

PARENT CORNER

Children and Substance Abuse

By Patricia von Oelhoffen

How common are illicit drugs, alcohol, and tobacco in your child's life? Some parents may find it surprising to learn of the increasingly young ages at which children are experiencing pressure to use these substances.

According to Renee Storm Pearson (*The 2003 Hawai'i Student Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Use Study [1987–2003]: Hawai'i Adolescent Prevention and Treatment Needs Assessment*, Hawai'i Department of Health) alcohol is the most prevalent substance used across all grade levels by Hawai'i adolescents (and youths in many other parts of the nation). The onset of alcohol and tobacco (cigarette) use—by age 9 or younger—is earlier than for any other substance. Illegal drug use can occur at age 9 or 10, with marijuana use escalating to a reported one-third of Hawai'i students by age 13. And, the American Academy of Pediatrics reports that every day, approximately 4,700 American youth under age 18 try marijuana for the first time.

The earlier children are exposed to and begin using drugs, the greater the likelihood of serious problems developing. Drug and alcohol use can increase the risk of addiction; permanently change the developing brain; affect concentration and retention; impair judgment; and lead to a multitude of negative emotional, physical, and behavioral life consequences.

Fortunately, despite these statistics, the majority of youths do not use illegal drugs, alcohol, or tobacco. We can attribute this in large measure to positive and constructive parental influence, support, guidance, and love, fostering children's emotional health and wellbeing. It is never too early or too late

to take action if your child displays unusual changes in mood, attitude, temper, sleeping habits, and avoidance of usual interests, leading you to suspect substance abuse. The *Twelve Tips for Helping Your Children Stay Drug-Free* encompasses proactive and supportive approaches for parents. Communicating with children about all types of substance abuse is particularly crucial, as learning about important topics from parents and other caring family members whom they trust and respect can be a powerful deterrent. Parents can not only make a difference in their children's lives, but also have a profound effect on drug abuse in their society as a whole.

For more information on the effects and consequences of substance abuse, as well as enlightenment on the warning signs and ways to prevent initial use, access the wealth of information available on these sites:

- PREL website: [www.helpwithice.org]
- Parents. The Anti-drug: [www.theantidrug.com]
- National Institute on Drug Abuse: [www.drugabuse.gov]
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: [www.niaaa.nih.gov]
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Agency: [www.os.dhhs.gov]
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: [www.samhsa.gov]
- National Clearinghouse for Alcohol & Drug Information: [www.health.org]

Patricia von Oelhoffen can be contacted at vonoelhp@prel.org. ★

TWELVE TIPS FOR HELPING YOUR CHILDREN STAY DRUG-FREE

- ✓ ACCEPT THE ROLE OF PARENT AS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY • Let others be their friends.
- ✓ MAKE PARENTING A PRIORITY • Be there for your children.
- ✓ EDUCATE YOURSELF ABOUT THE PROBLEMS FACING TODAY'S CHILDREN • They are different from the problems you faced.
- ✓ GIVE CLEAR MESSAGES ABOUT YOUR EXPECTATIONS • Be specific about how you expect them to behave.
- ✓ BE AWARE THAT MANY IN THE COMMUNITY PUT CHILDREN'S BUYING POWER ABOVE CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING • Don't expect the community to reinforce family values.
- ✓ CLEARLY STATE CONSEQUENCES OF FAILURE TO FOLLOW FAMILY RULES • Consequences are not negotiable.
- ✓ ENFORCE STATED CONSEQUENCES WHEN FAMILY RULES ARE BROKEN • Children who don't follow family rules today may break society's laws tomorrow.
- ✓ DON'T ASSUME THAT THE PARENTS OF ALL YOUR CHILDREN'S FRIENDS HAVE THE SAME RULES YOU DO • Some have different rules, some have none.
- ✓ BELIEVE THAT CHILDREN WANT RULES TO GUIDE THEM • Allow them to paint you as the "bad guy."
- ✓ REMEMBER THAT TEENAGERS NEED PARENTAL SUPERVISION AS MUCH AS TODDLERS DO • It's just a different kind.
- ✓ IF NECESSARY, LOVE YOUR CHILDREN ENOUGH TO LET THEM HATE YOU • For a while.
- ✓ KNOW THAT CHILDREN ARE NEVER TOO BIG FOR A HUG • Even when they are grown.

Copyright 1991 by Families in Action (www.nationalfamilies.org). Reprinted with permission. Additional copies in card format or bookmark format are available from National Families in Action at \$50/100. Call 404-248-9676 to order.