

Raising healthy, well-adjusted kids starts at home

By Sheryce Allendorf

In a culture where alcohol, marijuana, and other substances are often sensationalized by the media, more and more youth are experimenting with, and/or using these substances on a regular basis. Whether this is the result of the glamorization of substances, growing up with adults using and partaking in controlled substance use, or trying to fit in, as a community we must do more to engage our youth and encourage healthy coping skills.

The California Center for Disease Control reported that 22 percent of high school students in California reported having five or more drinks in a row within a couple of hours in the previous 30 days. Although this statistic is from 2011, there has been an increase in binge drinking by youth 12 to 17 based on more recent studies.

Additionally, 9.4 percent of youth 12-17 were reported as current users of illicit drugs, which includes marijuana, cocaine, heroin, hallucinogens, inhalants, and misuse of prescriptions drugs.

As adults we may minimize the risks posed to youth who use alcohol or other drugs based on our own childhood experiences, belief system, or media, but research has shown that an individual's brain continues to develop well into young adulthood. The use and/or abuse of alcohol and controlled substances in teens, can impact brain development and negatively impact neurocognitive functioning, which can impact how these youth function in adulthood.

Additionally, in 2014, 33 percent of youth ages 12-17 who use illicit drugs or alcohol had a co-occurrence of a major

depressive episode. With the stigma surrounding mental health disorders, inability to obtain services, and one's own denial, many youths are going without services that could support mental wellness, and instead, youth are using alcohol and other illicit substances to cope.

How do we help our youth? Whether you are parent, raising a child, or a member of our community, you play a vital role in assisting our youth to become the best they can be. The following are some ways help engage, support, and set examples for our youth:

- Lead by example: If you are using illicit drugs or consuming alcohol which impacts your ability to manage daily responsibilities, seek out help and support.
- Encourage community/recreational involvement.
- Stay connected: eat a meal together, play a game, engage in meaningful conversation.
- Make plans with your youth; give them something to which they can look forward.
- Pay attention: pay attention to a youth's verbal and non-verbal cues. If there have been changes in behavior, personality, or routine. Connect, ask, and provide support.
- Set age appropriate boundaries, and expectations. Stand by your word.
- Get to know your children's friends, and their parents.
- Trust your instincts; if you think something is cause for concern, act.
- Seek out professional support.

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