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Help your kids draw the line

As young people throughout Wyoming head back to school, I encourage parents to consider underage drinking and its potential impacts on their families.

For students, a new school year holds great promise of new friendships, academic accomplishments and, yes, fun. However, when that fun includes underage drinking there can be life-damaging consequences.

A teenager's brain is not done developing. In fact, brains keep maturing until the mid-20s. Drinking before your brain is fully developed changes the way it works. Alcohol impairs a teenager's ability to react, to make good judgments and to remember lessons. Young people who drink are often trying to act older, but underage drinking actually prevents the very "maturity" they think they're seeking. As parents, we must help our children know where and when to draw the line.

Research has shown there are four "A's" that apply directly to youth alcohol purchase and use. These risk factors can be easily affected through parental, business and community controls:

■ **Availability** – Is the alcohol (beer, wine, liquor) within reach?

■ **Accessibility** – Can the youth get to the alcohol easily?

■ **Acceptability** – How "acceptable" does the youth perceive alcohol use to be? When alcohol is part of every aspect of the youth's culture – popular movies and TV shows, community festivals and fairs, family dinners and holidays – perceptions of approval develop early and easily. They believe that "everybody's doing it."

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Perspective

provide it. Increasing the number of liquor outlets makes alcohol products more accessible to those with limited transportation and spending money such as teens.

While teens, girls in particular, may prefer the sweet alcopop drinks (flavored malt beverages), kids will drink whatever they can get their hands on. Since beer, wine and liquor are more popular for adults, they are usually the easiest to get – at home, in the fridge or unlocked cabinet.

Energy drinks come in cans with labeling making it hard to detect the presence of alcohol. And new products seem to appear daily that disguise alcohol's taste or percent of alcohol content and make it seem harmless and even more socially acceptable to kids.

What can you do?

As a parent, make sure alcohol is out of reach in your home, and keep close tabs on what you have. This is especially important if youth are in the home unsupervised for periods of time.

Don't ever serve your child alcohol. This sends an underlying message that it is OK with you if children break the law and that underage drinking is acceptable.

Ask stores to keep close watch on their stock, to check IDs, and train their employees.

Ask elected officials to consider underage access as they make decisions about granting more liquor licenses, expanding hours and days or lowering the prices of alcohol beverages.

■ **Affordability** – Does the youth have money to buy the alcoholic products?

When beer, wine and liquor are in the fridge or the unlocked cabinet at home, they may be available to unsupervised young, inquisitive minds. The temptation to experiment with alcohol becomes greater and much more likely if accessibility is no issue.

Adolescents in treatment often cite home as the first place they got their alcohol. Even if alcohol isn't common in your home, it might be easy to reach where your child's friends live.

Away from home, many states are increasing the hours for sale, the number of days alcohol can be sold and the number of locations that can

Invite the parents of your children's friends over, get to know them, and set some common alcohol-related rules.

Check out online resources such as www.stopalcoholabuse.gov.

Your aim is to raise your children to be happy, productive adults. Talk with your kids early and often about your expectations for them and how they can meet those goals. You are the No. 1 reason your children will say, "No thanks, not tonight." Give them the strength to draw the line and the knowledge to make decisions that will help lead to a healthy and long life.

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