

TROUBLED TEENS ASK MORE HELP FROM THE COMMUNITY

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The admission by a 16-year-old girl that she was an alcoholic and had started drinking at age 9 was shocking yet familiar to the audience of professionals gathered to discuss how to help youngsters in trouble.

At the third meeting Tuesday of the Seminole Chemical Awareness Network, two key suggestions emerged on how to prevent adolescent alcoholism, chronic drug abuse, pregnancy and school dropouts:

- Find places for teens to go on a voluntary basis where they can talk freely about what's bothering them.
- Get parents involved in drug and sex awareness programs as much as possible.

Jamie, the 16-year-old, told the audience of mental health, school and drug treatment workers that she felt disconnected from her family, alone and unsure about herself. Drugs and alcohol offered relief from the confusion. When that no longer worked, the teen said she tried suicide more than once, then ran away.

Had there been a place for her to go and just talk about her problems, the teen said, she might not have gone through so much anguish.

In Seminole, there are only a few teen centers where young people can go to talk about themselves. The teen rap group at the Missing Children Center in Winter Springs was opened as a way to understand why so many teens run away, said founder Joan Hopkins.

"It's very, very important to listen to these kids . . . they need to know that they are liked, that they are good people," Hopkins said.

Sanford Mayor Bettye Smith said many problems teens have stem from a lack of self esteem or a clear-cut sense of values.

Another teen-ager involved in the drug treatment program, Straight Inc., said parents and teachers need to be more aggressive in helping youngsters. "It just takes common sense to see that a kid is on drugs, but too many people are lazy or unwilling to do something about it," said 17-year-old Casey.

The youth suggested that more effort should be directed at getting troubled kids into treatment programs. "For a teacher to not do something about a kid in trouble is like taking that kid's life."

Sex education, which is not offered in Seminole County schools except through a required life management skills class, is an area that generates concern and controversy.

Cathy Iverson, vice president of the Seminole County Right-to-Life group, said children need to learn that it's okay to "say no to sex as well as drugs."

An 18-year-old pregnant teen said more emphasis needs to be placed on the consequences of sex.

Iverson said that parents often need as much education about sex as teens do, and in some cases, more. It was generally agreed that if parents cannot pass on values to their children, it's tough for the school system or church to step in and play that role.

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