

# Turning the tables on teen drug abuse

I left the recent Lake Oswego Together sponsored town hall on teen substance abuse with a full menu of food for thought. While my oldest child is only five, I still have some time to digest what I took in. But not as much time as I'd like to think I had, according to the panel of teenage experts who courageously took the hot seats for 90 minutes of front-line reporting.

While everything I heard was eye-opening and at times shocking (like the teen who started taking drugs in fifth grade or the Lake Oswego student who claimed he could walk behind the high school seven times a day and get drugs for free) there were three messages besides the obvious — that Lake Oswego kids are at risk for drug and alcohol abuse — that I certainly hope don't get lost once we're back in our comfort zones.

One is the need to provide kids with alternatives to drugs. When asked how they get high naturally, teen panel members who have chosen abstinence cited sports and good family relationships. One student admitted, "I have a blast with my family," and another confessed that her mom was her best friend. These aren't the kinds of true confessions we usually associate with the rebellious teens. To the contrary — we relegate so much importance to peers during the adolescent years that parents just assume our influence is minimal at best, but the experts that night assured us it is



**HOME WITH A VIEW**  
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not. The news comes as a comfort as well as a challenge, but one any parent worth his or her gray hairs can rise up to meet. (Seems those formative years between zero and five aren't the only ones when our interaction and presence makes such a difference.)

Sports also provide our kids with the focus, camaraderie and sense of purpose they seem to be looking for during their teen years. Recovering addicts and alcoholics on the panel admitted that they were substituting exercise and organized sports for the escape drugs used to bring. That's the good news. The bad news as one

panelist pointed out are the budget cuts that increasingly threaten athletic and other extracurricular activities in our schools. I trust those "extras" appeared much more basic to more taxpayers than just me after that forum.

While much of the focus that night was on abuse, those teens who abstain from alcohol and drugs admitted that they have chosen a difficult and sometimes lonely path. In our efforts to reach and help the troubled kids, we have to ensure that we're also supporting those who have chosen a drug-free lifestyle. Theirs is not an easy, nor the most popular, choice among today's teens. Comments included feeling "left out" and finding it hard to "be true to myself." Just because these kids are making what we feel is the right choice, we shouldn't misinterpret their behavior as indicative that they don't have their struggles too. As moderator Tracy Goudy of Portland's Mainstream program kept stressing, "communication is key" even with the kids who aren't acting out.

While the panel of 20 teens profiled their stories of experimentation, abuse and abstinence, concerned parents sat in the audience asking, "What can we do to help?" The kids themselves suggested, "Give us your support," and "Acknowledge there is a problem." Towards the end of the program, however, one parent took off her kid

gloves and said, "I see a lot of hypocrisy in this room. Basically the answer is that every adult has to change their lifestyle." With a six-year-old who is learning it's not OK to drink in school, this mother admitted wrestling with the dilemma of whether or not she can continue to enjoy a drink in front of her child.

Many of the students alluded to parents who are guilty of the old double standard, "Do as I say, not as I do." And Officer Cross, the police department's school resource officer, reported on five parent supervised drinking parties that he knew of over the last three years here in Lake Oswego. These parents actually thought they were doing the responsible thing by procuring parent consent forms and confiscating car keys as kids arrived. It's certainly better than raiding mom and dad's liquor cabinet while they're away, but it's a far cry from admitting that teens and alcohol abuse are not a healthy mix.

By the end of the forum I felt the tables had been turned. While the format of the program was to put teenagers on the hot seat and have them explain their choices, the bottom line is that we as their parents have to take the hot seat and explain ours. I hope we can be as honest and brave as those 20 panelists were that night.

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