

Alcohol and Drug Education for Young Adolescents – A Family School Partnership

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One of the hallmarks of a developmentally responsive middle school is that it provides programs and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety as well as comprehensive guidance and support services for its students. Both of these are critical elements of an alcohol and drug awareness education program. By providing a comprehensive health program, topics such as substance use and abuse can be discussed in content classes and advisory. This allows students to be given opportunities to develop and practice healthful decision-making and refusal skills. Our comprehensive advisory program provides students with ongoing assistance as they grow and mature. When occasions emerge where students confront more serious problems, our Middle School Counselor and School Psychologist are there to provide the more specialized services needed.

The school is in the process of implementing a new health education program Kindergarten - 8. Although aspects of drug and alcohol awareness education occur every year across subjects in a developmentally appropriate manner, we have put a major emphasis on this at the fourth and seventh grades as we believe these are critical moments in children's development. In the health program at ninth and tenth grade, students will study this topic again. One of the key elements of this program is to educate children about drug use and misuse and to help them to understand their choices well before they are put in a position where they have to make such a choice. As we know from experience, the school-community partnership is critical for student achievement and progress in school. All research shows that without the support of the community, a school's health program is ineffective; any good drug prevention program involves the participation of the parents. Therefore, we look to parents to be active participants in helping us educate children about alcohol and drugs.

Social events are an important part of life for young adolescents. Some of their favorite topics of conversation are what happened at the party last week, and who is going to the party this coming weekend! This socialization is important for their development. Additionally, young adolescents are also curious and experimenting beings. They love to try things out and have new experiences, but do not yet have the experience of years to guide them. This curiosity is a great quality that will help them learn a great deal about the world, but it can be dangerous when they are at a party where they have free access to alcohol and other drugs. It is critical that they be in a safe environment when they are socializing. The school and the home both need to provide this safe environment. To help parents create a safe social environment for young adolescents, we present the following suggestions.

When giving a party:

1. Do not serve alcohol or other drugs at parties for young adolescents. Their bodies and minds are still developing and alcohol is a powerful drug (although legal for

- adults) that acts on the brain. Other drugs are illegal and should not be served at any parties, much less those given for young adolescents.
2. Always have adult supervision during any party. This should not be a maid or someone with little authority, but rather adults who can set limits and take action if necessary. These adults should be visible and make every effort to circulate during the party. If the behavior of a child is especially inappropriate, the adult(s) should not hesitate to call the child's parents to come and take him/her home. Consider a ratio of 15 adolescents for every 1 adult chaperone.
 3. Have party guests check backpacks and bags at the door when they come to a party. Do not allow them to bring alcohol or drugs in to the party.
 4. Do not allow guests to leave and return to the party.

If your child is going to a party:

1. Call and check with the adult giving the party. Find out if there will be adult supervision. Feel free to speak with the parents who are hosting the party and ask questions.
2. Ask if alcohol will be served to anyone at the party. (Be aware that it is not uncommon in Brazil to have alcohol available at any age party!)
3. Be awake when your child comes home or have them wake you. If he/she is drunk or high, do not speak to him/her at that moment. Wait until the next day and have a CALM discussion with him/her about the behavior and your feelings about it, and whatever consequences you think are appropriate.
4. Be sure you know who is driving to and from the party or other social event. Your child should always have a "plan B" to get home if for any reason their ride is not available or they are concerned that the driver has been drinking or taking other drugs. If you allow your child to ride in a taxi, this option could involve having "emergency taxi money" that may not be spent on other items and must be returned if not used.

Other suggestions:

1. Have an "evacuation plan" in case your son, daughter gets to a party and finds that it is not a good place for them to be and they want to leave.
2. Under no circumstances should they be riding in a car with someone who is drunk or high on other drugs.
3. Know where your child is going and with whom he/she will be with on the weekend. Asking questions is embarrassing for them, but it shouldn't be for you!
4. If possible, have your adolescent carry a cellular phone and keep it on during the social event. Any changes in their plans should be checked out with you!
5. Provide other types of social gatherings besides parties such as groups going to the movies, to have pizza, to the mall, to bowl, for sports or cultural events. With a little planning, your son/daughter will have a great time at all kinds of social events!

We hope the above guidelines will be of help to you. Additionally, a spiral-bound pamphlet for parents entitled "We Care....." is available from the school. Should you wish a copy, please contact the office secretary to send one directly to you. We firmly believe that together the school and the family can provide safe, enjoyable social opportunities for children. Please know that we are here to help and please let us know if you need assistance.

We thank you for helping to make our community a safe and enjoyable one for our early adolescents!