

Why Employers Should Invest in Preventing Drinking Among Youth Ages 9-15

Background Information for Governor's Spouses, Coalitions and Others

Children ages 9-15 years old constitute a vital group of concern for a state's employers for two key reasons. First, children's alcohol and other drug use can adversely affect workplace productivity and safety by causing parents, guardians and other caregivers to be distracted at work. Secondly, youth in the 9-15 year old age group are the up and coming workforce of tomorrow. So, delivering intervention services and prevention tools and messages to parents, guardians and other caregivers of children ages 9-15 years old makes good business sense.

Parenting can be one of the most challenging yet rewarding roles in an adult's life. The adage "You're only as happy as your saddest child" speaks a lot of truth. And due to a confluence of factors, today's parents may face more complex challenges than ever before. Economic uncertainty, pervasive media and the increased likelihood that primary caregivers work outside of the home all may affect parents' efforts to help children build strong self esteem and the confidence to make smart decisions – especially when it comes to alcohol and drug abuse.

Clearly, when alcohol or other drug use enters a young person's life, it affects the entire family. And if that young person's parents are employed, it likely affects their ability to work. Workers concerned about a child's alcohol or drug use cannot help but be distracted on the job. Those who are aware of the root of their child's problems may spend considerable amounts of their workday dealing with the ramifications, such as phone calls with the child's school or meetings with counselors. Others may simply be consumed with worry, experiencing significant stress and struggling with how to respond to changes in their child's behavior. Regardless, the parent's ability to work safely and productively is compromised.

Parents have a profound impact on children in many ways. When it comes to alcohol and other drug use, this influence can be negative or positive, depending on a variety of factors, including their own use of alcohol and other drugs as well as their ability to effectively talk to their children about the dangers of alcohol and other drugs.

On the negative side, parental alcohol and drug use increases the odds that children will use alcohol and other drugs themselves. Combined data from 2002 to 2007 indicate that more than 8.3 million young people under 18 years of age (11.9 percent) lived with at least one parent who was dependent on or abused alcohol or an illicit drug during the past year. Of these, almost 7.3 million (10.3 percent) lived with a parent who was dependent on or abused alcohol.¹ Although genes account for more than half of the risk for alcohol dependence,² genetic susceptibility does not automatically mean a person will develop a problem. Helping working parents who abuse alcohol or other drugs get treatment can help break the cycle, making children less vulnerable to addictive behavior.

¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies. (April 16, 2009). *The NSDUH Report: Children Living with Substance-Dependent or Substance-Abusing Parents: 2002 to 2007*. Rockville, MD.

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *The Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General, 2007

On the positive side, research indicates that children who learn about the dangers of alcohol and other drugs from their parents are up to 50 percent less likely to use.³ So, parents are well advised to have frequent conversations with their children about the dangers of alcohol and other drugs, including the abuse of prescription and over-the-counter medications.

And an added bonus is that parental disapproval of underage alcohol use is associated with decreased involvement with peers who use alcohol, less peer influence to use alcohol, greater self-efficacy for avoiding alcohol use, and lower subsequent alcohol use and related problems.⁴ However, youth perception of parental disapproval of alcohol use generally decreases with age. For example, 93.8 percent of 12 or 13 year olds compared with 90.3 percent of 14 or 15 year olds and 85.2 percent of 16 or 17 year olds thought their parents would strongly disapprove of having one or more drinks nearly every day.⁵ Thus, parental disapproval has the greatest chance of affecting their choices if youth are given messages early and consistently.

Not surprisingly, underage drinking is a risk factor for heavy drinking later in life, and continued heavy use of alcohol leads to increased risk across the lifespan for serious consequences, including medical problems such as cancers of the oral cavity, larynx, pharynx, and esophagus; liver cirrhosis; pancreatitis; and hemorrhagic stroke. Furthermore, youth who report drinking before the age of 15 are more likely than those who begin later to abuse other drugs during adolescence.⁶ Fortunately, sending clear, consistent messages from an early age – before the critical transition to adolescence – is an extremely effective form of prevention. It helps avert use altogether or stop it before it escalates into serious problems that endanger young people's health and future life and career prospects. But the window for positively influencing youth behavior in these ways is narrow as underage drinking increases with age. The percentage of the population who has drunk at least one whole drink rises steeply during adolescence until it plateaus at about age 21. By age 15, approximately 50 percent of boys and girls have had a whole drink; by age 21, approximately 90 percent have done so.

Key to preventing both the core and consequential problems of underage drinking is empowering parents, especially those with children ages 9-15, with the information they need to understand and effectively address the issue. Although some think this age group is too young to have problems with alcohol, research indicates otherwise. Many early prevention programs have documented short-term impact and a capacity to at least delay the onset of problems. These primary prevention programs are geared toward intervention with adolescent alcohol use and intended to reduce the number of new cases; enhance positive functioning; promote adolescents' social and self resilience; encourage healthy behaviors; and minimize risk and vulnerability factors.⁷

³ *The Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (PATS) Teens 2008 Report*. (February 2009). New York, NY: Partnership for a Drug-Free America.

⁴ Nash, S., McQueen, A., Bray, J. Pathways to adolescent alcohol use: family environment, peer influence, and parental expectations. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Volume 37, Issue 1, Pages 19-28.

⁵ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies. (May 28, 2009). *The NSDUH Report: Parental Involvement in Preventing Youth Substance Use*. Rockville, MD.

⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General. 2007.

⁷ NIAAA: Social Work Education for the Prevention and Treatment of Alcohol Use Disorders. Module 10-A: Adolescents and Treatment of Alcohol Use Disorders. March 2005.

By helping working parents, guardians and other caregivers understand how to prevent drinking among children and intervene when necessary, employers can reap immediate and long-term benefits. Parents who are confident in their ability to positively influence their children's behavior are less distracted at work. Not only do such efforts help current employees with children stay focused and alert at work, they sow the seeds for a healthier, productive future workforce. Although hard for many parents to fathom, for children ages 9 to 15, the world of work is just around the corner.

Preventing these and other problems requires helping children learn to make healthy choices today. Parents, guardians and other caregivers are best positioned to teach these lessons, if armed with accurate information and the confidence to share it. Because the vast majority of parents work, employers have the power to play an important role in helping parents rise to the challenge of raising children who are alcohol free. Addressing underage drinking prevention in the workplace is a smart investment with both immediate and long-term returns – a more productive and focused workforce today and a healthier, more prepared workforce tomorrow.