



CENTRE COUNTY PREVENTION COALITION
A SAMHSA Funded Drug-Free Community Coalition
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April 2009 – Talking to Young Children about Alcohol

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.

As much as we may not like to think about it, the truth is that children start forming opinions about alcohol at a very early age. Recently, a four-year-old playing “restaurant” offered me a selection of pretend drinks, asking if I would prefer water, milk, juice, or wine. Perhaps that’s not surprising when you consider that children learn what they observe.

Images of alcohol are widespread in our society. Many preschool age children see adults being offered alcoholic beverages when they go out to dinner as a family. Some children will have overheard adults discussing alcohol-related events happening right here in our community, such as State Patty’s Day. Turn on the television and children are exposed to portrayals of alcohol consumption about twice per hour in day time television shows and three times in an average evening program. What children see and hear may lead them to believe that alcohol helps people have more fun. What they are usually not aware of is the problems that can be associated with it.

Adults often feel uncomfortable talking about alcohol with young children or are not sure when and how to initiate conversations. Many delay talking about the issue because they believe that drinking is something that children would never be involved in at a young age. Local data tells us that most children growing up in Centre County try alcohol for the first time at around 12.6 years (Pennsylvania Youth Survey, 2005). And many kids start becoming curious about alcohol even sooner.

So when should you start talking with young children about alcohol? Now! Children who are aware of family standards surrounding alcohol use are less likely to base their developing values on what they learn from television, movies, magazines, and peers. Short frequent conversations about alcohol use when children are young are more likely to be effective than lengthy lectures when they are older. Here are a few tips for talking to preschool age children about alcohol.

- Use your child’s naturally occurring questions and comments about alcohol as door-openers to begin short conversations about what alcohol is and how your family views drinking.
- Examine your own values and behaviors regarding alcohol use. If you drink, set a good example.
- Develop a clear message on alcohol use by children and repeat it often. For example, “In our family, kids do not drink alcohol.”

- Create an environment in which children feel comfortable talking about feelings and asking questions. Open communication in the early years will make it more likely that children will turn to you for guidance on alcohol-related issues later on.

Open, honest, age-appropriate communication is key to ensuring that kids grow up healthy and safe. Start talking to your young children now so that they will be able to make good decisions when confronted with choices about underage drinking and other risky behaviors as they grow up. To find out more about the Talking To Your Kids initiative, contact Communities That Care at carepartnership@gmail.com or centrecountyctc@yahoo.com.

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