Alcohol is Teens’ Drug of Choice

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Recent studies show that New Hampshire teens are turning to alcohol and they’re getting it in their own homes. In fact, alcohol is the primary youth drug problem in the state.

In a progressive move, the Makin’ It Happen (MIH) Coalition, in cooperation with the Manchester Middle Schools, surveyed the 7th and 8th graders during the spring of 2007 to look at behaviors and attitudes concerning tobacco, alcohol and marijuana. Known as the Pride Survey, more than 1,815 students responded.

Of those surveyed, 64.2% had used alcohol in the past year, 20.5% had used marijuana, and 31.4% had used tobacco.

People often think that addiction to alcohol or drugs is something that happens to other people. The truth is, addiction is a chronic progressive disease that can occur in your own home. The word “denial” is often used to describe how people refuse to accept or believe that addiction is present. Parents may express their denial through their tendency to underestimate drinking in their children. Once you admit addiction is a possibility, you can take steps to prevent its development.

Age of first use? As a parent you may have questioned when you should first talk to your child about addiction or look for signs of addiction. According to the survey, the age of first drug use in Manchester was found to be 11.5 years for tobacco, 11.6 years for alcohol and 12.2 years for marijuana. This means that prevention needs to start long before the pre-teen years.

Schools often use Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) programs as early as Kindergarten. At home, establish a two-way dialogue with your children about drinking and encourage abstinence. Early onset of drinking is a risk factor for developing the disease of addiction. The longer you can put off your child’s first alcoholic drink, the more successful you will be in prevention of addiction.

In order to accomplish this, kids need to learn refusal skills. The bottom line is that if you never drink, then you never develop alcoholism. Teach your kids how to deal with peer pressure and stress.

Alcohol also affects children differently than adults because their brains are still developing. It can cause brain damage, impact memory and impede the ability to learn. Alcohol use can cause poor school performance and depression. It is quite lethal, having been found to be the key factor in the three leading causes of death among our young people: traffic accidents, homicides and suicides. Tell your children that to stay healthy, happy, and smart, they should not start drinking.

Students’ perception of parental and peer disapproval? The Pride Survey found that most students felt that parents disapproved more highly of tobacco and marijuana use than of alcohol use. Marijuana is typically used as a measure of illicit drug use as it is by far the most commonly used of the illicit drugs. Their peers disapproved more highly of marijuana, followed by tobacco, then alcohol use. Alcohol is clearly the drug of choice, followed by tobacco, then marijuana. Alcohol was also rated as the easiest to obtain.

As a parent, be a good role model. Limit the alcohol you use around your children. Do not joke about alcoholism or drunken behavior. Remember to have conversations with your children, not lectures. Listen and be non-judgmental. Be aware of the fact that alcoholism has a biological component and can run in families. Provide education. Today we know about the negative consequences of alcohol use. It is the parent’s right and responsibility to set rules about alcohol use.

Where and when? The survey also found that students preferred to use alcohol and tobacco at a friend’s house, with their own home as the next most common setting. In terms of marijuana use, students surveyed also preferred to use it at a friend’s house, generally not as often as in their own home. Weekends seem to be the preferred time to use tobacco, followed by after school and then weeknights. Students surveyed used alcohol and marijuana mostly on weekends, followed by weeknights, then after school. Also, students who were less involved in activities and community, were more likely to engage in drug use.

Tips for parents: Offer loving but firm advice with clear boundaries and consequences by setting down firm guidelines. Be prepared that other families will have different standards of acceptable behavior. Set a rule that if your child does drink they must never drink and drive. Encourage your child to become involved in school and community activities that promote healthy behaviors and peer interactions.

The bottom line is that parents need to continue to talk to kids about the dangers of using alcohol, not just about the dangers of tobacco and marijuana use. Know the facts about alcohol use and abuse and discuss them with your children. Those surveyed seem to be getting messages from their parents that alcohol use is more acceptable than tobacco or marijuana. Keep talking about the dangers and consequences of ALL three substances – your kids are listening!