

**Families and Family Strengthening: A Fundamental Strategy to Prevent Alcohol  
Use among your Teens**

By

James E. Copple

November 2, 2006

We all have them – most of them are pretty average or normal – some are dysfunctional and some are pretty exceptional. We all fight for them, we can be embarrassed by them – and sometimes we wish they would just go away. We see them at holidays and we resume arguments that seem to have lasted for years. We know how to get to them and they know how to get at us. Yes, I am talking about families. We were born into one and hopefully we will die with one surrounding us. Families are the bedrock of our culture and our civilization. We may leave them – pursue our own dreams – travel to distant lands – we may change our names because of marriage or bring new members in through marriage, birth and adoption but we cannot escape the reality that we are part of family. Anger, pain and abandonment may separate us from family, but it is still family.

Much of what we do in alcohol policy focuses on what we call environmental strategies. We look at policies, norms, legal strategies and practices that can shape or influence an individual's decision to drink or avoid problem drinking. It is right that we do that – but it is also important that we occasionally examine the obvious. And the obvious is where we begin our journey in life and where we are most influenced. Nobody at the end of this journey, when asked who were the most influential people in your life ever says George Clooney, Michael Jordon, Angelina Jolie or President Bush. Rather, it is usually parents, a grandparent, a teacher, a minister or other significant adult. In fact, to validate that assertion, research results from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth Risk Behavior asserts the most significant indicator of risk for teenage pregnancy, crime, violence, and substance abuse among teenagers is unsupervised time. It is about adults being involved in the lives of our children.

Today our PODCAST has focused on parenting. What parents can and should do to prevent their children from becoming involved in alcohol. Stacey Brunell, IIAA's new national spokesperson, underscored the significance of parental involvement in the daily lives and activities of our children and understanding the difference between parenting and being a friend. There is an assumption that when young people enter high school that the relationship between parent and child changes dramatically. It changes, often because we let it change. Despite efforts on the part of our adolescents to distance themselves from the home, an important activity for the development of autonomy, we have a responsibility to stay engaged and to stay informed.

The Century Council funded by America's Leading Distillers release in 2005 the results of a survey that emphasizes the role of moms in preventing underage drinking. Two observations are worth noting about the survey: 1) They believe that parents (moms in this case) have a role in shaping attitude about alcohol; and 2) Parents (again, moms in this case) are somewhat clueless when it comes to understanding their daughter's attitudes about alcohol. And, the most startling finding in their survey is that "nearly half of all mothers think underage drinking is acceptable in different circumstances."

Joe Califano and his colleagues at the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University stress the importance of family and parents in the prevention of substance abuse. CASA in a study released in August of 2005, noted the following:

*Twenty-six percent of teens live in households with these four characteristics: frequent family dinners (five to seven times in a typical week), low levels of tension and stress between family members (not very much or none at all), parents who are very or fairly proud of their teen, and a parent in whom the teen can confide. The average substance-abuse risk for such teens is roughly half that of the average teen.*

Our friends at CASA point to the twenty-six percent of young people that live in homes with these protective factors. They correctly draw the correlation between a positive family environment and the prevention of substance abuse. The horror is that 74% do not live in this environment. In other words, almost three-quarters of American teens do not

have the qualities of a relationship that CASA believes are important for a safe and nurturing environment when it comes to substance abuse.

Families are bound together by a complex stitching of relational threads that defy easy analysis. They are vulnerable, they are enduring, and they are fragile. For that reason, we should give attention to strengthening families. Here are some suggestions that have a direct impact on the substance abusing behavior of our children:

1. Involve your children in activities where they are supervised by adults.
2. Parents Should Parent. Parents, according to Karol Kumpfer of the University of Utah have made the following observation. “The critical role of the family is acknowledged in virtually every psychological theory of child development; however, many parents have given up parenting. They have heard they have little influence compared with peer and media influences.” Parents throw in the towel.
3. Model Behavior – Alcohol is a legal product for individuals over 21. Modeling behavior includes your own assessment of how frequently you drink, how frequently you drink in the presence of your children, how risky your behavior is when you drink, such as driving, temper, social interaction and discourse.
4. Provide Family Order and Organization. Eat dinner with your children, create expectations, and establish guidelines and barriers.
5. Don’t apologize for values and expectations.

Here are eleven quick tips:

1. Communicate clear values and expectations around alcohol.
2. Be open about responsible use of alcohol (particularly your own).
3. Parent Classes are valuable and can help strengthen families.
4. Organize your home and provide a sense of security and one that reflects consistency and normalcy.
5. Eat dinner as a family and yes – one more suggestion about turning off the TV.

6. Promote family friendly work environments. Encourage employers to provide leave for school conferences and extra-curricular activities
7. With children and all family members – COMMUNICATE
8. Discuss with your neighbors and friends the importance of knowing where your children are at all times.
9. Encourage your children to have back-up call centers so if you can't find them or they can't find you – there is another place to contact.
10. Discuss these issues with other parents and discourage any use of alcohol in group environments with kids. No social hosting and providing alcohol believing you are creating a safe environment to drink. WRONG
11. Promote, participate, and encourage civic engagement and volunteerism with your children.

Despite the warts, wiggles and weirdness of our families – embrace them and understand them as the first and most significant influence in a child's decision to consume or not to consume alcohol.