

Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

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Underage Drinking Still a Concern in Oklahoma: National Prevention Week 2012

During National Prevention Week, May 20-26, parents are encouraged to educate themselves about the dangers of underage drinking – an activity that potentially could set a child up for a lifetime of addiction.

Although the pressures faced by today's adolescents differ from those of generations past, young people have been – and probably always will be – influenced by peer pressure, a hunger for thrill-seeking and risk-taking, and the temptation to use substances designed to change the way they think or feel, particularly alcohol.

“A lot of people may dismiss underage drinking as simply a ‘rite of passage’ from adolescence into adulthood, but year after year, the statistics prove to us that lives are ruined and potential is lost,” said Terri White, commissioner of the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. “Thousands of young people die each year from alcohol-related car wrecks, suicides, homicides, burns and drowning. Alcohol use also is directly correlated with juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy, fetal alcohol syndrome, sexually transmitted diseases, reduced academic achievement and increased high-school dropout rates.”

As a society, we must do a better job of persuading our citizens and our young people that alcohol use is a dead end, that they are playing Russian roulette, not only with their own lives, but with the lives of friends, neighbors, and loved ones, White said. “Alcoholism is a disease, not a rite of passage.”

And, for the teenage brain, which is still developing, it can be especially damaging.

“The ‘higher-order’ brain centers, which are responsible for reasoning and problem solving, don't fully develop until young adulthood (between the ages of 21-25). So, it's a cruel irony that, just when the brain is most vulnerable to the effects of substance abuse, that's also the time when people are most likely to experiment with alcohol or drugs,” she said.

A National Institutes of Mental Health neuroscientist, who specializes in studying the adolescent brain, said he tells teenagers “if they're doing drugs or alcohol that evening, it may not just be affecting their brains for that night or even for that weekend, but for the next 80 years of their lives.”

Not every person who uses alcohol or drugs will become addicted, White added. But the younger a person is when he or she starts using alcohol or drugs, the greater the risk.

“In Oklahoma, the average first-time use of alcohol among children is age 12. Studies have shown that kids who begin drinking before age 18 are six times more likely to develop alcohol dependence as adults than those who begin drinking at age 21, so that is of major concern,” she said.

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In Oklahoma:

- ✓ Alcohol – not methamphetamine or prescription drugs – remains Oklahoma’s most abused substance, as it has for decades.
- ✓ More than 85 percent of Oklahomans who sought ODMHSAS alcohol treatment services in FY11 said they began drinking before their 18th birthday.
- ✓ Nearly 72 percent of high school students have consumed alcohol, and 40 percent are current drinkers. (*YRBS 2011*)
- ✓ Ranking states based on the percentage of alcohol consumed by underage youth, Oklahoma ranked as the seventh highest. (*Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation*)
- ✓ In 2009, underage customers consumed 20.4 percent of all alcohol sold in Oklahoma, totaling \$250 million in sales (in 2010 dollars). (*Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation*)
- ✓ Underage drinking cost the citizens of Oklahoma \$831 million in 2010 (youth violence, traffic crashes, high risk sex, property crime, injury, poisoning and psychoses, FAS among mothers age 15-20, youth alcohol treatment.) (*Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation*)

White said parents have always been the most powerful resource in preventing underage alcohol and drug use. “You may not think your kids are listening to you, but they are,” she said. Clear communication about the negative effects of alcohol, as well as about parental expectations, have been found to significantly decrease alcohol use in teens. Adequate parental supervision also has been found to be a deterrent to alcohol use in youth.

“Spend time with your children and get to know them, because it will make a world of difference in their lives,” she added. “Establish curfews, and make sure you know where your kids are after school and on weekends. Also, committing to something as simple as eating dinner together on a regular basis is important, especially as children age. Compared to teens who have frequent family dinners (five to seven per week), those who have infrequent family dinners (fewer than three per week) are more than twice as likely to use alcohol, two-and-a-half times likelier to use marijuana, and almost four times likelier to say they expect to try drugs in the future.”

The bottom line is that preventing substance abuse is so much easier than having to treat addiction – and all the consequences that go along with it – later. “Reducing youth access to alcohol is important, and laws such as the social host ordinance are helpful in this regard, but we also must teach our young people to make safer and healthier decisions. If, as a parent, you are concerned that your child is abusing alcohol or other substances, the sooner you recognize the problem, the sooner you can seek help. And, the earlier you can intervene, the more likely your child will be able to achieve successful recovery.”

For more information or referral services, call the department’s “REACHOUT” hotline at 1-800-522-9054. The agency’s website at <http://ok.gov/odmhsas/> also contains resources related to underage substance abuse prevention.

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