**Confronting Kids and Substance Abuse:**

**Communication is the Best Back-to-School Supply**

According to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, 66 percent of high school students and 33 percent of middle school students report that drugs are used or sold - or both - at their public school. Compared to those who attend private schools, public school kids are five times likelier to use marijuana, three times likelier to drink, and nearly five times likelier to have a friend or classmate who uses drugs like acid, ecstasy, coke or heroin.

It's bad enough that our kids are bombarded by unhealthy and unrealistic media portrayal of drug and alcohol use, from shows like Weeds and Gossip Girl to celebrity headlines on the news. Add to that the information they receive or overhear from their friends, enemies, teachers, neighbors, siblings, teammates, the guy at the pizza parlor...the list goes on. Unless a child is home-schooled in the wilderness, their daily life is a barrage of conflicting opinions about substance abuse and addiction.

So how can kids get a straight answer? It's as simple as having a conversation. Often, adolescents don't see the gray area between black and white: they take what they are given, and believe what they are told. Parents need to acknowledge the flimsiness of the media and process it along with their kids, teaching them to question and examine - and to take everything with a grain of salt.

Parents should sit down with their children and provide them with accurate information, while also asking questions and developing a family-specific substance abuse policy. It's important to "parent for prevention" by outlining appropriate behaviors and consequences, providing "easy outs" (excuses they can use when offered alcohol or drugs), and remaining aware of activities and whereabouts.

My advice for parents: making assumptions won't get you anywhere. On the one hand, don't assume that your child will inevitably become involved with drugs or alcohol. On the other hand, don't assume that they are immune to the problem. This balancing act is especially important if you or your partner has a history of substance abuse; statistically, the children of past or present drug users are at a high risk of developing a problem. Of course, you and your child should be aware of this - however, risk and heredity are not equivalent to destiny. Even though parents may have struggled with substance abuse, their children should not feel doomed to follow the same path.

If your son or daughter does experiment, or even develop a recurring drug/alcohol problem, it is vital to keep the parent-child lines of communication open. Discuss, ask questions, and listen. If this is a first incident, find out the circumstances surrounding your child's drug use, outline the consequences, and develop "easy outs" for the future. If substance abuse is an ongoing issue, get your child help - look into treatment programs, counseling, group therapy, etc. The better educated you are about substance abuse treatment and recovery, the better equipped you will be to respond to your child's needs.

 It's important to remember that, when it comes to kids and substance abuse, there is no one-size-fits-all method of prevention. What works for one child may not work for another, and parents need to encourage discussions and develop guidelines that are tailor-made for the individual needs and personalities of their children. What's the closest thing to one-size-fits-all? Family communication. Keep talking to your kids about drugs and alcohol, keep asking them about their worries and priorities, and most importantly, keep listening to what they have to say.

**Gratiot County Substance Abuse Coalition**

525 N. State St. Suite 4

Alma, MI 48801

989-463-1422

sara@linkforfamilies.org