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## Youth tobacco use must matter to all of us

Youth tobacco use in the Hays community should matter to all of us. Our youth are our greatest resource, and as a community we should challenge ourselves to make Hays the safest, most positive, and healthiest environment to raise our children. I am a middle school counselor in Hays and a parent. When questioned about tobacco use and prevention there are many points that come to my mind including the heightened health risk of underage youth who begin early tobacco use. There are both physical and financial consequences of smoking. However, there are science based prevention strategies that help to decrease underage tobacco initiation and use.

Preadolescence and adolescence are challenging developmental periods. The influence of friends is at its greatest and youth are attempting to find their identity. Some youth spend great amounts of time unsupervised and have more free time to watch movies and other sources of media where smoking is glorified and perhaps encouraged.

Some teens' first encounter with tobacco is with a peer who has previously smoked and has access to the cigarettes or other tobacco products. Often tobacco is taken from a parent or other adult without their awareness. Other social sources for underage access to tobacco include older friends or siblings. Unfortunately, a small number of parents allow their children to use tobacco and provide the products for them.

We all are alarmed at the thought of teenagers using illegal drugs such as methamphetamine or cocaine. Likewise, it is vital we realize tobacco and alcohol have the same alarming effects on adolescents, serving as gateway



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drugs. When teens under 18 choose to use tobacco they are using an illegal drug. The lethality of tobacco is all around us. In Kansas, an average of 3,800 adults die each year from smoking and 2,300 kids have lost at least one parent from smoking. Teens often feel removed from the threat of death as an immediate consequence. However, tobacco does have many immediate consequences such as stench or foul smell, yellow teeth, decreased athletic performance due to decreases in endurance and their irritability and agitation levels increase greatly.

As people who are invested in our youth we need to look for strategies to prevent teens from choosing to take their first puff of a cigarette or dip of spit tobacco. As a counselor, one approach is to consider what would make a person want to begin smoking. Some possible reasons include the desire to connect and fit in, by using smoking as a coping strategy, an ineffective peer resistance skill. In order to prevent use based on these reasons we need to consider what skills we can empower adolescents to develop that will be a protective barrier from the influence of tobacco use.

Research suggests many programs are effective in reducing the use of tobacco. These programs include DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) and Life Skills. Both programs are taught within the Hays school district at the elementary and/or middle school levels. There are programs such as Guiding Good Choices, a free parenting class that helps parents develop and set healthy boundaries and consequences for navigating the teen years.

Though we often might think teens do not want time with us as parents or kudos from community adult role models, they indeed do. Youth need one on one time frequently with their parents engaged in meaningful activity. Keeping an open door of communication with parents and other trusted adults will be increased as we spend valuable time with our teens and they

realize how valuable they are to us. Building social skills and developing strategies for managing bullying situations also help teens make healthy connections as well.

Additionally, empowering children with leadership opportunities within the community provides the opportunity for them to feel an increased connection and sense of responsibility. Contrary to popular beliefs the use of tobacco increases heart rate and impulsivity making it an ineffective, yet addicting behavior as a coping mechanism. Additionally, teaching children resistance skills when faced with peer pressure and frequently practicing these strategies is beneficial due to increasing healthy ways to manage stress. All of these skills are taught in Life Skills and DARE.

Parents and community members influence prevention of tobacco use. The most effective way to have a positive influence is to serve as a positive role model by making healthy choices throughout life and discussing these choices with your children. There are programs such as Guiding Good Choices, a free parenting class that helps parents develop and set healthy boundaries and consequences for navigating the teen years.

We should all be encouraged by realizing there are actions we can take to decrease the use of tobacco in our youth and increase their chances to grow up healthy and strong. The challenge is which adult will you choose to be - the one who takes the time to make a difference or the one who misses the opportunity? Each day we are called to give our youth our best. I rejoice in knowing that through use of science based programs and active coalition groups the Hays community is building a wonderful place to raise our most precious resource, our future, our children!

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