

Target Audience

The Middle School Parent Campaign is directed at parents of Vermont middle school students ages 11 to 13. The parents generally range in age from 30 to 55 years old and face situations such as divorce, single parenting, combined families and extended relatives living in the same home.

In the fall of 2007, Vermont Department of Health (VDH) Prevention Consultants conducted research studies to get a better understanding of the attitudes, behaviors, needs and perceptions of Vermont parents in regards to underage drinking. For the purpose of this study, VDH limited participation to Vermont residents 30 to 55 years of age with at least one child between the ages of 10 and 17. The focus groups and in-depth interviews involved both men and women and participation was restricted to only one parent per family.

Parents' Beliefs, Attitudes and Concerns

The parents in our target audience are concerned about a wide range of issues—not just underage drinking. Research conducted in Vermont found that:

- Obesity, eating disorders, nutrition and exercise were the most cited concerns of parents when it came to health issues affecting their children.
- Some parents are more concerned about substance abuse involving pills, marijuana and tobacco compared to alcohol. They feel that these problems pose a higher risk to their children than underage drinking.
- Other concerns include stress, depression, bullying, low self-esteem and suicide.

When asked about specific beliefs, attitudes and concerns about underage drinking, parents feel that:

- The main risks for underage drinking are drinking and driving, and alcoholism and addiction.
- Drinking is more attractive to their children because it is prohibited. They feel that introducing their children to alcohol in a controlled environment such as their home can offset the appeal of underage drinking.
- The social dynamic of drinking is a bonding opportunity for their children. These bonding opportunities are often a source of peer pressure.

- Even though they do not approve of underage drinking, many parents feel powerless to control it and perceive underage drinking as a normal part of growing up.
- Children are given mixed messages about underage drinking. They are told not to drink while at the same time they are exposed to messages that tell them if they do use alcohol, they should drink responsibly.
- It is good to talk openly about alcohol when children are young. Some parents told their children personal stories of their own drinking or stories about family members' alcohol use as a way of starting a discussion.

Perceived Risks of Underage Drinking

When asked about the risks of underage drinking, parents in our target audience responded that:

- Drinking and driving, and alcoholism and addiction are their biggest concerns.
- They are also concerned about suicide, unwanted pregnancy, death and depression.
- There is some concern about poor academic performance and the stigma that can come with children getting in trouble for underage drinking.

Some parents believe the best way to control the risks of underage drinking is to allow alcohol consumption in a controlled setting, such as the home, under adult supervision.

Needs Identified by Parents

Our target audience understands the important role that parents and guardians play in helping to prevent underage drinking, but they are unsure about where to find support, resources and information. Their needs include:

- Parent-to-parent support networks.
- Promotion of existing alcohol education programs and materials in the local community.
- Increased alcohol education in the school system such as videos during driver's education classes, as well as guest speakers and peer education programs.

Conclusions

Most parents do not approve of excessive underage drinking, many feel that it is a major problem, and they are uncertain how to prevent their children from drinking. There are many parents who are more accepting of underage alcohol use if the drinking is done in a controlled environment with adult supervision. They feel that by doing this they are reducing the allure of a forbidden substance. Parents recognize they have a powerful role in preventing underage alcohol use, but they feel that peer pressure is a major factor in the high amount of underage drinking and are unsure how to overcome it.