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SADD

The Chicago Tribune's report of 15 students suspended from Naperville North High School for drinking until 5 a.m. on the morning school started—some of them still intoxicated for the opening bell—paints a poignant, if problematic, picture of teens and alcohol. As one area mom asked, "I still am wondering, where were the parents? The night before the first day of school? Where did they think their kids were and what did they think they were doing? It's astonishing to me."

Astonishing, yes. Uncommon? Not so much.

Research from SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) and Liberty Mutual Insurance reveals that 63 percent of middle and high school students have used alcohol—and that by 12th grade, about three in four are drinking.

So where were the parents of these kids? Some were likely unaware (reality gap), others may have figured there was nothing they could do about it (myth of inevitability), while a few perhaps aided and abetted the crime (a scenario frequently reported by young drinkers). "What's the harm as long as they're not driving?" such parents often ask.

Hmmm ... where to start?

Other accidents? Incidents of violence? Unplanned sexual activity? Drownings? Acute alcohol poisonings? And we haven't even touched on the brain research.

Regardless, many underage drinkers are driving. The data show that 13 percent of teen drivers say they have driven after drinking alcohol (15 percent say they have done so after using marijuana; and seven percent report the same regarding prescription drugs used illegally).

But there is a silver lining: almost two decades of research reminds us of just how influential mom and dad are in the choices their teenagers make. Unfortunately, the same research reveals a fault line in those relationships during the critical developmental phase known as adolescence, when young people need their parents more than at any time during the lifespan other than early infancy.

The culprit? A lack of sustained, open, and honest dialogue around the issues young people themselves rate as most troubling—including impaired driving, which many adults have simply stopped talking about, perhaps thinking it was solved back in the 80s.

Think again.

Not surprisingly, nearly one in five (19 percent) teens say that their parents have never spoken with them about driving safety!

And, sadly, many parents who try meet resistance in the form of dishonesty. For example, one in eight teens report shading, or outright hiding, the truth when speaking to their parents about driving while under the influence of alcohol, while 15 percent are dishonest about driving after using other drugs.

Overall, less than half (49 percent) of young drivers are fully forthcoming in their driving-related conversations with mom or dad. Ironic that almost all of them (91 percent) say they want their parents to trust their driving abilities!

Year after year, the SADD/Liberty Mutual driving research points to the positive impact of informed parent-teen dialogue where expectations are stated, family rules put in place, and compliance monitored. That this dialogue can be facilitated by written agreements, such as SADD's Contract for Life and Liberty Mutual's Parent/Teen Driving Contract, is great news—65

percent of teen drivers say having a contract in place would help them achieve their goal of parental trust.

Liberty Mutual and SADD believe that effective parent-teen communication is critical to helping teens recognize and choose safe driving behaviors. As Dave Melton, a driving safety expert with Liberty Mutual and managing director of global safety, says, "Having a conversation with a new teen driver provides an opportunity to share past driving experiences, discuss concerns about safety, and determine rules and consequences."

Liberty Mutual's contract not only demonstrates a driver's commitment to being safe and responsible behind the wheel, but also facilitates parental trust in their child's driving behaviors by including some open-ended questions designed to stimulate the type of honest conversations both parents and teens actually want.

Given that automobile crashes account for thousands of teen deaths annually, it's imperative to have some clear conversations about rules of the road ... for them and for us.