

'I DIDN'T THINK IT WAS NORMAL' - Seminar at Kettering Fairmont teaches parents to avoid, spot substance abuse by children

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- Author/Byline: Mara Lee Dayton Daily News
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KETTERING - It's never too late to intervene - or too early to prevent - alcoholism, parents were told in an education program at Kettering Fairmont High School last week.

The seminar, sponsored by Parent Pact, was given to about 20 parents and two students.

Parent Pact is a parent-led organization designed to inform parents about how to recognize or deal with their children's substance abuse.

Two parents, a recovering alcoholic student and a doctor who works with adolescents with addictions, spoke to the group.

Some of the warning signs that a teen could have a drinking problem are difficult to distinguish from typical adolescent moodiness.

Steve Markman, who wrote a book about his son's struggles, described how his boy's childhood revealed the seeds of his addictive personality. His son was impulsive, compulsive, a natural leader and had low self-esteem, Markman said.

As a teen, his son broke doors in his fits of anger, played his mother and father against each other, and avoided his parents as much as possible. He also changed friends quickly.

For a long time, Markman knew his son was in trouble, but didn't know drinking was at the root of it.

Denise [REDACTED], whose 17-year-old daughter is still in a rehabilitation program, also talked about her denial. Her daughter Laura first got drunk in fifth grade; by eighth grade she was drinking herself to sleep every night and drinking before school every morning.

Laura played sports year-round, kept her grades up in parochial school - how could she be an alcoholic? Even when she was temporarily suspended from the volleyball team for drinking, her mom didn't recognize how serious it was.

"I never confronted problems," [REDACTED] said, as a mother nodded in agreement in the audience.

Laura became angry, depressed and withdrawn, especially once she got her driver's license and a car from her parents.

"I didn't think it was normal, but I truly didn't know what to do," [REDACTED] said.

Laura gave an example how an older sister once found an empty box of wine under Laura's bed and told their parents. [REDACTED] asked about it, but accepted Laura's excuse.

Laura tried to commit suicide three times, but doctors wouldn't admit her to psychiatric care for more than one night, her mother said.

The last time, [REDACTED] was so desperate, she threatened to cut herself and blame Laura so her daughter would be committed. The doctor complied.

"I didn't know how to save her life," [REDACTED] said. "I wanted our relationship back."

Even in an outpatient rehab program, Laura continued to use. Eventually, her mother committed her to a residential program called Kids Helping Kids.

"Putting her in there just killed me," [REDACTED] said. "I wanted to turn the car around about five times."

Laura was furious, tried to run away, denied she had a problem to her parents. But privately, she knew she was in trouble, even in eighth grade.

"I knew it wasn't normal to drink yourself to sleep," she said. But, "I never wanted to stop."

Eight months later, she's intensely grateful.

"My worst day sober is better than my best day drunk," she said.

Dr. Doug Teller, who works at Kettering Medical Center, told the group that some children are helped by outpatient treatment and don't have to go to a long-term program like the one that helped the Markmans and [REDACTED]

He said it's normal for parents to feel guilty, but they have to forgive themselves to make progress. He tells them: "Yeah, you screwed up. You're going to live through it."

His advice to parents whose teens are out of control is to relax. Try to negotiate without being emotional, and if you can't, get help from a third party, professional, pastor or a family friend.

Try to make as few rules as possible, and have rewards for good behavior. If you say there will be consequences, follow through. Try to make a plan with your child for what happens when they turn 18 - even if they'll still be in high school.

Parents said his prevention tips, for early childhood, were particularly useful.

Lori Simms, a mother of six, ages 2 to 15, said she tries to follow many of those child-rearing guidelines.

Simms, who will be president of Parent Pact next year, said she'd like to have a panel of speakers more often.

A 16-year-old boy in the audience said his mother had him come because he's used drugs. He was reminded how this hurt his family, especially when he heard Laura tell her story.

Like Laura, he found himself doing the same actions over and over.

"You keep looking for different results," he said.

For more information, call Fairmont High School's Karen Day at 296-7699.

* Contact Mara Lee at 225-2420 or e-mail her at mara_lee@coxohio.com.

- Memo: Prevention tips Here are tips from Dr. Doug Teller of Kettering Medical Center on ways to head off substance abuse:

- * For parents: Partners should discuss parenting priorities to be sure they're don't conflict.

- * It's Job 1: Make parenting your top priority.

- * Be clear on roles: You are a parent, not a friend.

- * Be consistent: This applies to rules and fun - have weekly and annual family traditions.

- * Be thrifty: Living below your means gives you more time with your children and shows the children that it's normal to delay gratification and to live with self-discipline.

- * Ask questions: Know your child's friends and activities. Who, what, where and when are anti-drug questions.

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