

## **Working Together To Prevent Underage Drinking**

By Gisela Rots

When we started this column last summer, we promised to bring you, the residents of Medford, some concrete ways that YOU can get involved to help prevent drug use among youth in Medford. This month, we'll begin fulfilling that promise by talking about the issue of underage drinking. While many of the pointers I give will be aimed at parents, this is a problem that requires involvement from the whole community.

### ***Underage Drinking Stats***

As you may recall, last February, Medford Health Matters and the Medford Public Schools worked together to conduct a survey of all 6<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> graders in the public school system. This survey, the Communities That Care Survey, asked questions about alcohol and other drug use among the younger populations of Medford. What we found was somewhat alarming: Overall, 27% (that is more than 1 in 4 of all 6 – 12<sup>th</sup> graders) of Medford students have used alcohol at least once in the past 30 days, and a staggering 16% reported binge drinking (5 or more drinks in one sitting) in the past 2 weeks. When we look at the statistics for High School Seniors, we find that nearly 60% of those surveyed drink regularly. Couple that with the fact that in the State of Massachusetts, 58% of young people between the ages of 15 and 20 who die, die in alcohol-related incidents, and that everyday, across the nation 8 young people die in alcohol-related accidents, and we can safely say that underage drinking is wreaking havoc on our young people and their lives.

### ***Dangers of Underage Drinking***

Apart from being dangerous, and illegal, why else is it important for us to reiterate to our youth that underage drinking is not ok? For starters, alcohol affects teenagers differently than it does adults. Teenagers have not yet finished developing, and drinking alcohol can inhibit their ability to learn how to make complex decisions, impair their memory and affect their overall development. Youth who drink are also more likely to get involved in dangerous crimes such as rape, are more likely to get pregnant and are also more likely to use other drugs excessively. And finally, young people who drink are more likely to become alcoholics later in life.

### ***So What Can We Do?***

In order to reduce underage drinking, there are 2 main actions that we, as a community, need to take. The first is that parents should make it clear to their children that they expect them not to drink before they are 21, and then monitor and enforce that expectation. The second is for everyone in the community to make it difficult for minors to access alcohol, whether it be in the home or through other adults and/or liquor stores.

### ***Setting Clear Expectations***

As a parent, though, how do you get involved and influence your child's decision to not drink? The first step seems pretty simple: talk to your teens. Let them know that it is NOT okay for them to drink before they are 21, that you are serious about them NOT using alcohol before they turn 21, and then monitor their behavior. Show them that there are consequences to their decisions – if they drink, they'll be punished. You don't have to lecture your teen in order to talk to him or her, in fact a simple, relaxed conversation can be more meaningful. Remind your teen that NOT every teen drinks or does drugs, and that you are not the only parent monitoring your child's behavior.

Simply spending time with your teen can make a difference as well. Not only does this affirm to them that you care about what happens to them, but it also makes monitoring them easier: it will be easier to notice changes in behavior that can be cause for concern (such as mood swings, changes in friendships or a drop in grades). This also gives you the opportunity, as an adult, to model positive behavior for your teens, by showing them that you can have a good time without alcohol, and by showing good decision-making skills. You probably have more influence over their actions than you think, and by getting involved and showing you care, you are sending them a positive message.

Linda Kelley, Vice President of MHM, and a parent of teenagers in Medford, has set clear expectations with her youth, and says it has worked well for the whole family. “When the kids go out, they do regular check-ins on the phone throughout the evening. This lets us know where they are and with whom, and gives us the opportunity to hear how they sound, and whether they’ve been drinking.” She says keeping tabs on your own kids and keeping lines of communication open are key. Finally, she says, giving logical consequences when kids do experiment is also essential. “Being aware of the situation, and then giving them a punishment that fits the crime is important. Like, if they come home smelling like beer, but are not drunk, grounding them and keeping them in the house makes sense.” She says her family practices open conversations around the dinner table, and her kids know they can talk to their parents if they have questions. Other suggestions include checking in with the parents of your teenager’s friend when they go to their house and making sure an adult is present wherever your child is ‘hanging out’.

### ***Community Actions***

Underage drinking, however, is not a problem limited to the family. Combating this problem requires commitment from the whole community. In early December 2005, Medford Health Matters partnered with 9 other communities, the Medford Police Department and Mother’s Against Drunk Driving (MADD) to begin a campaign to alert the public that providing alcohol to minors is illegal. The program, called Sticker Shock, centered on visiting local liquor stores, where our Youth Advisory Council placed stickers on multi-packs of alcohol, informing the public that 1.) it is illegal to buy alcohol for youth, and 2.) that it is a crime punishable with up to 1 year in jail and/or a \$2,000 fine. Anecdotal information gathered after the fact shows that it was harder for teens to obtain alcohol in the weeks following this campaign. Medford Health Matters will repeat this campaign in May, just prior to prom and graduation season, when youth alcohol consumption increases. We’re excited that the Medford Police Department has been so supportive of this program, and are thankful to all the local liquor stores who allowed us to sticker their product.

We hope you will join us in our efforts to reduce underage drinking. For additional tips and information, you can also visit [www.theantidrug.com](http://www.theantidrug.com), a page dedicated to help parents fight drug use among youth in the US.

*Medford Health Matters is currently recruiting youth between the ages of 14 – 18 to join its Youth Advisory Council. If you are interested in learning more, contact Gisela.*

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*Caption: Fegens Didie, a member of the Medford Health Matters' Youth Advisory Council participates in the region's Sticker Shock Campaign in December. The youth placed over 4,000 stickers on multipacks of alcohol in Medford alone. Regionally, close to 30,000 stickers were distributed in 10 communities.*

