Reducing and Preventing Underage Drinking

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Why is it so important to reduce and/or prevent underage drinking? Well, in addition to being illegal, late childhood and early adolescent drinkers cause more than their share of havoc on the roads, including car wrecks and fatal car crashes. And the high cost to human life and property is not all that young drinking is associated with. Some young drinkers go on to a life of alcohol abuse, alcoholism, and all of the diseases and difficulties associated with chronic alcohol consumption.

Studies funded by the National Institutes of Drug Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) have identified several factors that reduce the incidence of alcohol use in late childhood and early adolescence. Through these scientifically determined methods, your community can decrease the likelihood that a child will drink. In most communities it is relatively easy to obtain alcohol through family members, older peers, and merchants willing to sell to youngsters. Sometimes communities, including law enforcement, are not aggressive in efforts to stop underage drinking. Also, some children, parents, and organizations are simply unaware about the real dangers associated with alcohol use for youngsters.

Proven prevention strategies focus on these areas. They will probably not surprise you. In fact, they may seem just like good old common sense. But these strategies have shown their effectiveness in research studies, and are worthy of strong consideration for families, and communities committed to reducing underage drinking. All in all, these studies have shown that when communities take the time, and support prevention efforts, fewer youngsters drink.
As simple as this seems, the first strategy is MAKING ALCOHOL LESS AVAILABLE TO YOUNGSTERS. As logic tells you, just making alcohol more difficult for youngsters to obtain will decrease underage drinking. We know that when the legal drinking age was raised to 21 years in all states, there was a substantial decrease in alcohol availability for youngsters. Raising the drinking age also contributed to a significant reduction in alcohol-related traffic accidents among drivers aged 16 to 20. Many teens obtain alcohol from their own homes. Just educating parents - telling them that teens might be drinking from the family liquor cabinet - can reduce access for youngsters. If parents make a point of not having alcohol around, it is that much more difficult for their child to obtain it. Another way parents can help is to make sure the parties their children attend are alcohol free. Parents are encouraged to call host parents to determine if this party will have strong parent supervision. There is some demand for keg-registration and social host liability legislation. These maneuvers are also likely to curtail access to liquor. Another strategy is to make alcohol less affordable. Right now, in most places alcohol is fairly inexpensive. When prices do increase, through increased taxes, it has an impact on whether youth can obtain alcohol.

A second approach to preventing and reducing alcohol use in children and young adolescents is CONSISTENT ENFORCEMENT OF EXISTING LAWS. Police enforcement of existing laws in conjunction with strong community support is associated with reduction in underage drinking. Logically enough, when youth realize that there is a good chance of being caught and punished for drinking, this serves as a deterrent to using alcohol. Similarly, when merchants know there is strong enforcement of laws against underage drinking, selling to minors decreases considerably. Many
communities are enforcing a stronger traffic safety policy, and more stringent DUI laws. These new limits are associated with decreases in car crashes, with and without fatalities.

A third approach to the problem of underage drinking is CHANGING DRINKING NORMS AND BEHAVIORS THROUGH EDUCATION. Many people do not understand the cost that young drinkers exact on the community. They feel that it is benign, even natural, for youngsters to experiment with unsupervised drinking. The attitude that alcohol is just fun, harmless, or a necessary part of adolescence can be quite destructive. Making people aware of alcohol's dangers, and promoting negative expectations about drinking, and positive expectations for not drinking, sending clear messages in homes and communities does work. Using the media to promote this message, community activism, and parent expectations all play key roles here.

The research studies looking at reduction in underage drinking, were funded by the National Institutes of Drug Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), one of the National Institutes of Health. You may visit their website at: http://www.niaaa.nih.gov. You may correspond with individuals associated with prevention efforts by using the email address: Leadership@cdmgroup.com, or by calling 301-654-6740.

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