



When the window is open: Talk to your tween about drinking

Written by Sally James

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If you have a tween, chances are you haven't even thought about talking to her about binge drinking. After all, she's just hit double digits; why worry now about her hitting the bottle? But some experts say that keeping your child from binge drinking in high school may begin with a chat you have when she's in the fourth or fifth grade. In Washington, most children take their first drink of alcohol between the ages of 11 and 13, according to the Washington State Coalition to Reduce Underage Drinking. At the same time, 9- and 10-year-old children may be more willing to listen, and talking when they're young helps lay a foundation for family rules that can weather the storm of puberty.

Recently, more than 50 parents met in the library at Bryant Elementary School to hear University of Washington researcher J. David Hawkins present his evidence for such communication. In the audience: a coalition of Seattle educators, parents and others who are hoping to use grant money to bring classes for parents to this northeast Seattle neighborhood in November.

The five-week class session is called Guiding Good Choices, and was designed by Hawkins and his team of researchers to give parents lessons in how to talk to their children effectively about drinking and other risky behavior. Talking isn't easy, and many parents need pointers on how to bring the topic up naturally and help their child practice ways of saying "no" without fearing the loss of friends. Parents also need to know how to rally other parents to their cause.

Bryant mom Inga Manskopf has a 9-year-old daughter of her own, and is the coordinator of this program, called Eckstein Community Coalition to Prevent Underage Drinking. "North Seattle really has a problem," Manskopf says. Data collected from three of the public schools in the area show that students drink earlier than average for students in the state. For example, the state's average of self-reported binge drinking among high-school sophomores is about 12 percent; at Roosevelt High School, it's 30 percent. The data also suggest that students don't notice a lot of disapproval from parents. One Seattle mother said she thinks her son needs protection from both peers and "other idiot parents," stating she knows of one household where beer is freely purchased for 16-year-olds.

Nobody knows why these teens drink more than the state's average. Manskopf described the area's parents as ranking above average in income and education. A psychologist hired by another affluent community, Mercer Island, reported earlier this year that teens in that community seem more troubled by anxiety and feel more distant from their parents than the norm. But why? One of the factors that Manskopf has noticed in the northeast community is the ambivalence of parents. Some parents think a little bit of underage drinking is OK.

There is no ambivalence about the laws, according to Seattle Police officer Kipp Strong, a member of the community policing team in the North Precinct and of the Eckstein Coalition. Minors cannot be in possession of any alcohol, and parents who host a party where alcohol is available to minors can face prosecution.

"There's nothing 'Leave It to Beaver' about a drinking party," Strong said during an interview in Magnuson Park. "Parents think it is just a rite of passage." But from his perspective as a coach, father and police officer, Strong believes they couldn't be more wrong.

The Eckstein Coalition has landed about \$130,000 in grant money to begin working to prevent the alcohol use, and Manskopf will coordinate the five-year project. A partnership between the coalition, Children's Hospital and Medical Center, and the Northeast YMCA will lead to parenting classes offered at all three places. Some of the grant money will also help pay the salary of a drug and alcohol counselor, who will be shared by Eckstein Middle School, and Roosevelt and Nathan Hale high schools.

Manskopf hopes that her coalition can raise additional money from other sources to create a sustainable effort with staying

power, long after the grant money runs out.

As a mother herself, Manskopf says she's eager to take the classes. She has talked to her own child, who says "Mom runs the don't drink club." But Manskopf remarks, "I know that the things I'm telling her now aren't going to be enough."

Sally James is a Seattle writer specializing in medicine and science, and the mother of three.



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