

HONESTY IS KEY FOR GETTING KIDS CLEAN

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"You have to love your children enough to let them hate you."

You might want to make a copy of that quote. Maybe even enlarge it and tape it to the refrigerator or your computer at work.

It comes from Mickey Bowman, executive director and chief executive officer of the Growing Together alcohol and drug rehabilitation center in Lake Worth. When she said it, she was talking about making the final, desperate decision to put a child into treatment. But her words really are appropriate for each stage in the "war against drugs" that's being fought every day in American homes.

You can't get kids to say no to drugs, the experts point out, if they can't comprehend what the word no means.

"What we're seeing is that kids are not being told 'no' enough," says Joe Bryan, director of the Beachcomber Family Center for Addiction Recovery in Delray Beach. "Entitled young kids don't understand what it means. They don't understand consequences."

In South Florida's middle-class and affluent neighborhoods, especially, the standard is "ask and you will receive," says Harold Jonas of Intervention Strategies, also based in Delray Beach. "The value system is so skewed. Kids think the more you have the better you are."

When Jonas first came to town about a decade ago, the joke was that the cars in the student parking lot at a Boca Raton high school were better than those in the teachers' lot. Things haven't changed much since then, he says. Except there are more kids and more cars.

"Now, you go to the Boca Town Center in the afternoon, you can't get a parking spot. And that's a big parking lot."

Nor is it unusual to see young, white, suburban kids pulling into the area's most notorious drug neighborhoods in their BMWs, Jonas says. "They might as well hang a sign, 'I'm buying.' "

Jonas has a chart he gives families who fear that a loved one is an addict. First on his list of Things that Make Someone More Vulnerable to the Addictive Process is "Being taught excess."

The more taboo something is, the more teenagers want it, he says. And the kids who love excess also have access.

They have cars, they have money, they have freedom. And they have television shows and Internet sites that make smoking, drinking, having sex and using drugs seem like expected behaviors - almost a rite of passage, Jonas says.

Not to mention that today's "digital kids" are so stressed, they're looking for drugs that have a calming effect, according to Bowman.

And they can get hooked fast. "They find these tranquilizers (Valium, or the more-in-vogue Xanax), and they're like, 'Wow,' " Bowman says.

The first depressant most kids learn to love, though, is alcohol.

Carl and Gayle Bailey, whose daughter went through Growing Together's treatment program in 1997, say that if they had it to do over again, the first thing they'd do is get rid of all the liquor in their house. "Because there's a world of people who do fine with alcohol, but some don't," Carl Bailey says.

Especially in a small town like Okeechobee, where they live, there's an "it's just beer" nonchalance about underage drinking, he says. But at the typical "pasture party," he's been told, 90 percent of the teenagers drink. "And those kids drive home with kids in their cars."

For some, weekend beer bashes are just a start. As their tolerance and dependence keep increasing, teens often try drugs, either to fit in with new friends (an early warning sign for parents) or because they need something stronger.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse states that addiction begins with drug abuse, but it isn't just "a lot of drug use." According to the Institute's Web site (www.nida.nih.gov): "At some point, changes occur in the brain that can turn drug abuse into addiction, a chronic, relapsing illness. Those addicted to drugs suffer from a compulsive drug craving and usage, and cannot quit by themselves."

While some kids may experiment and settle on alcohol or marijuana, the addict moves on, Bowman says, forever seeking a faster and better high. In the movie *Traffic*, for example, a 16-year-old addict experiences an incredible jolt the first time she freebases cocaine.

"But it wears off fast," Bowman says. "That's why when she saw the needles (at a dealer's home), she said, 'Yeah, yeah, that'll be better.' "

Eventually, it's not even about feeling good, Bowman says. "To feel normal, you have to use."

Rehab, jail or death

Most parents know their child is in trouble early on, but they don't want to admit how bad it really is, says Gayle Bailey, whose daughter started drinking at 12.

The parents ask, and the teen says no, and they don't push it any further than that - just as the father accepted his daughter's denials in Traffic. "Until he got it," Bowman says and smiles. "And God bless him, he got it."

That's when the "love them enough to let them hate you" policy really comes into play. Or, as Carl Bailey puts it: "It's rehab, jail or death."

Parents do seem to be reacting sooner than they used to, says Jonas, who helps families arrange intervention sessions, during which they confront a loved one about out-of-control behaviors. "If a child is acting out, there's a reason," he says. "You get the whole family in the room at one time and get to the bottom of things."

For teens, it's a good idea to involve the friends they had before they got into trouble, he says.

There's still a hook, when fellow cheerleaders or old best friends tell them, "I love you, and I miss you."

"They'll listen to their peers. It's the best way to get to them," Jonas says.

There are limited local resources for treating adolescents for substance abuse, but most people familiar with the rehabilitation process agree that addicts need an extended program with plenty of family involvement.

"If the kid changes, but the parent doesn't, nothing changes," says Bryan, who cares for clients 18 and older at the Beachcomber but also has worked with younger teens.

At Growing Together, clients go through six phases of treatment that require the commitment of family and friends. Amends must be made, and rigorous honesty is demanded because, Bowman says, "It's the secrets that keep us sick."

It's a painful process. The teens tell their parents where they kept their drugs, where they used their drugs and list all the drugs that they used. The Baileys' daughter, Katie, told them she had used 18 different drugs, and Carl was flabbergasted. "I could only list nine foods she would eat," he says.

Katie Bailey completed the Growing Together program in 13 months, but some clients take years.

And others never make it through.

Knowing that, parents have to think of addiction as an incurable disease, Carl Bailey says, and treatment is the way to improve the patient's quality of life. "You ask them, 'If you could extend your child's life even by two years, would you?'

"They look at you, and they say, 'Yes, we would.' "

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Where to get help

Narcotics Anonymous Help line: 848-NANA;

on the Web: www.palmcoastna.com

National Institute on Drug Abuse: www.nida.nih.gov

National Families in Action: www.emory.edu/NFIA/

NoDrugs.com: www.nodrugs.com

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