

## Creating an environment that invites your child to choose abstinence:

Throughout the years we have met thousands of teen non-users of every race, nationality, gender and economic class. When we ask them what inspires them to be sober (at least for now) almost every student mentions their parents immediately. It is parental *disappointment* rather than discipline that they fear. Students point out that they would have to deceive their parents to get away with drinking or other drug use and there isn't room in their relationship for that. That's a powerful statement from an adolescent who we all know is surrounded by supportive messages TO drink from peers, media and many adults. You and other healthy adults may be their only source of support at times, so you want to provide a good foundation as early as you can. There is no magic to this – it's **hard** work and it involves *spending time with your child*, not the mythical “quality time,” but real time – doing the dishes, walking the dog, standing in line at the supermarket, going out to dinner and a movie, bickering, whatever. Just living together and finding out who your child actually is; what their fears, dreams and passions are. Tell them how you managed being a teenager, where you failed and where you did well.

When the topic of alcohol and other drug use comes up – you are on their minds. You are a huge part of that decision. They don't only consider the punishment, but what it would *mean* to you and the relationship in a more soulful way. Remember how much teenagers value relationships (almost to a fault!), especially their primary bond to you. You are holding all the trump cards – nobody will ever influence their attitudes and behaviors as much as you will. There have to be rules and consequences – it's up to you, not the school or anybody else to control their weekend environment –kids use substances on their parents' watch. The schools are doing a pretty nice job of patrolling their borders when it comes to substance use, are you? This is one of the difficult questions we have to ask ourselves and there are many others: *Am I a role model of healthy drinking? What are our family's values around drinking? Have we discussed them as a family and are they clear to my teenager? What are my expectations of the hosts of teenage parties and have I communicated them? Am I willing to feel personal discomfort (your child's anger or embarrassment when other adults accuse us of being “uptight” or unrealistic) to ensure my child's health and safety? Am I willing to go out on a limb in conversations with my child so they feel I am a resource and can be honest with them? Can I make room in my mind that my child could become involved in unhealthy activity and am I prepared to address it? What sort of expectations have I put forth to my child?* Many parents with their hearts in the right places say things like, “Honey, I know you are going to experiment with drinking and other drugs, everybody goes through that, just be careful.” This is a permission giving statement. It's best to set up the expectation that they don't experiment. Something more like this: “Honey, I want you to be healthy and whole and I would be really dismayed and concerned if you were to use any kind of drug and I hope we can keep a conversation going about it as you go through high school.”

Here's a little secret. If you can nurse your kid through to age 18 without drinking, you are home free. They don't have to be abstinent forever, just try to help them through the crucial ages of 13 –17 – that's when they are so vulnerable to addiction, as they have not completed the tasks of adolescence yet. Once they have mastered social skills, driving a car, the ability to deal with disappointment, have fallen in love once or twice, and have had some other crucial life experiences, they will be much less likely to abuse alcohol. They won't need to drink to “get their spark” or deal with anxiety – they will already be fairly comfortable in life and they won't require chemical enhancement.

On a practical note here are some things to do:

Help them chase their dreams and indulge their passions if you have the resources. Drive them to skating practice at 4am or listen to them play the trumpet badly – it will pay off in the end.

Let them see you and other adults having a blast without booze – often. Be able to do what you are urging them to do --have fun and socialize sober. Also, encourage your child to invite friends over for sober fun – this way you can get to know your child's friends and keep an eye on things, while the kids enjoy a safe evening of being together. It might take a long time to actually convince your child to have a little supervised get together, but keep offering. They need as many options for drug free socializing as they can get.

Talk about abstinence as a viable and “normal” option. 30% of our country's adults don't drink for a myriad of reasons and they're not weirdoes.

Support them when you see them struggling with this topic – maybe their friends are using and they are feeling really torn or all their friends want them to be the designated driver or “take care of them” when they’re drunk at parties. Encourage them not to enable their friends in these ways, as it’s harmful to everyone involved.

## **Being an Ally Rather than A Friend**

First of all, your child has friends, they only have one mother/father and you need to be that. Be willing to be unpopular and say NO if the child wants to do something you do not feel good about. Your child is going to resent you – learn to live with it - it's better than the alternative!

Children need three things:

**Love** (that's not earned, it's just there)

**Fences** (outer fences, as they don't have inner fences)

**Leeway** (to make mistakes without putting themselves at dangerous risk - like taking too many classes in a semester and freaking out half way through.)

Be willing to address/confront your child about their behavior even when you are both really uncomfortable. Fear can get in the way of effective parenting.

Be the adult - don't let your child police you into thinking that calling a parent before a party is heresy - or accuse you of "being the only one" who doesn't allow whatever it is they are trying to do...It's never true and you know you don't have to buy that one!

Network, Network, Network - there is no such thing as too much. Parents are afraid to talk to each other, which is a shame.

Being an ally is caring enough about them to struggle through these arguments and negotiations around privileges and socializing. It will be painful for you.

You are definitely not an ally if you are involved in Denial, Enabling or allowing use of any kind - whether it be outright providing ATOD for your child or "looking the other way," it is sending a message that use is normal, okay or understandable. They are bombarded with those messages from so many sources; they certainly need to be hearing something else from those who care about them the most...