



**CENTRE COUNTY PREVENTION COALITION**  
A SAMHSA Supported Drug-Free Community Coalition  
Led By Centre County Drug and Alcohol



**November 5, 2008 – Risks to Tweens**

Dawn Taylor is the Community Mobilizer for Care Partnership Centre Region *Communities That Care*. This weekly column, published on Wednesdays, is a collaboration of Centre County *Communities That Care* serving Bald Eagle, Bellefonte, Penns Valley, and Philipsburg-Osceola Area School Districts, and Care Partnership: Centre Region *Communities That Care* serving the State College Area School District.

The tween years when children are between the ages of about 9 and 14 years can be terrific and terrifying in equal amounts. It is a time of both discovery and confusion as tweens explore expanding options. During these in-between years, even seemingly normal transitions can predict increases in problem behaviors.

Many tweens have difficulty making the transition from elementary to middle school. New friends and settings promote growth but also create pressure as tweens try to fit in and meet changing school and family expectations.

The physical transitions that accompany adolescent development lead tweens to seek greater independence and new experiences. With increased susceptibility to media and peer influences, tweens face confusing choices about who they will hang out with and how they will behave.

Research shows that the tween years are a time when many children begin experimenting with alcohol. The average age at which Centre County students have their first alcoholic drink is during this period at 12.6 years (Pennsylvania Youth Survey, 2005).

This is a greater problem than many people realize because studies reported by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration show that exposing the still developing brain to alcohol can cause lasting harm. Alcohol use is associated with a multitude of negative consequences, including problems at school and memory loss. It is linked to death by drowning, suicide, homicide, and driving incidents. Youth who drink at young ages are much more likely to become dependent on alcohol later. They are also more likely to become sexually active at an earlier age.

The good news is that parental involvement can help protect tweens from alcohol use. In fact, young people say that parental disapproval of underage drinking is the key reason they have chosen not to drink alcohol.

While you may think it is too soon to start talking to your tween about alcohol, many 10 and 11 year olds have already started to form opinions on this and other critical issues. During this time, your child especially needs your guidance.

Begin by engaging your tween in brief conversations about risky behaviors. Short frequent conversations are more likely to be effective than lengthy lectures.

Ask questions that require more than a yes or no answer. Encourage your tween to express her thoughts and listen to what she has to say. Follow-up with dialogue that will help her know how to resist peer pressure when presented with difficult choices. Monitor your tween's activities.

Children are less likely to engage in behaviors for which parents have established firm "no tolerance" rules. Set clear "no use" rules about underage drinking including:

No experimentation with alcohol  
No riding with peers who have had even one drink  
No staying at parties where alcohol is being served  
No giving, asking, or taking alcohol from brothers or sisters.

The Strengthening Families Program is offered to families through area schools to help tweens make a successful transition to adolescence. Contact the Communities That Care group serving your area to find out more.

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