

“Suzanne O. Carcieri: A tool against youth drinking”

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Suzanne O. Carcieri: A tool against youth drinking

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By SUZANNE O. CARCIERI

Summer is a favorite season, but it can set the stage for the best of times or the worst of times. It is a time when our kids can enjoy friends and fun, but it is also a time when extra freedom and late summer boredom can lead to risky behavior such as experimenting with alcohol.

As summer draws to a close, recent high-school graduates prepare to move away from home for their freshman year of college — and move closer to a new level of independence that will test their ability to make smart choices affecting their health and safety.

We all have a role to play in preventing tragedy and protecting the safety of our youth and young adults. It is an uphill battle, as our youth and young adults are bombarded with unhealthy messages that put them at high risk for underage drinking and substance abuse.

As a mother of four and a grandmother of 14 children, I understand how hard it is to fight such negative influences.

So a new state Web site has been developed that can serve as a powerful prevention tool: www.substancefreekids.ri.gov is a user-friendly site that offers information and advice for parents, educators, the community, college students, and even kids. Nationally respected resources and reports are included, as well as links to local prevention organizations.

Parents can learn how to talk to their teens about drinking and substance abuse, learn about effective discipline for children of all ages, recognize the signs of substance abuse, learn how their children’s safety and development are compromised by drinking and taking drugs, and learn where to get help when a child is in trouble. Kids and teens can learn how to resist peer pressure and see how drugs and alcohol can affect their minds and bodies. College students can learn about the consequences of high-risk drinking, how alcohol affects their bodies, the myths of alcohol use and facts about alcohol abuse. Educators and community members can learn how to help create a safe environment for our kids.

Although recent statistics show that underage drinking and substance abuse have fallen modestly in Rhode Island over the last 10 years, there is still reason for concern. Rhode Island still ranks among the top 10 states for binge drinking for youths aged 12-17 and young adults aged 18-25.

Our state is also among the top 10 states for alcohol use reported in the past month among both young populations.

Alcohol abuse must not be a rite of passage for our youth. It threatens their health and safety, often leading to life-changing or tragic consequences, such as changes in brain development; death from alcohol poisoning; physical and sexual assault; higher risk for suicide and homicide; injuries from alcohol-related car crashes; school, social and legal problems; unwanted, unplanned and unprotected sexual activity; disruption of normal growth and sexual development; and memory problems.

As a member of the group National Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free, I have visited a number of fifth- and sixth-grade classrooms and taught students about the effects of alcohol on the developing human brain. Why have I selected that young age group? Unfortunately, it is necessary. According to the 2009 Pride Survey, as many as 300,000 fourth and fifth graders nationwide begin drinking before the sixth grade.

When I look at my grandchildren, and when I visit children in schools around our state, I see their potential in life. They have dreams, talents and ambitions, and it is our job to ensure that they have the chance to fulfill them. I urge all Rhode Island adults to visit www.substancefreekids.ri.gov and share it with the children, teens, and young adults in their lives.

Start a conversation! Talk to your kids — and talk often. You may be surprised at how much they will listen to you. They will know you care!

Suzanne O. Carcieri is the wife of [Governor Carcieri](#).