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**Five Ways Parents Can Help Middle School Kids Delay Their First Drink**

September 4, 2008, Washington, D.C. The first few weeks of middle school are a frenzy of friends, parties, and school events. It's also time for parents to start talking with their kids about the dangers of drinking alcohol, according to The Science Inside Alcohol Project of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).

Nearly twenty percent of 14 year-olds say they've been drunk at least once, according to the Surgeon General, and recent news points out dangers of alcohol use by the young:

- The Partnership for A Drug-Free America released a study in August, 2008 of 6,500 teens in which 73% said school stress caused them to drink and take drugs.
- A Columbia University study, also released in August found that "problem parents," those who let their kids stay out past 10:00 PM on school nights in particular, are putting them in situations where they are at risk for drinking and drug use.
- About 100 university leaders called for a national discussion of lowering the drinking age back to 18, saying it's not clear that 21 works.

The middle school years are crucial in the battle to prevent early alcohol use. Young adolescents' bodies and friendships are changing. They start pulling away from parents; yet seek out other adults for guidance. It's the most vulnerable time, specialists say, but also one of the last times they still can be influenced by adults.

No one sets out to be a disengaged parent. But it's hard to be vigilant and talk to your kids about complicated topics when you are constantly on the go. "As parents better understand the physiological effects of alcohol on the body and the fact that their children might be starting younger, it can motivate them to have this sometimes awkward conversation," says Shirley Malcom, head of the Education & Resources Directorate at AAAS. "That's where the science can help."

Members of AAAS' The Science Inside Alcohol Project are writing a book for middle school parents and developing an interactive Web-based science and health curriculum explaining how alcohol affects adolescents' brains and bodies. Based on extensive research, the AAAS team suggests five steps parents can take to talk with their kids about alcohol.

1. **Find Teachable Moments** – We live in a culture of celebrity. If a celebrity your child admires admits to a drinking problem, or an instance of alcohol abuse occurs in your community, talk about it. Ask your middle school student if she knows anyone who drinks alcohol and whether it is at parties or has been brought into her school. Answer questions. Have this conversation often.
2. **Talk to Your Kids When Everything is Fine** – Middle school students are volatile, hormonal beings. They are sweet and wonderful one moment, and blow up the next. Pick a time when things are quiet and they're a captive audience such as in the backseat of your car. Don't take no for an answer.

3. **Engage Your Kids in the Science of Alcohol** – Adolescents are incredibly self-involved. Alcohol can cause memory loss, impair sports performance, incite embarrassing behavior and affect how they feel and look. Make them aware of these facts. If there is a history of alcoholism in your family explain about genetic predispositions towards alcohol abuse.
4. **Be Vigilant** – There's no alternative to monitoring your kids. Have an early curfew. Know where they are at all times. Even if you are not home on a weeknight, make sure you can reach your kids by phone. Get to know their new friends and their parents. Find out what their rules and level of engagement are.
5. **Learn to Trust Your Child** – Now's the time when all the work you've put into creating a value system for your child begins to pay off. Set limits and enforce rules, but remember to give your child room to make his or her decisions, within your comfort zone. Praise them when they do well. It's worth a thousand words.

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