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Be a Piece of the Puzzle Underage Drinking: It is About Who You Know



By DeAnna Pearl

Do you know what the biggest risk factor for underage drinking is? It's having a best friend who drinks. It turns out that kids who have their first whole drink (not just sips) before age 15 have a four times higher risk of developing alcoholism: Four times. Given how alcoholism can devastate not only the life of the alcoholic but the lives around them, it's really important that parents know the risk factors: Not only social risk factors but the risk to the brain's full development.

The biggest risk factor is having a best friend who drinks, which makes sense. Peer pressure is huge for adolescents. Most Vernonia 8th graders, 69%, reported their peers would disapprove of them drinking even a little. (Student Wellness Survey, 2012) However, there's also the matter of availability: You have to be able to get the alcohol to drink it, and having friends who drink makes that more likely. In Vernonia, there are 10 alcohol outlets and during the summer several more during events in a one square mile area. Unfortunately, youth report they get most of their alcohol from older friends or older siblings. What this means for parents is that you need to know whom your kids hang out with and where they hang out.

Now, it's not always possible to know everything about your kids' friends but you can ask questions. You can try to make your house kid (teen)-friendly so that they hang out there and you can get to know them. This is not to be confused

with the attitude, "It's OK for my kids to drink with their friends if I am home. It's safer!" This is actually contributing to a minor and very much illegal. While you don't have to be BFF's with other parents, it is important to know who they are. You can get to know their parents by introducing yourself at school gatherings or when you drop off or pick up your kid. The bottom line is who your kid hangs out with matters.

There comes at a certain point where a parent can't dictate your child's friendships, of course. But you can certainly try to steer them toward activities, like sports, out of school activities, clubs and programs, where they will meet motivated kids who are less likely to drink: Not that kids in sports don't drink or in band for that matter, but getting kids involved generally helps protect them against alcohol use. **FYI:** According to 83-88% of 6th, 8th and 11th graders in VSD 47J, there are lots of chances for students to get involved in sports, clubs, and other activities outside of class. (Student Wellness Survey, 2012)

According to the Risk and Protective Factor theory, youth whom bond with peers whom have healthy beliefs and clear standards are less likely to be at risk for drug and alcohol abuse. It is imperative that these programs have clear standards around conduct and expectations. An even greater contributing factor is a consistent, safe, and positive volunteer and or mentor that support program policy during the times our children are participat-

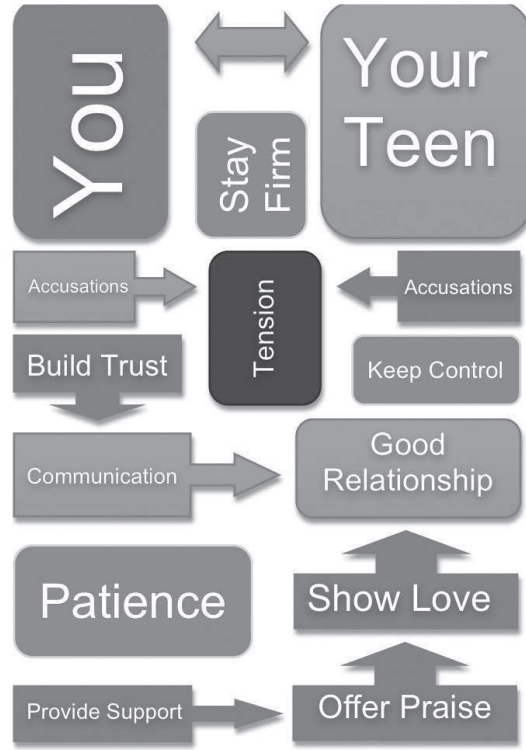
ing in functions. How do we help assure that the people whom our children come into contact with have their best interest at heart? We ask. Further, ask how the program leaders **enforce** the policies for both youth and adults participating in whatever capacity.

The other factor to consider is having a conduct problem or change in normal behavior. While some behaviors may indicate an alcohol or other drug problem, some also reflect normal teenage growing pains. Experts believe that a drinking problem is more likely if you notice several of these signs at the same time:

- Mood changes
- School problems
- Rebelling against family rules
- Switching friends
- Secretive about new friends
- A "nothing matters" attitude
- Finding alcohol in your child's room or backpack
- Smelling alcohol on his or her breath
- Physical or mental problems

While it can be hard to know for sure, certain behaviors can alert you to the possibility of an alcohol problem. If you think your child may be in trouble with drinking, consider getting advice from a health care professional specializing in alcohol problems before talking with your teen. Talk to your doctor about resources in your community to support your child — and you. Remember, no matter what age your children, the first line of defense to reduce use and abuse are parents. Your relationship with your child can go a really long way toward helping them not just now, but in giving them the best future possible.

Some on-line resources are www.theantidrug.com and <http://www.drugfree.org/Parent/>. Both provide up-to-date information and services to help parents positively. If you need more information, contact, DeAnna Pearl, Vernonia Prevention Coalition, @ DeAnna@vernonia-or.gov or (503) 369-7370.



There were two other big risk factors for having that first whole drink early. The first: having a family member with high-risk drinking behavior. That doesn't necessarily mean alcoholism, although alcoholism does run in families. It means any unhealthy or risky drinking. Risky drinking is defined as drinking at levels that put a person at risk of medical and or causes social problems. Drinking too much too fast often times during social events and gatherings is risky drinking. It is during these risky times that we do things we wouldn't normally do such as fighting, property damage, and driving under the influence.

NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE
1-800-273-TALK (8255)
suicidepreventionlifeline.org

OREGON PARTNERSHIP lines for life
Preventing Substance Abuse & Suicide

SUICIDE LIFELINE 800-273-8255
ALCOHOL & SUBSTANCE HELPLINE 800-923-4357
MILITARY HELPLINE 888-457-4838

youthline
1-877-968-8491
oregonyouthline.org

Columbia Community Mental Health
Oregon and Washington
(503) 397-5211 or (800) 294-5211
After Hours
(866) 866-1426

Spencer Health and Wellness School Based Health Center
is open to patients on
Tuesdays and Fridays from 7:30 AM - 1:30 PM

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Exec. Board	Shawn Carnahan	Police	(503) 429-4232	COV Police
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Sector Member	Mark Brown	Faith	(503) 961-5281	Vernonia Comm. Church
Board Member	Breanne Mares	Prevention	(503) 396-7637	Col. County Mental Health
Board Member	Heidi Brown	Business	(503) 429-2787	Grey Dawn Gallery
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Board Member	Alexis Baska	Youth	(503) 429-3521	O.S.S.O.M.
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VPC Mission:
To develop safe and healthy neighborhoods through collaborative planning, community action, policy advocacy and enforcement.

1 out of 5
6th and 8th graders has tried inhaling household products to get high.

Parents, want to learn how to keep your kids away from inhalant abuse? Go to:
www.InhalantAbuseTraining.org

TimeToTalk
The conversation starts here.

**PARENTS:
THE ANTI-DRUG**

89.5% of 6th graders in Vernonia Elementary School report they haven't tried inhalants in the last 30 Days!
(Student Wellness Survey, May 2013)