

Helping Teens Make Safe and Smart Decisions

It's a truism that as children get bigger, so do their problems. It's relatively simple to comfort a heartbroken 4-year-old whose balloon has popped, yet infinitely more challenging to talk in a non-confrontational way to a 14-year-old who is seeking acceptance from his friends by experimenting with alcohol or drugs. One of the best ways to prepare your children to navigate the sometimes uncomfortable social situations that occur as they approach their teen years is to start communicating with them at a young age. "There are many opportunities to talk to your children about being safe and making smart decisions," says Ellen Elias, director of The Center for Alcohol and Drug Resources and vice president for prevention & addiction services. "For example, your 8-year-old may hear of a celebrity who overdosed, got arrested, or even died because of their abuse of drugs or alcohol. This is a perfect opportunity to talk about how bad decisions can have devastating consequences."

And as your child gets older, the communication must continue so he or she is equipped with the confidence and skills to make smart and safe decisions, especially when socializing with friends. Today's world of texting and social websites requires specific skills for children to safely maneuver through this crucial time in their lives. Even teenagers who don't drink alcohol may be faced

with upsetting or dangerous situations, such as having to make a choice not to be in a car with a driver who's been drinking or deciding if a friend needs emergency help.

Often, it's not easy for parents to broach the topic of substance abuse and safety with their elementary school-aged children and teens in a non-judgmental way. To help, The Center has developed a tip sheet "Communicating is Key to Keeping Your Teen Safe" and an "In Case of Emergency" (ICE) card. This is a wallet card, created with the input of a focus group of teenagers, that contains contact information and important safety tips. Funding for the ICE cards was provided by grants from the Yaw Paw Foundation and Stop & Shop. They were distributed in Glen Rock, Midland Park and Ridge-wood school districts earlier this year and this fall, the effort will expand to Franklin Lakes, Oakland and Wyckoff school districts.

Parent tip: Insist your kids make agreements with friends about never leaving anyone behind or alone.

"What parents think is extremely important to kids," says Ms. Elias. "When the messages are clear and consistent, it helps kids make healthier decisions as they get older and become more independent. What's more, keeping the lines of communication open reassures your kids that they can ask you for help whenever they need it, no matter the situation."

Research indicates that kids who communicate regularly with their parents about their daily activities are 67 percent less likely to be involved in substance abuse than children who have little or no communication (2000 PDFNJ Middle School Study on Substance Use). The Center for Alcohol and Drug Resources has an abundance of resources, including community and school programs, literature and practical advice, to help parents talk to their children about making safe and smart decisions.



To get an ICE wallet card or Parent Tip Sheet, call The Center for Alcohol and Drug Resources at 201.488.8680 or visit www.tcadr.org.



Children's Aid and Family Services was named one of the 2010 Nonprofit Innovation Awards finalists by NJBIZ. Bob Jones, Ph.D., president & CEO and Harvey Braun, Boardmember, attended the awards event.