

Expert touts close families as antidote to risky behaviors

Gail Bruss has been an intervention counselor with Starting Point of Ozaukee and its predecessor, Ozaukee Council, since 1981. During that time, she has seen a lot of young lives ruined by drug and alcohol abuse.

Bruss offered some insights into the dangerous line many young people are walking during a presentation last week to Northern Ozaukee School District parents.

“The key is to focus on parenting,” she said. “In our culture, a lot of parents want to be friends. Kids really do prefer having a parent over a pal. They can find new friends, but parents are hard to come by.”

Bruss said youngsters are not born into drug addiction, but drawn into patterns of abuse. Alcohol use is the most common entry point.

“We have very supportive police departments and school districts and we have the advantage of being a small county, but you know how difficult it is to break the influence alcohol has on our culture in Wisconsin,” she said.

“The average entry age in the cycle of abuse is 13. The number of underage alcohol assessments has doubled in recent years, and often by middle-school age they are well on their way to the continuum of abuse.”

Bruss said parents should be aware they are most frequently the inadvertent suppliers of alcohol and medications to youngsters.

“My advice: Lock up your medications and keep your alcohol in a locked liquor cabinet. It may look like you don’t trust your kids, but you don’t want to put temptation in the way of their friends,” she said.

Bruss said when parents lose contact with their children, they invite problems to take root. She said studies show 73% of children said they began abusing alcohol and drugs because of stress at school, a problem parents can detect early.

She advocated countering the threat of risky behavior with “The Five C’s” — consistency, commitment, consequences, caring and conversations.

Not only is underage drug and alcohol use illegal, Bruss said, research shows it

The treacherous life of teenagers

Written by Mark Jaeger

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greatly impedes brain development in youngsters.

The recreational use of prescription drugs is a growing problem with young people in the county, Bruss said.

She said the latest trend is “pharm parties” or “skittling,” where prescription medications are tossed into a bowl and eaten like candy.

Bruss said concerned parenting means being willing to form party alert networks where fellow parents and even law enforcement authorities are notified as rumors of parties spread.

“If we don’t do anything about it, we are part of the problem,” she said.

Cedarburg Police Detective Scott Yanke, a school district resident, said the county’s affluence means most young people have the financial means to fuel life-threatening drug habits.

The worst cases, Yanke said, are reflected in recent heroin deaths.

“In our county, a lot of parents have given up the role of parent. They don’t want to be the narc or the rat ... and you’ve seen what can happen,” he said.

Authorities say heavy use of marijuana is the biggest drug problem in the Fredonia area.

Several people in the audience expressed disappointment that a districtwide program on alcohol and drug use attracted only a dozen parents.

Bruss was not dismayed.

“You are the people who are going to make a difference. It may be preaching to the choir, but you have to remember that the choir is important, too,” she said.