

Commentary | Marin Voice: When it comes to underage substance use, let's be average

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Did you know that Marin County has an underage substance use problem? At Marin Healthy Youth Partnerships, we call it our “2X problem.”

According to the California Department of Education's “healthy kids” survey, Marin 11th graders report using alcohol or another drug in the past 30 days at a rate twice as high as the rest of California. You read correctly. We are double the rate – 2X.

With Marin's high-achieving culture, we are used to being twice the average. But being twice the average in underage substance use is nothing to brag about. It's definitely nothing to ignore.

Yet, many replay weekend socializing and recount consumption with strange bravado. Some parents host youth parties under the misconception of “keeping them safe.” Some bring kegs of beer to kids' birthday parties, drink wine at Little League games and serve cocktails at school functions and fundraisers. All this happens while kids are watching, listening and receiving a clear message that using substances is the norm in Marin County.

But does it have to be that way? The short answer is no. Can changing our behavior make a difference? Importantly, the answer is yes.

Several factors contribute to Marin's underage substance use. For starters, we need to accept that this is not just a “youth problem.” So much about Marin's 2X problem is a lack of awareness paid to everyday adult substance use behaviors and attitudes, as well as the impact it has on our kids.

If we want the better lives and opportunities that we say we do for kids, the environment needs to change. The adults need to change.

Make no mistake, our kids are suffering the consequences of these actions. Prefrontal cortex development, which is important for complex behavioral performance and executive functioning, begins during adolescence. Underage substance use can slow this development.

Research shows that 90% of people with addictions started using substances in their teen years. Every year of delaying use decreased that risk. However, it's more than long-term consequences in the balance. Fentanyl has changed the rules so now one pill can kill.

Marin Healthy Youth Partnerships, a nonprofit organization, has developed a variety of programs to address this issue and more. Our programs all live under the umbrella mission of lowering the rate of underage substance use. Understanding the issue facing Marin; using tools to effectively address the challenges; connecting to a network of fellow parents/caregivers; and learning healthy coping skills to support ourselves and each other are all ways to address the 2X program and move the needle back to average.

Here are some actionable steps we can take collectively:

- Skip the alcohol at kid-centered events like youth sports, trick-or-treating and pre-prom.
- Don't glamorize alcohol as an effective way to cope – i.e., “I've had a rough day, I deserve a drink.” Discuss and model healthy decisions like going for a walk or calling a friend instead.
- Talk with (and listen to) your kids about current alcohol and drug culture. Get informed on the latest trends and tips for talking to youth.
- Follow the social host ordinance laws in your community. Make your home substance-free for youth.
- Prioritize all kids. If we don't watch out for each other's children, it makes it harder to create an environment where anyone is thriving.

These prevention measures aren't complicated. Their success is evidence-based. But the missing piece for real change is that we can't opt out. This is not a campaign of shame. It's one of compassion and support. We need to be in this together.

We're not good at being average in Marin County. Suffice to say, we despise it. We love being 2X. But this is one of those times when being twice the average isn't a good thing.

What if we used our typical overachiever instincts to our collective advantage? What if we poured our competitive spirits into an effort to be average? We'll pack a room to learn how to get our kids into the best colleges. This is one of the ways it's done.

If we can change our behaviors, focus on our youth and protect their developing brains, they have the chance to be above average in life, not in substance use.

Todd Lieman, of Mill Valley, is a parent volunteer with Marin Youth Healthy Partnerships.
