

Westview Behavioral Health Services
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Alcohol Awareness Month 2019

Parents are more than an ounce of prevention

In a society that continually promotes alcohol and drug use at every level -- even here in Saluda County -- the need to provide education on the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse and its effect on children has never been greater. To focus on that goal, April is designated as Alcohol Awareness Month.

Education on this critical threat to the health of our community needs to begin as early as possible in people's lives. Properly educated, children and youth are much more resistant to these dangers and better able to make healthy choices about substance use. Alcohol and drug use tends to begin in mid-to-late adolescence, and the earlier the age at which someone starts drinking, the greater the risk that he or she will develop alcohol-related problems later in life. In fact, research says that youth who begin drinking before the age of 15 have been found to be 5 times more likely to have addiction problems.

Various factors can contribute to underage drinking, from insecurity to a desire for social acceptance, and while the percentage of teenagers who drink alcohol is slowly declining, numbers are still quite high. According to 2018 data, in Saluda, nearly 40 percent of youth report drinking by the age of 12, and 44 percent of drinking youth report binge drinking (drinking five or more drinks in a single session). Also, almost 20 percent of youth say that alcohol is a central part of their social life. Drinking alcohol undoubtedly is a part of American culture. Conversations between parents and children about its risks should equally be a cultural norm.

Alcohol's differing effects and parents' changing role in their children's lives as they mature and seek greater independence can make talking about alcohol a challenge and parents may have trouble setting concrete family policies for alcohol use. Yet, parents are the most effective force in preventing and reducing adolescent risky behaviors and helping our nation's youth lead healthier lives. Research shows that kids who learn about the dangers of alcohol and drugs at home are up to 50 percent less likely to use these substances than kids who don't learn about such dangers from their parents.

Parents influence whether and when adolescents begin drinking, as well as how their children drink. Family policies about adolescent drinking in the home and the way parents themselves drink are important.

So, what can parents do to help minimize the likelihood that their adolescent will choose to drink and that such drinking, if it does occur, will become problematic? U.S. Department of Health and Human Services studies have shown that it is important to talk early and often, in developmentally appropriate ways, with children and teens about your concerns—and theirs—regarding alcohol.

Adolescents who know their parents' opinions about youth drinking are more likely to fall in line with their expectations. Establish policies early on, and be consistent in setting expectations and enforcing rules. Adolescents do feel that parents should have a say in decisions about drinking, and they maintain this deference to parental authority as long as they perceive the message to be legitimate.

Work with other parents to monitor where kids are gathering and what they are doing. Being involved in the lives of adolescents is key to keeping them safe. With open, respectful communication and explanations of boundaries and expectations, parents can influence their children's health. This is especially important in young people's decisions regarding whether and how to drink—decisions that can have lifelong consequences. Ultimately, there are many influences on whether an adolescent begins to drink alcohol at a young age, including a child's home life and whether parents have talked with their children about rules for alcohol use.

Whether an adolescent's peers drink alcohol also influences his or her choice about alcohol use and another powerful influence is the media: movies and television that depict alcohol use, music that includes lyrics about alcohol use, and advertisements for different brands of alcohol.

Reducing underage drinking is critical to securing a healthy future for America's youth and requires a cooperative effort from parents, schools, community organizations, business leaders, government agencies, the entertainment industry, alcohol manufacturers/retailers and young people themselves.