

THE POWER OF PREVENTION...

Contributed by: Angela Lynch, Franklin Mayor's Drug Task Force

Creating Safe Holiday Celebrations

The winter holidays are a time to enjoy the company of family, friends and co-workers. Holiday parties are often a highlight of the season, but they also give young people more opportunities to misuse drugs and alcohol. This is a concern, and unfortunately the holiday season can be a time of risk for young people. On an average December day, more than 11,000 young people, aged 12 to 17, will use alcohol for the first time. Some of these young adults will not make it to the New Year, as nearly 400 young people under age 21 die from alcohol-related causes every month.

The holiday season is often a blur of family gatherings and celebrations, and more often than not, alcohol is present. The fridge and the liquor cabinets are stocked, parents are distracted by relatives and dinner preparations, and older siblings or college-age friends are around. The result is an increase in drug- and alcohol-related tragedies. According to Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), at least 50 percent of all deadly car crashes that take place during the holiday season involve alcohol. Creating a safe environment and encouraging healthy behaviors saves lives.

The widespread availability of alcohol at holiday parties gives our teens and pre-teens many opportunities to sneak alcohol when no one is looking, or convince a relative to let them enjoy "just one" alcoholic beverage. And some parents may be more inclined to let their teenagers have an alcoholic drink to share in a family toast or otherwise share in "the holiday spirits." On a local level, 47.8% Franklin Middle School students who ever had a drink of alcohol say they obtained it by having someone give it to them.

Where's the harm in that? Let's take a look.

- The younger a child is when he/she starts to drink, the higher the chances of having alcohol-related problems later in life.
- Alcohol use by teens affects still-developing cognitive abilities and impairs memory and learning.
- Teens who drink are more likely to commit or be the victim of violence (including sexual assault) and to experience stress, depression, and suicidal thoughts.

There are some simple things that you can do to lessen the exposure of your children to holiday substance abuse. Consider these holiday celebration tips:

- At your holiday gatherings, offer plenty of non-alcoholic foods, drinks and activities.
- Model responsible behavior by making sure that guests who have been drinking do not drive.
- Let your child know what to expect. Tell your child that adults may be drinking during the holidays, but under no circumstances is a child allowed to drink alcohol.
- To lower the risk of alcohol poisoning, be sure to throw out partially empty alcoholic drinks. Children love to imitate adults, and if they have access to leftover drinks they may be tempted to taste the contents. Children are much more sensitive to alcohol than adults. Alcohol is found in beer, wine and distilled liquor, such as vodka, whiskey, rum or bourbon. It is also in perfumes, aftershave lotions, and mouthwashes. Did you know that vanilla and almond extracts also have high alcohol content? Make sure to keep all of these products out of the reach of children.
- Parents, grandparents and babysitters should also be extra cautious during the holidays. Visitors often leave medicines on a nightstand or in the bathroom, making them easily accessible to children. Medications given to seniors often do not have child-resistant closures, allowing children to open them with very little difficulty. Also, purses of visitors may contain medicines

and other potentially dangerous items. Remember that the homes of friends and relatives may not be poison-proof, particularly if children do not live there.

Each year, about 4,700 people die as a result of underage drinking. Data from a national survey of high school students shows that teens who receive a message from their parents that underage drinking is completely unacceptable are more than 80 percent less likely to drink than teens who receive other messages. It is crucial for parents to have ongoing, intentional conversations with their teens – talking honestly about alcohol and drug misuse can have a real impact.

We all want the best for our families, so why not create some substance-free holiday traditions for your family? It's a great way to show your child that you can have fun during the holidays without alcohol or drugs. For tips and tools to help start the conversation about drug and alcohol misuse with your teen, click on the link for the Franklin Mayor's Drug Task Force at www.franklinnh.org.

Wishing you a safe and wonderful holiday season!

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