



**Beyond Alcohol Awareness Month:  
Shedding light on youth, a mental health crisis and underage drinking**

*Nicole Holt, CEO – Texans for Safe and Drug-Free Youth*

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Last week marked the end of alcohol awareness month, the same month in which a new CDC report brought to light serious mental health challenges among youth. Facing challenges from increased social disconnectedness, school closures, family economic hardship, and illness and loss of loved ones, social emotional struggles often drive youth to use alcohol and other substances as coping mechanisms. The data illustrates nothing short of a crisis.

According to the CDC, more than a third (37.1%) of youth experienced poor mental health over the past two years and almost 20% seriously considered suicide during the year preceding the survey. And according to a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, evidence also shows that among adolescents, alcohol and substance use disorders as well as overdoses increased over the past two years, specifically solitary use. This same study rightly notes that when substance use begins at younger ages, it is more likely to persist into adulthood and increase the risk of addiction, as well as the fact that youth exposure to adult alcohol and substance use can lead to long-term mental health and substance use issues for youth who observe that behavior.

Dallas youth are no exception to the challenges raised by these reports: According to the 2018 Texas school survey, nearly half (46.9%) of the region's 7<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> graders reported drinking at least once in their lifetime and nearly a quarter (23.6%) during the past month. And according to the Texas Department of Transportation, 21% of 2019 alcohol-related car crashes in Dallas – nearly 400 crashes – involved a driver under the age of 25.

The community must take collective action to do everything possible – and the right things – to keep our kids safe and healthy. Armed with the right information and actionable steps, parents can foster a supportive, open dialogue with their kids that can help protect them from the risks and consequences of alcohol and substance use. To help prevent underage drinking as well as the many life-altering consequences, parents can take action such as:

Maintain Open Communication – Don't hesitate to have honest, straightforward conversations with your kids where you set clear boundaries and expectations about alcohol. Parents may not believe it,

but kids listen. And parents' conversations with them are actually some of the most influential and impactful.

That's why perhaps the most important thing a parent can do is simply to talk openly and honestly with kids about alcohol. They should make clear that alcohol is only safe – and legal – for responsible adults. Ultimately, when they're confronted with difficult situations, kids will remember what they talked about and will be much more likely to make smart, safe decisions.

Have a Plan of Action – If they find themselves in a difficult situation, kids need to know exactly what to do – and that anyone who has been drinking shouldn't be behind the wheel. This is a reality we want them to be prepared to face and able to make the best decisions possible. By setting a plan of action ahead of time, they will be prepared and more confident in handling that moment when it arises.

Know Modeling Matters – It's incredibly important parents limit negative influences and behaviors around youth, even older teenagers. Kids constantly watch and take note of adults, and ultimately follow our example. Very simple awareness can make a big difference in what our kids are aware of and later repeat in their own lives.

Minimize Access – Alcohol should not be kept where it can be accessed by anyone but responsible adults. When possible, parents should consider locking it or keeping it in a clearly off-limits area. And when alcohol is kept in places where it is accessible, parents should make clear that it is off-limits to youth.

Protecting our most vulnerable youth means deliberately increasing our awareness and taking comprehensive action to protect all youth. By increasing our own awareness and building a supportive environment for our kids, we can give them the resources and connection they need to ensure their well-being and success.