
CLEVELAND COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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April is Alcohol Awareness Month

Talk Early. Talk Often: Parents Can Make A Difference

(Shelby, NC)—Every April since 1987, The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc. (NCADD) has sponsored Alcohol Awareness Month in order to increase the public’s awareness and understanding of alcoholism and encourage local communities to focus on alcohol related issues. This year’s theme, “Talk Early, Talk Often: Parents Can Make a Difference in Teen Alcohol Use”, draws attention to the role parents play in preventing teen alcohol use and how it can impact their lives. It provides the tools and support necessary for parents to proactively engage teens about the dangers of using alcohol.

The first step in talking to your teen is educating yourself on the dangers associated with underage drinking. Alcohol impairs the area of the brain used for impulse control and judgment. Therefore, teens are more likely to engage in risky behavior and make poor decisions when under the influence of alcohol. Often, these behaviors result in accidents, injuries and behaviors that teens later regret. Alcohol can make teens act in ways and do things they would normally never do when sober. Consuming alcohol underage is associated with many dangers including car accidents, high-risk sexual activity, sexual assaults, violence, suicides and addiction. Car crashes are the leading cause of death for 13 to 20 year-olds, and more than three young people die in alcohol-related crashes every day. Drinking alcohol increases the chance that teens will engage in unplanned sexual activity and teens who drink are less likely to use condoms or other forms of birth control. This risky behavior can lead to pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. According to the National Institute of Justice, alcohol use is involved in at least half of all sexual assaults among college students. Underage drinking also significantly increases the chance of alcohol dependency. People who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to become alcoholics than those who begin at age 21 or older.

This year’s Alcohol Awareness Month theme coincides with local efforts to reduce underage drinking. The Cleveland County Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition (SAPC) focuses on preventing underage drinking and substance abuse within Cleveland County. The SAPC’s website, talkitoutclevelandcounty.com, highlights the importance

of the role parents play in their teen's decisions regarding underage drinking and drug use. In Cleveland County, much like the rest of the state and country, alcohol continues to be the most widely used and abused substance among our young people. According to the 2015 Pride Survey conducted in Cleveland County Schools in grades, 6, 9 and 12, 63% of high school students reported using alcohol in the past year and 20% reported using alcohol in the past 30 days. 43% of high school students reported alcohol is fairly or very easy to get, with 72% reporting they get their alcohol from an older friend, sibling or parent.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has identified two strategies that work best to reduce underage drinking: 1) environmental prevention and 2) parental involvement. In an effort to address the issue of underage drinking locally, the SAPC has been implementing environmental strategies such as responsible beverage service trainings, alcohol compliance checks, and shoulder tap surveys and has established an anonymous underage drinking tip line (1-888-207-0702). SAPC is comprised of numerous sectors from throughout the community including representatives from the health department, law enforcement, healthcare, school system, faith-based community, parents, social services, businesses, youth and many others.

Jamie Todd, Coordinator of Cleveland County's Drug Free Communities Grant, says, "While this commitment from the community to address the issue of underage drinking is incredibly valuable, it is imperative that prevention efforts and conversations around underage drinking start at home. Parental involvement is simply talking to your kids about these issues and setting good examples." Research indicates that talking with teens about tough subjects is critical to limiting risky behaviors. Talking to your teenager about alcohol and drugs can be an uncomfortable conversation for both parents and kids alike, but it is well worth the effort.

"Research has shown that kids who have conversations with their parents about underage drinking are 50% less likely to use alcohol than those who don't have these conversations. Yet, according to the Pride Survey, 1 in 3 students in Cleveland County reported their parents never or seldom talk about the problems associated with tobacco, alcohol and drug use. As a parent or guardian, it is imperative to initiate these conversations. It's never too early to begin talking to your kids about the dangers associated with underage drinking or other drug use," says DeShay Oliver, Cleveland County Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition Director.

If you are ready to begin talking to your kids about underage drinking and drug use, here are some helpful tips to get you started:

- **Be a good role model.** Kids learn much of their behavior from their parents. Don't accept underage drinking as a rite of passage or allow teens to drink on special occasions.
- **Set rules about alcohol use.** Enforce them consistently and ensure that your expectations are clear and reasonable.
- **Get involved** in your kid's life and make time for one-on-one discussions. Tell your teen to call you if he or she needs a ride home from a party where alcohol is being

served. Allow your teen to ask questions, but don't press if he or she is not ready to talk. Let your teen know you are available to listen to any and all problems, anytime.

- **Start early!** The average age when kids first try alcohol is 12 years old.

For more information and helpful tips on how to start the conversation, please visit www.talkitoutclevelandcounty.com. Remember, it's never too early to begin to talk to your kids about alcohol, but it can be too late.

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