

PARENTING FOR PREVENTION NEWSLETTER

Today many parents fear the dangerous world and values that reach their children through the media. They know that new technologies, while providing many fantastic learning opportunities, regularly display normalized violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and sexually explicit behavior. Should parents throw in the towel, hide in denial land, and avoid learning what is going on “out there”? No, parents must focus on *prevention*, which was defined by our recent Hazelden presenter Kim Kane as the “ongoing process of creating new possibilities, options, and support structures for youth.” Prevention involves changing adults’ behavior as well as young people’s.

HAZELDEN SHARES IMPORTANT INFORMATION AND CHALLENGES US

This year, thanks to our affective education staff and concerned school parents, the Parent Education Initiative cosponsored many events led by the staff of the Hazelden Foundation, dedicated to providing counseling and alcohol and drug abuse prevention programs for families. I would like to summarize some of the very important information shared at these sessions.

The Hazelden staff supports the assets-building model of Minnesota’s highly respected Search Institute. They emphasize focusing on positives instead of problems when it comes to teens. They see young people not as problems but as resources. They encourage teachers and parents to be proactive, not reactive, and to focus less on assigning blame and more on claiming responsibility for action. They encourage seeing the solution in the hands of not a few trained professionals but of

everyone working together. They avoid a crisis model in favor of a vision-building paradigm. They offer hope, not despair.

Many children and parents have a self-righting mechanism that helps them make good decisions. At the same time, we know that the following characteristics and activities are key to good outcomes for children. Parents, teachers, and children need to *plan, develop a common vision, assess resources, set goals, list a sequence of necessary tasks to attain these goals, identify each person's responsibilities, find a way to reflect on and evaluate progress, and often begin a new revised planning process.* In “doing prevention,” parents learn that repetition and redundancy are often necessary. Prevention involves a willingness to work at a process. It takes much more than an initial statement of values and expectations.

PREVENTION IS A PROCESS

If parents are not committed to the ongoing process of helping identify and support good decision making, they may be guilty of *enabling*, which is defined as allowing their child to engage in destructive behaviors without intervention. Adults in children's lives cannot accept denials, lies, or excuses without confronting their children. They cannot always ignore or make allowances for rude and disruptive behavior. They must act if they get information about or see signs of alcohol or drug abuse. How? By observing, documenting, expressing concern, stating expectations for improvement, and helping their children get the help they need. As the Hazelden facilitator Kim Kane said to independent school teachers at an April inservice at school, “Kids need to know we notice. Some kids have said to adults, ‘It is when you thought I was high that I wasn’t and when I was high . . . you didn’t notice. I did a good job of becoming normal when I was under the influence.’” She added that “teachers and parents need to know it’s okay to say it’s not okay. Once kids are comfortable with us not knowing, they will up the ante. We need to ask them, ‘What’s new and out there?’”

What behaviors should parents be concerned about? If your middle school children are home more than 2 hours per day for 3–6 days per week without an adult, they may likely experiment with alcohol and drug use. Watching more than 3 hours of television daily is a predictor of risky behavior. Take notice if your child displays a depressed affect, poor concentration, a drop in grades and assignments, a change in friends, poor hygiene, loss or gain in weight, compulsiveness, moody and aggressive behavior with almost daily fights, discipline problems, increased isolation, high absenteeism, or dilated red eyes or drops out of activities or falls asleep at school. Of course, we would check first to see, for example, whether red eyes are from hay

fever or if fatigue is from working on a big project or being sick. But if many of these behaviors appear and you notice them escalating, you must intervene. While the path to chemical dependency takes an adult 3–5 years, it takes an adolescent 3–6 months. If you ignore these behavior changes, this crucial phase moves into a chronic cycle in which children feel completely defeated, finally demonstrate a desire for help, learn that chemical dependency is a disease, begin treatment, gain new hope, face their situation honestly, return to their family, resume school, and receive ongoing treatment and support.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

As Hazelden speakers say, oftentimes the “cheese stands alone.” You need to make clear where you stand. Even if your children are world travelers and complain that it is legal to drink in Spain and other countries, it is still illegal in the United States. While some parents say referring to the illegality of youth drug and alcohol use is often insufficient by itself to prevent abuse, parents still must at least note it as a fact. You as a parent cannot silently tolerate a space where students are allowed to discuss their drinking or holding their liquor. Your silence is a sign of condoning the behavior. Some parents also say that they want their children to try alcohol in a safe place: at home. Research indicates that your child will think you are condoning an illegal act and that you cannot assume this practice is related to less alcohol abuse on campus. It is usually related to higher use on campus, with the ante upped.

If throughout high school your children go to parties where kids are drinking and yours insist they never drink, know that at some point all youth feel pressure and stress to drink. As our Hazelden workshop facilitator noted, “How many times can you turn down the cheesecake without giving in?” Children who most of the time feel stress or pressure will experiment with risky behavior.

RECOMMENDED READINGS AND WEB SITES

- Hazelden Prevention Resources: www.hazelden.org/web/landing.viewor
www.research.hazelden.org.
- Office of the National Drug Control Policy: www.theantidrug.com or 1-800-788-2800.
- Search Institute: www.search-institute.org or 1-800-888-7828.
- Sexuality education information is available from www.SIECUS.org.
- Wilmes, D. (1995). *Parenting for prevention*. Center City, MN: Hazelden.