a joke or comedy? Now...consider how that might affect an adolescent, with a brain that is still developing its healthy thought process and decision-making capabilities.

Thinking about this may seem overwhelming if you are a parent or guardian of a young person – there are so many ways to engage with media and social media these days that trying to stem the flow of information from those sources looks impossible. However, a recent study shows one clear and easy way that parental restrictions regarding media exposure can make a measurable difference.

In the past, research has shown that limiting youth exposure to substance use-related media is effective in reducing various alcohol-related negative consequences. But just last month, a study was published that got even more specific. It looked at the influence of parental rules, in particular regarding movie watching, on later alcohol and marijuana initiation and use. These rules were based on the common rating categories (G, PG, PG-13, R) and results showed that when parents restrict access to rated-R movies, youth were at lower risk for alcohol and marijuana use initiation. In other words, when parents do not allow youth to watch movies with adult content, rated-R movies, the youth were less likely to start using alcohol and marijuana.

However, it is important to keep in mind that these restrictions must be age and developmentally appropriate. If youth perceive the restrictions as too harsh (for example, limiting viewing of PG-13 movies post age 13), then the chances they view these movies without parental knowledge and then initiate substance use actually increase, possibly as a rebellious response.

This one tactic may seem small or useless in the face of everything else youth are seeing and hearing, but it is something. And every little something makes a difference. One step at a time, one expectation

at a time, our youth will be safer and lead healthier lives. Plus, stay tuned next month for a follow-up with even more information and suggestions related to this topic!

*If you would like to read more on this, and get more specifics from this recently published study, please visit the Orange Partnership website, orangepartnership.com (in the “What’s New” column on the right side of our home page).