

Talk It Up. Lock It Up!™ Column

Plan for a Safe Summer

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The number of students drinking underage has been steadily decreasing over the past few years. From surveys, we know that the majority of our youth are making good choices and do not drink alcohol. A concerted effort to raise awareness and greater understanding of the harm alcohol can have on the maturing brain help influence these decisions. As with anything, the more messages heard the greater the influence. While youth get messages from a variety of sources, mostly from peers and the industries marketing to youth, messages which need to be heard more frequently needs to come 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 an important point! While you may think your teen is not listening, they really are! Parents must take this opportunity to share important information to allow their teen to make wise decisions, and even more important – 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, hanging out and all-nighters with friends. With more free time on their hands, there is a correlated increase in risk taking and the temptation to experiment with alcohol, marijuana or sexual activity. Let's look 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 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, this includes friends who visit. Be clear about your rules and expectations, and have a plan. Safe Homes Network of the Orange Partnership wants everyone to enjoy the long summer days, 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. Don't fall prey to the "I'm bored" routine. Before you know it, they'll be calling you on the phone while you're at work asking to go to place A, with friend B, whom you've actually never met, but is a friend of friend C, whom you know quite well. If friend B is really that important to your teen, they'll make plans within your guidelines.
- **Remove temptation.** Lock up, or better yet, throw out any left-over alcohol bottles. 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 means cigarettes and prescription medication. Be sure that your prescription meds 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 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!