

Sometimes a stray comment made by a middle school student will haunt me for a long time afterward. I had such an experience last week while conducting a prevention seminar with an 8th grade class. A girl shared the following conversation she had recently had with her brother, who is a senior: She asked him how he could stand to drink beer, which she thinks tastes “gross.” His reply was, “You’ll like it when you’re 17 – you’ll see.” I asked her what she understood that to mean and she said, “I guess I better learn to like beer by the time I’m 17.” I get sad when I hear things like that. Even though the climate is better than it’s ever been before for kids who choose the path of non-use in this country, there are still lots of 14 year olds out there who feel drinking is inevitable and take that notion with them to 9th grade. We could analyze this conversation between a girl and her brother and find many clues as to how kids in middle school get their information about high school – it also highlights the fact that *the high school experience begins in a young person’s mind long before they get there*, much as college starts in a high school student’s imagination as they listen to older siblings, watch movies and take in tales of folks who have lived it already. It all depends on who is painting the picture.

Kids tend to behave in accordance with what they believe to be the norm. In the world of alcohol, they try to live up to their perception of how much others are drinking. This is why it’s extra important that we help amplify the voices of those who aren’t drinking up a storm – meaning the **majority**. One statement from her brother prompted an 8th grade girl to believe that everybody likes beer when they’re 17. Remember that everybody means “everyone in my small world.” The subtitle in her brother’s comment is: there is something strange about you if you don’t like beer in high school. This girl needs to start hearing some new sentences pretty soon. She should see as many examples of “sober” high school students thriving in their lives as can be put in front of her. I’m sure her brother is just talking when he says such things. He is surely unaware that he is shaping his sister’s vision of high school or even affecting her future behavior in a potent way. This is why we need to be talking with our children (the young and almost grown) about their beliefs, their image of themselves in the next few years and the impact their comments could have on others.

Transition is a vulnerable time for youngsters – they are trying to redefine themselves in their new spot, looking for new connections. They are craving their new freedoms and scared of them, too. They don’t know if they’re really up to the new challenges and they are feeling grief about what they are leaving behind. This creates many small voids in the psyche that alcohol/other drugs could fill quite nicely. This is why they need their parents more than ever, which they oddly illustrate by pushing you away as fast and as hard as they can. It could be a weird ride for the next few years, so buckle in and hold on tight. Make sure your child understands that there are always more options than they think – hopefully they will want to talk out some of their social dilemmas with you AND other trusted adults. Watch them closely as they enter a new situation and “check in” with them often. Look for signs of stress and try to walk them through the process. While assisting them in adapting to a new environment, help them hold on to some of the valuable connections they made in middle school. They don’t have to leave everything behind. Encourage them to stop in and say hello to a beloved middle school teacher – Provide them access to positive middle school friends who are now going to another school. Network with other parents whose children are also entering high school – it’s a great way to get support and find out how normal you are!