

Recovery is POSSIBLE, IMPORTANT, and a NEW BEGINNING



Parenting is prevention: Raising resilient, drug-free children

When Anne Hensler's 16-year-old son was charged with drug possession in November 2007, the city of Davenport, Iowa, sent her a warning letter in accordance with their parental responsibility ordinance. When her son was cited for violating curfew in December, she was ordered to take parenting classes. A third offense would subject her to a fine of \$100 to \$750. The American Civil Liberties Union is seeking to overturn the law on her behalf.

While laws that protect children from parents who severely neglect or abuse them have been in place since the early days of American history, many jurisdictions such as Davenport also hold parents responsible for their children's misbehavior. Some, like the city of Royal Oak, Mich., maintain it is a parental duty to exercise "reasonable control to prevent the minor from committing any delinquent act."

Under Royal Oak's ordinance, parents must: keep controlled substances (non-prescription), alcohol and firearms out of the possession of minors; make certain that minors observe curfew and attend school; insure minors are properly supervised when parents are absent; and forbid minors from destroying or stealing property. Parents who have trouble controlling their minors are required to seek help from the appropriate agency. Royal Oak parents who violate this ordinance are subject to monetary fines. Other cities, like Davenport, have additional penalties.

Many states have also toughened their social host liability laws, holding adults responsible for criminal acts committed by underage youth who consume alcohol in their homes or to whom they provide alcohol. For example, in 2002, Judith McCloskey was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter in Philadelphia when her teenage daughters hosted a party in her home and an underage guest got drunk and drove, causing a fatal accident. McCloskey, who denied providing or serving alcohol, was found guilty and sentenced to one to four and a half years in prison for the deaths.

Opinions differ about whether you can control a minor's behavior by punishing a parent or assume that "delinquent" youth are a product of "delinquent" parents. But many credible studies show that parental involvement can deter alcohol, drug and tobacco use. In fact, in 2001, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University concluded that parents were the most important influence on a child's decision to smoke, drink, or use drugs.

Parents have opportunities to improve children's "protective factors" everyday, regardless of their ages or stages of development. The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) says this happens when parents and children spend time together—like eating dinner as a family; driving the carpool; or playing board games. Talking to children every day about everyday things opens the door for serious conversations when necessary.

In SAMHSA's guide for families, "Start Talking Before They Start Drinking" (<http://www.family.samhsa.gov/talk/>), parents are told not to wait until a problem arises to talk to children about drinking alcohol. Since half of all eighth graders have tried alcohol, and children who begin drinking alcohol before the age of 15 are five times more likely than those who start after age 21 to develop alcohol problems, talks about underage drinking should begin early (by at least fourth grade, according to some studies).

It is also important to be good role models, monitor children's activities, and set clear and sensible rules of behavior that are enforced with consistency and followed up with appropriate consequences. A 2000 study by

researchers at the University of Washington showed how parents who set clear rules and expectations can prevent or delay their children's use of alcohol and marijuana.

Regardless of how it may seem at times, children do listen to their parents and they do care what parents think. Parents' ongoing involvement, honest communication, and loving care will help their children stay safe. As SAMHSA reminds us, "parenting is prevention."

The Iowa Substance Abuse Information Center (ISAIC) has available a range of educational materials aimed at helping parents and schools raise resilient children. Visit <http://www.drugfreeinfo.org> or call 866-242-4111.

Reprinted from *Alive & Free*, a health column that offers information to help prevent and address addiction and substance abuse problems.