

# Interactive Program Teaches Parents to Watch for Signs

Thursday, June 03, 2010

By Glen Miller

Teen and child counseling experts often tell parents to monitor their kids and keep an eye out for drug or alcohol use.

The problem is parents don't always know what to look for because the signs are often "Hidden in Plain Sight."

That's the title of a parental intervention and prevention program that experts from The Community Partnership, a Toledo-based drug, alcohol and behavior prevention organization, taught to a small group of parents at Chardon High School last Tuesday.

"Hidden in Plain Sight" walks a parent through a life-size replica of a teenager's bedroom, discussing high risk indicators such as substance abuse, underage drinking, eating disorders and many others. It teaches parents what to look for in their child's bedroom, including the obvious and not-so-obvious indicators.

With the use of props -- a bed, dresser and other items normally found in a teenager's bedroom -- prevention specialists showed parents what and how to look for signs of drug abuse or behavior problems.

Half the simulated bedroom looked like a girl's room, while the other half replicated a boy's room.

A federal substance abuse prevention grant paid for the program. Co-sponsors were the Chardon Community Action Team, Chardon High School Teen Institute, Lake-Geauga Recovery Centers, Inc. and the Geauga County Board of Mental Health and Recovery Services.

The Community Partnership prevention experts walked parents through the simulated bedroom. As they did, they picked out everyday items and explained how they could be used to conceal drugs or a behavioral problem.

The program discussed "indicators" of high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse, underage drinking, eating disorders, the choking game, prescription and over-the-counter drug misuse and sexual activity.

Jennifer Roberts, a prevention specialist with the Lake-Geauga Center, said items such as an empty Cool Whip container, a portable CD player, empty cough medicine containers and Visine eye drops could be used to "hide in plain sight" drugs.

"Most kids today have an iPod or a cell phone that plays music. So, if a parent sees a CD player in their child's room, they should be suspicious because it's not something most teenagers have or use today," Roberts said. "They (parents) shouldn't be afraid to ask why."

The CD player could have drug hidden inside it. A Cool Whip container, for example, might not have drug hidden in it, but it could be an indication of something else -- bulimia. Teenage girls can hide what they regurgitate in the empty container, Roberts said.

"The point is, if parents find something, they need to sit down and communicate with their kids. They need to have a conversation with them, not feel as if they are spying on them," she added. "They need to ask questions, not necessarily yell or scold, but show concern and a willingness to help them deal with whatever their problem is."

Teenagers and children who accompanied their parents to the program were asked to leave the cafeteria area where the training was held. The adult experts did not want to give the students "suggestions" they might use or unwittingly pass on to friends with an abuse or behavioral problem, Roberts explained.

Even clothing styles parents need to be wary of were discussed and shown. Some clothing worn by teenagers has deep or hidden pockets. There are even sandals where alcohol can be hidden, Roberts said.

"If a parent is unsure about something or thinks it is weird, or out of the ordinary, they shouldn't be afraid to ask," she added. "It's a matter of raising parents' awareness."

Other suggestions made by the prevention specialists included:

- \* Know what your child is looking at on his or her computer. There are several videos on YouTube from which kids learn how to make bongos to smoke marijuana from using carved out apples. So, if your teenager doesn't normally eat an apple, a parent should wonder why there is an apple sitting on his or her dresser or computer desk.

- \* Regardless of age, have regular "communicative" discussions with your child about what is happening in their lives.

- \* Be aware of and ask about sudden or unexplained changes in a teenager's behavior. Roberts said kids usually put away dolls or stuffed toys when they become teenagers. The reappearance of stuffed toys in their room should prompt an inquiry, because teenagers have used the stuffed animals to hide something in them.

Or, it may mean the old teddy bear has become a security blanket for a teenager suffering from an emotional problem.

"It's not about parents being super-sleuths, it's about teaching parents what to talk to their kids about," Roberts said. "If something is different, it may be an indication that they are having a bad day or something happened in school. These are clues parents need to pick up on."

- \* Learn about fads, especially those related to drug and alcohol use.

The Community Partnership training, which is offered throughout the state, is aimed at various audiences, including parents, social workers, counselors and educators.

Sadly, only seven parents out of 20 who registered for the program showed up, even though it had been promoted in the Geauga County Maple Leaf and in flyers and a City of Chardon newsletter.

"People seemed interested, but I'm not sure what happened," said Roberts.

It might have been the onset of summer-like weather or something else. Regardless, the program might be offered again, possibly in the fall or in early 2011, she added.