

BocaParent ...Blog

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Karen Perry tells the story of losing her son to a drug overdose while he was away at college. It is a gut-wrenching thing to hear, her anguish in sharing that it all began with him smoking marijuana when he was about 15. That she and her son's father got him into treatment, transferred him to another college, and still ... a middle-of-the-night visit from the police brought the awful news.

Perry told her story to a recent gathering of parents at Spanish River High School. She is a co-founder of the nonprofit NOPE (Narcotics Overdose Prevention & Education) Task Force, which visits schools and parent groups all over Palm Beach County. Your middle- or high-school student may have seen the NOPE program in recent weeks.

As an educated parent, you may think you've heard it all before. But a couple of the task force's messages were startling:

- Kids are dying because they are mixing one or more drugs, sometimes with alcohol, and sometimes in small amounts. A 13-year-old boy died from taking one Oxycontin pill.
- Kids are dying because their friends, afraid of getting into trouble, are not calling 911 when they see signs that someone is overdosing.

This has become the leading cause of non-natural death in Palm Beach County, with someone dying of an overdose every 28 hours.

What's new about that? Eighty-five percent of them had more than one drug in their system. And that is a real danger for kids, who are experimenting with prescription drugs stolen from their parents – or bought from their peers.

Gary Martin, an associate dean at Lynn University and a former drug agent and homicide detective with the Palm Beach Sheriff's Office, said, "The kids think they're invincible. They think they know about drugs and what they can handle. But no one knows what will happen when they mix them," Martin said, adding that it's not an issue of trust, but a matter of "risk ignorance." Many instances can be traced back to the home, which is the main source of drugs and alcohol used by kids age 12-14. (Solution: Keep track of how much you have and lock it up; throw out what you don't need).

In 2006, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse reported that a third of teens have attended parties where parents were present and alcohol was served to minors. (Remember October 2010 when two [Boca Raton parties](#) involving high-schoolers got out of control? Parents were arrested in both cases.)



It is against the law to serve alcohol to minors in your home – and opens you up to civil liability if anything goes wrong.

“You have to be the parent. You have to take control. You have to know what your kids are doing all the time,” said PBSO Capt. Jeffery Lindskoog.

The middle school years are prime for experimentation. The average age of the first use of alcohol or drugs is 13 in Palm Beach County. It used to be 11.

What to do

If you find drugs or alcohol in child’s belongings, Martin advises:

- If it’s something mild – like marijuana – have a serious conversation right away.
- If it’s cocaine, heroin, ecstasy or prescription pills, treat it like a 911 emergency. Take the child immediately for blood and urine tests to see how much is in his system. Then go to a treatment center to assess the problem.

How to talk to your kids about drugs

Lynn Guelzow from The Hanley Center, a treatment facility in West Palm Beach, gave some guidance:

- Be honest with your kids about any family history of drug addiction or mental health issues, which may make them more susceptible – just as you would with diabetes, breast cancer or any other medical condition.
- Set clear expectations and consequences. The No. 2 reason kids don’t use drugs and alcohol: My parents told me not to. (The No. 1 reason: They didn’t like the taste.)
- Have five or more meals a week with the kids. Engage with them about what is going on in their lives.

Guelzow said it’s also important to tell other parents when you know their child is using drugs or alcohol. They may not speak to you anymore, but it’s the right thing to do.

Perry later learned that her son had a prior non-fatal overdose earlier and several people knew about it. No one told her.

To Learn More

For more information or to get help, visit NOPE’s website www.nopetaskforce.org, call 561-478-1055 or visit NOPE’s [Facebook](#) page.