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Thursday, September 10, 2009

Parents warned about giving teenagers alcohol at home

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ALISON HEALY

INTRODUCING TEENAGERS to alcohol in the home in the hope that it might encourage responsible drinking is “very naive” and does not work, a leading child and adolescent psychiatrist has warned.

Dr Bobby Smyth said this myth was becoming increasingly popular, particularly among middle-class families.

“To think that we can magically inoculate our children against the very toxic, drunkenness tolerant society that we have in Ireland by giving them a glass of wine with Sunday dinner is very naive, and without any scientific basis,” Dr Smyth told an audience of parents last night.

“It is children who grow up in families with permissive attitudes and behaviours around alcohol who are much more likely to develop drink and drug problems.”

He said the drinking which parents saw at home was “likely to be a poor reflection of the drinking which occurs out of home” and it was hard to put the genie back in the bottle once alcohol was permitted. Dr Smyth was speaking in UCD at an information session for parents on preventing drug and alcohol problems.

It was organised by the Lucena Foundation in association with the Royal College of Psychiatrists Faculty and its 150 places were quickly booked out.

A second talk for parents has been organised for October 6th to cater for the demand.

Dr Smyth also warned parents against trying to be their children’s best friends.

Most children had lots of friends, he said, but they only had one or two parents. “They need you to be that person who loves them enough to tell them when they are heading down a dodgy path.”

He highlighted the signs that could alert parents to drug or alcohol use by their children. They included a mid-week crash in mood, a sudden enthusiasm for mints or chewing gum, deteriorating self-care and burn holes in clothes.

He said children were less likely to get involved in alcohol or drugs if they were motivated at school and were involved in sport, creative activities, community work and religious activities.

Family support was very important, he said, and parents should be actively involved in helping children to succeed in school. The whereabouts of teenagers should be monitored and there should be clear rules with consequences for breaking them. He encouraged parents to talk to their children about alcohol and drug use and to accept their children’s right to be irritated by their parents’ views.

Dr Smyth said parents were swimming against the tide in trying to steer their children away from alcohol. The most effective public health interventions to curtail alcohol-related harm were to increase taxes, reduce availability and restrict promotion, but none of these things were happening, Dr Smyth said.

In fact, the number of outlets selling alcohol had increased massively in the past decade and guidelines on alcohol adverts were “a nonsense,” he said.

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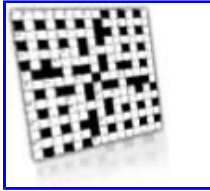
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