

## Underage Drinking...Not My Child

by Cathi Norton, Community Relations Specialist, Center for Behavioral Health

April is Alcohol Awareness Month and this year the national focus is on teens who drink. It's a sad fact that for young people, alcohol is still the number one drug of choice. In fact, teens use alcohol more frequently and heavily than all other illicit drugs combined. Although most children under the age of 14 have not yet begun to drink, early adolescence is a special risk time for beginning experimentations. By the time they reach the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, nearly 50 percent of adolescents have had at least one drink and over 20 percent report having been "drunk." Among 12 graders, almost 30 percent report drinking on three or more occasions per month, and approximately 30 percent of 12th graders engage in heavy, episodic—or "binge" drinking. While this alarming news is offset by the fact that nearly 70 percent of adolescents do not drink, those who have their first drink before age 15 are *five times* more likely to develop alcohol dependence, compared to those who have their first drink at age 21.

Our young people are at risk not only because underage drinking is illegal, but the rate of alcohol-related car crashes is two times greater for drivers ages 16-20 than for drivers 21 and older. Adolescents are also more vulnerable to alcohol-induced brain damage, suicide, sexual assault, and impulsive, high risk-behavior.

Understanding the personal, social, and environmental factors that contribute to underage drinking is critical to finding effective prevention and treatment programs. *Personal factors* – childhood behavior problems, a family history of alcohol abuse, and peer pressure—are important influences. *Family factors*—like parent-child relationships, discipline methods, communication, supervision, and parental involvement also play a major part in adolescent drinking decisions. And equally important are *environmental factors*—like availability and access to alcohol, laws and enforcement against it, and community-wide policies or strategies to inform and unify the public facing the challenges of underage drinking.

Through prevention and intervention strategies directed at the individual, family, school, and community, we can provide knowledge and change belief systems and social norms to reinforce the message that underage alcohol use is unacceptable. We can also enhance young people's self-esteem, self-motivation, and identify formation to help them take responsibility for their own health by making informed, deliberate, and healthy choices regarding alcohol use.

It's not easy. Our kids' friends exert a lot of influence. Fitting in is a chief priority for teens, but they will listen if you take the time to communicate with them. Encourage conversation; ask open-ended questions about how they feel; control your emotions so that you can acknowledge your feelings in a constructive way; and show respect for your child's viewpoint so conversation between you is a win-win experience.

On a community level, there are many resources from which to learn about alcoholism and its effects. A careful self-evaluation of alcohol use might be a good start. What is the definition of social use, mis-use, or dependence? As part of the month-long, national effort to give this problem greater visibility, Center for Behavioral Health (645 S. Rogers St—Bloomington, 812-339-1691) will offer education and free screenings on National Alcohol Screening Day – Thursday, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1-6:00 p.m. Visitors will have the opportunity to see a short video, fill out a questionnaire, learn more about alcohol use, and speak with a counselor if desired.

The bottom line is, we CAN make a difference in our children's lives. Of course we want what is best for them, and that "best" requires active participation. Let's take the time—our kids are definitely worth it.