

BRAINS MATTER

Understanding the developing adolescent brain and strategies for supporting youth
A conversation with MJ Woodburn, licensed drug and alcohol counselor

At BAPC, we're often asked by parents, caregivers and educators, in our community, to share tips and strategies for preventing youth from experimenting with drugs, alcohol and other substances. Many parents are aware that teens often have a prevalent misconception about the safety of experimenting with substances including marijuana and prescription drugs.

In order to provide the community with the most current and helpful information for prevention, we often connect with local specialists who provide substance use related counseling support to teens. I recently sat down with MJ Woodburn, and asked her to share her twenty-six years of wisdom as licensed drug and alcohol counselor [LADC]. MJ is currently a LADC with Rocking Horse Circle of Support, a state-funded health education support program for parenting mothers who are questioning their own use of alcohol and drugs or who are experiencing the effects of another's substance using behaviors. In addition to her work with Rocking Horse, MJ has a private practice in Brattleboro and Bellows Falls.

MJ confirmed what we already know; adolescent brain development continues to the age of twenty five. From age eleven on, areas in the brain that control planning, problem solving, impulse control and reasoning skills are being built. Use of drugs and alcohol during this critical developmental time can change the way the brain develops. Decisions made by youth now, such as experimenting with drugs and alcohol, may impact them for the rest of their lives.

MJ explained that during this phase of brain development, a teen is experiencing the second highest growth spurt they will ever have. New neurons are blasting and the body requires additional support. The natural needs of a teenage body become much like that of an infant, requiring additional sleep and nutrition. Many of us may recall our teenage years of sleeping until noon and an insatiable appetite. There were good reasons for it—our brains were developing! MJ feels it's important to remind parents that this growth period provides an opportunity for teaching self-care and leading by example with our own lives. How do we handle our stress? Are we eating healthy, getting enough sleep and making time for physical exercise? Our children are watching us, even when we think they're oblivious, they are primed for teachable moments through our own self-care.

Studies show that the more often a child is exposed to substances, including alcohol and tobacco, the more likely they are to experiment. MJ doesn't suggest that you should not enjoy a glass of wine in the evening, but, she hopes parents will be mindful in their attitude and comments about their choices and how they are perceived by young people. Has your child overheard you make a casual comment such as, "After the day I've had, I really need a glass of wine!" or "Work is making me crazy, I need a drink to calm my nerves."? While this sort of statement may seem harmless it's important to consider the message it sends to kids, which may translate to "hey, when I'm stressed I can use alcohol to help me deal". An alternate message might be something like "Hey, I had a rough day, how about we take a quick walk together and get some fresh air". Chewing also helps alleviate stress so consider having fresh

veggies, hummus or apples available as an after school snack. Encourage your kids to come home and munch away their day and allow them to take a quick cat-nap to refresh before diving into homework.

While increased appetite and the need for sleep are normal needs for teenage growth, MJ also expressed the importance of being aware not to confuse these needs with the warning signs your teen may be experimenting with substances, such as marijuana. Be aware and if you notice signs such as decreased short-term memory, anxiety, reduced ability to concentrate, lack of interest in activities that previously caused pleasure and learning challenges, it may be time to have a talk with your teen. Get outdoors and go for a walk. Talk about some of the stresses you face and your struggles and strategies for self-care and stress management and ask your teen to share their stresses with you. You do not need to have all the answers at that moment; the important part is just being there to listen. Consider creating a family plan for stress management and be mindful of the example you set for your children.

For more information on how marijuana use affects the developing adolescent brain and for resources for talking with your child about the risk of marijuana use visit www.TheBluntTruth.org or www.ParentUpVT.org

Shannon Albritton is the communications coordinator the Brattleboro Area Prevention Coalition (BAPC), a local nonprofit that organizes community efforts involved in the ongoing prevention and reduction of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse in the Windham Southeast area. The coalition meets in Brattleboro on the second Friday of each month at 12pm, from September – June and all are welcome. To learn more about their prevention efforts or how you can contribute to their efforts visit www.BrattleboroAreaPreventionCoalition.org or call 802.257.2175