

POSSIBLE HEADLINES

Putting a stop to shoulder-tapping

Take time to educate your kids about alcohol's harms, dangers of asking adults to buy alcohol for them

A guy in his mid-20s pulls into a convenience store parking lot and is approached by two teenage girls, who nervously ask him to buy alcoholic lemonade for them. The man obliges, emerging from the store a few minutes later with a couple of six-packs he hands to the kids.

Unfortunately, the scene is all too real, because most kids who consume alcohol – about 30 percent of 8th-graders and nearly half of 11th-graders say they have in the past month, according to a survey of Oregon schoolchildren – get it from adults, who either knowingly or unknowingly supply it.

That makes underage drinking an adult problem, with adult solutions.

Maybe you've heard the terms. Sometimes it's called shoulder-tapping. Other times it's referred to as "Hey, mister." Whatever the term, teens asking people, often strangers, older than 21 to buy alcohol for them is troubling. And organizations such as the Oregon Liquor Control Commission, the state agency that promotes responsible alcohol sales and service, and Oregon Partnership, a statewide nonprofit that works to end alcohol and other drug abuse, are seeking to prevent it.

For adolescents and teens, the mere act of drinking alcohol poses health and safety risks, from physical injuries to damage to the young, developing brain. And let's face it: too many kids who drink do it to get drunk. In Oregon, one in every four 11th-graders say they have binged on alcohol in the past 30 days, consuming five or more drinks in a couple of hours.

Pile on top of that the potential dangers inherent when kids approach adults who are strangers and ask them to buy alcohol and the picture becomes even more alarming.

Consider one study of shoulder-tapping by University of Minnesota School of Public Health researchers, who found that almost 20 percent of young males were willing to purchase alcohol for underage youth when approached outside an alcohol establishment. The study, published in 2007, found that one in five young males older than 21 was willing to buy alcohol for youth who appeared to be underage when shoulder-tapped outside of a convenience or liquor store. In contrast, 8 percent of the general adult population entering alcohol establishments was willing to purchase alcohol. The odds of adults providing alcohol in urban areas were about nine times greater than in suburban areas.

Furnishing alcohol to a minor is illegal. In Oregon, a furnisher faces possible fines for a first violation of as much as \$6,250 and up to one year in jail – penalties designed to deter and, ultimately, keep kids safe. That's something we can all get behind.

In fact, all of us have a role in preventing youth alcohol use. For parents, one of the most effective steps to keep kids safe and alcohol free is to talk with them about the harms of drinking at a young age. Consider it an ongoing conversation rather than the big "drug talk." Share the safety risks, from

riding in a car with a teenage driver who has been drinking to alcohol-related injuries, and emphasize the compelling research that points to the fact that regular drinking can harm the developing brain. We simply know more today than we did in the past about the health risks when kids and alcohol mix.

And be clear about your rules and consequences. For example, establish a family rule against your child asking anyone to supply alcohol to them, and weave this rule into your “stranger danger” conversation. Many kids don’t realize how dangerous shoulder-tapping can be. That’s why it’s important to establish firm boundaries and monitor their behavior. Stress that, at their age, drinking is illegal, and adults who furnish it to youngsters are breaking the law.

If you suspect your son or daughter has shoulder-tapped, talk with them to determine whether it’s true. Take time to gather your emotions first, and if you confirm it’s happening, explore what’s behind their behavior by asking open-ended questions. It’s a prime opportunity to turn a negative situation into a learning opportunity.

Whether or not you’re a parent, consider taking the conversation about shoulder-tapping to a broader audience. The reality is that too many adolescents and teens drink, adults are complicit and it makes your neighborhood less safe. Talk with neighbors and parents about your concerns and work together to raise awareness about the problem. Seek out the manager or owner of the local convenience or grocery store, share your concerns and ask what steps they are taking to prevent it. Also, consider contacting a substance abuse prevention organization and/or the OLCC. The agency works with convenience, grocery and liquor store owners to prevent alcohol furnishing.

And keep a consistent eye out for shoulder-tapping around your community and the stores you frequent – a kind of broader Neighborhood Watch concept. Remember that an adult buyer can be a complete stranger in a store parking lot, or the person who lives down the block or in the nearby building complex that you see around from time to time.

Education, awareness and action are keys to prevention, and it starts with you.

This article was prepared by Oregon Partnership, a statewide nonprofit that provides substance abuse prevention education and treatment referral, and the Oregon Liquor Control Commission. The organizations, together with the National Alcohol Beverage Control Association, are collaborating on a public awareness campaign to prevent shoulder-tapping. For parenting resources, and for more information about underage drinking prevention, please contact Oregon Partnership at 503-244-5211, or visit www.faceitparents.com or www.orphnership.org.