

# Parenting Matters

Quarterly Newsletter

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For Colorado Parents

## *Inside The Developing Brain*

The development of children's brains before birth and during early childhood determine how well they will adapt to the expectations of the classroom. Research findings reinforce what educators have observed for some time; that boys and girls enter school with different physical and mental abilities. Boys have better eye-hand coordination while girls tend to have better fine motor skills. Boys are more impulsive and girls more verbal and begin to recognize words sooner.

A number of education researchers are discovering tools to help schools and parents support youth development. Some important examples of recent science-based work in this area include, "Raising Cain" by Michael Thompson, "The Minds of Boys" by Michael Gurian, and "Real Boys" by William Pollack.

In 2004, a Boulder, Colorado school principal launched a school experiment triggered by Michael Gurian's book. Teachers in her school have replaced many lectures with fast-moving activity-based lessons that all students can enjoy. Students have opportunities to work in small

groups to act out reading assignments instead of just discussing the assignment. In the two years since the beginning of the experiment the standardized test scores of boys have increased and are much closer to the scores of girls in the same school.

**Creating school environments that promote success for boys and girls is important**

Dr. Jay Geidd, of the National Institute of Health, has discovered that the part of the brain that helps organize complex thoughts, control impulses, and understand consequences of behavior develops maximum thickness by age 11 for girls but not until closer to 13 in boys. Deborah Yurgelun-Todd's research suggests that girl's brains are processing information faster, more efficiently, and more accurately than boys' brains until about age 18.

This may help explain why boys are sixty percent more likely to have repeated at least one grade by age 12. By middle school, girls' standardized test scores in reading aver-

age eleven points higher than boys and writing scores average twenty-one points higher. These noticeable differences can make it hard for boys to thrive in middle school. Feelings of failure and frustration, combined with the emerging brain messages that encourage risk taking, create a vulnerable young person. This may explain why boys are more likely to have tried cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana before age 13. It may also be connected to the fact that boys age 5-14 are 200% more likely than girls of the same age to commit suicide.

Brain development combined with family background, and environment also play an important role in a youth's success.

**Violence, alcohol, or drugs in the family or community can derail youth development**

However, better understanding of the development of the human brain can help parents and educators assure that all youth have the appropriate support and environment to thrive at their own pace.

**PARENTING MATTERS, PREVENTION WORKS**

# Informed Adults Help Youth Resist Alcohol

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal summarized an American Medical Association (AMA) study that found teen girls are drawn to fruit-flavored bottled alcoholic beverages known as “alcopops”. The poll of 12 - 18 year olds found that thirty-one percent of girls had used these beverages in the previous six months while only nineteen percent of boys reported using these beverages. The AMA believes that “alcopops” are designed to draw girls to hard-liquor brands when they are older. For example, some of these products come in bottles with small metal charms like a purse, a high-heeled shoe, a ring, or a heart.

The current 10 to 27 year old group, known as echo-boomers, will be the target of advertising over the coming decades because they are nearly as large a group as the boomer generation. Many young women report that they picked up their heavy drinking behavior during college. The potential peer pressure of adolescence and young adulthood combined with extra advertising targeting young women create a need for more deliberate and effective education. Important topics are the long-term health risks of alcohol overuse and how to make sound social and emotional decisions.

It is essential that the adult be comfortable talking about the influence of media, different values, and family rules. There are many

opportunities to use media messages as an introduction to conversation about the difference between fantasy and reality. Alcohol ads often have party themes, talking animals, sport themes, and glamorous celebrities to attract customers. Adults can help youth reflect on their experiences to clarify the difference between the images in the ads and the reality of alcohol use.

**The use of scenarios to prompt conversation is helpful and might include the following topics:**

- ◆ Mixed messages from adults
- ◆ Keeping commitments to parents
- ◆ Resisting peer pressure
- ◆ How alcohol affects judgment

These are examples of situations included in “The Ten Talks Parents Must Have With Their Children About Sex and Character.”

- ◆ A teen girl is looking forward to a date with a new boyfriend. She is nervous and drinks wine to relax before he arrives.
- ◆ A guy is mad at his girlfriend. He goes out and drinks a lot and has sex with someone he just met. Later he feels bad and regrets the whole episode.

- ◆ A junior in high school comes home in the early morning hours showing signs of alcohol use. When asked, “Have you been drinking?”, the youth replies “No.”

Some things recommended for parents to think about as they prepare to have conversations with their children include:

- ◆ Someone who experiences relief from anxiety when they use alcohol may develop a habit of alcohol abuse over time.
- ◆ Are youth encouraged to talk about drug use they see?
- ◆ Does the youth feel that the parent welcomes any conversation about alcohol use?

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**Colorado State University**  
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 Program Coordinator:  
 Christine Cerbana-Whaley  
**Editor: Laura Benavente**  
 Questions or comments?  
 Call us at (800) 457-2736

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"Informed Adults Help Youth Resist  
Alcohol"*

- ◆ Does the parent talk to the youth about finding friends who do not abuse alcohol?
- ◆ Does the parent role-model stress management without alcohol?

Family values will determine how parents approach different scenarios. Since everyone interprets behavior in his or her own way, the conversations between adults and youth will be different depending on their backgrounds and experiences.

"The Ten Talks Parents Must Have With Their Children About Sex and Character" suggests including the following in adult-youth conversations about alcohol use:

- ◆ Alcohol is part of American culture
- ◆ There is a difference between alcohol use and abuse.
- ◆ Alcohol changes feelings and it is important to know which feelings are changed and in what ways.
- ◆ Use or abuse of alcohol does not excuse harmful behavior.
- ◆ Relationships suffer when alcohol is abused.



## Involvement In Your Child's Education

by Rich Batten

Family and Consumer Science Agent,  
Douglas County

Colorado State University Cooperative Extension

### Research

A 1996 study of 20,000 teenagers and their families by Temple University psychologist Laurence Steinberg and his colleagues discovered that "parents exert a profound and lasting effect on their children's achievement in school." Steinberg's research shows that **"the type of involvement that makes a real difference is the type that actually draws the parent into the school physically – attending school programs, extracurricular activities, teacher conferences, and 'back to school' nights."** Why should this type of involvement make so much difference? According to Steinberg: "When parents take the time to attend a school function – time off from an evening activity or time off from their own jobs – they send a strong message about how important school is to them and, by extension, how important it should be to the child. When this sort of involvement occurs regularly, it reinforces the view in the child's mind that school and home are connected and that school is an integral part of the whole family's life."

### Ideas

- Meet your child's teacher and principal – early
- Don't wait for report cards or teacher meetings to confirm problems
- Volunteer at your child's school or preschool
- Build in an extra five minutes of "drop-off" and "pick-up time" to observe your children and relate to their teachers and other parents.

- Original article edited to fit publication

# Developing the Whole Child

In 2003, the Search Institute found some unsettling attitudes prevailing among American youth. Sixty-five percent of youth surveyed said they do not respect the values and beliefs of people from different races and cultures. Seventy-one (71) percent reported that they did not feel that their teachers cared about them.

Educators and youth development practitioners recognize that children do not learn alone but in collaboration with teachers and other adults, in the company of peers, and with support of their families. Research is showing that social and emotional learning (SEL) also improves academic performance. SEL, introduced by the Collaborative

for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, is the process of acquiring competency in these five areas:

- ◆ Managing emotions and behaviors to achieve one's goals.
- ◆ Showing understanding and empathy for others.
- ◆ Forming positive relationships, working in teams, dealing effectively with conflict.
- ◆ Making ethical, constructive choices about personal and social behavior.
- ◆ Recognizing one's emotions and values as well as one's strengths and limitations.

**Parents and schools can work together to assure that all children have the opportunity to develop academically, socially and emotionally.**

Schools integrate SEL by instituting class meetings; encouraging peer conflict resolution; helping students generate discipline and behavior norms; establishing "buddy" activities between older and younger students; and initiating interactive activities for children and their families. SEL builds social and emotional competence to act responsibly, effectively, and ethically.

## PARENTING MATTERS, PREVENTION WORKS

*Putting Knowledge to Work*



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Colorado State University  
Cooperative Extension  
135 Aylesworth Hall NW  
Fort Collins, CO 80523  
(800) 457-2736  
[www.coopext.colostate.edu/CFERT](http://www.coopext.colostate.edu/CFERT)



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