



Underage Drinking. Why is Prevention Important?

By Laura S. Otte

Alcohol is a legal substance. Sporting and community events attended by families often serve alcohol. Family entertainment businesses, filled with games and prizes, serve beer. Alcohol advertisements portray images of young people gaining popularity with the opposite sex and their peers. Well-intentioned parents and adults that allow kids to drink at home where they are “safe,” are collecting car keys at house parties. High School prom and graduation parties are riddled with kegs and plastic cups. Some perceive underage drinking as a “rite of passage,” and many share the common misconception that youth consumption of alcohol is harmless.

2010 Michigan Profile for Healthy Youth (MiPHY) data shows both male and female 7th graders in Calhoun County reported using alcohol for the first time at 10 years old and 35% of 7th graders feel alcohol is easy to get. Research demonstrates decision making areas of the human brain are still developing, which leads to adolescents making impulsive decisions or taking impulsive action; a disregard for consequences, and emotional reactions that put youth at risk even *without* alcohol or drugs. Young people think “bad things” won’t happen to them. Parents may be unaware of the true scope of danger underage drinking poses to their child. Negative consequences of underage drinking include: low or failing grades and poor academic performance, problematic classroom behavior, diminished cognitive ability, inconsistent attendance or truancy, delinquency, violence, crime; poor physical health, including sexually transmitted infections and disease; teen pregnancy, committing or becoming the victim of sexual assault, serious or fatal injury from falls, burns and car accidents; and a 40% chance of adult

alcohol dependence and addiction. According to the Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking, "Alcohol dependence rates are highest among young people between ages 18 and 20. And they're not even old enough to drink legally."

When we work together as a community to prevent underage drinking we support healthy choices that enable our youth to enjoy personal and academic achievements leading to future success as adults. Less young people drop out of high school, and more go off to college. When we prevent underage drinking we can break family cycles of addiction. We create safer, more desirable neighborhoods and free financial resources spent on addiction, incarceration and disease to be directed towards prevention and greater community health overall.