

VINEYARD GAZETTE

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A Daunting Task

While Island seniors and their families are planning their graduation parties, parents of Island middle schoolers are discovering ways to make sure their kids reach graduation, happy and healthy. The Martha's Vineyard Youth Task Force hosted dinners at all Island schools in the past week, to communicate with parents about communicating with teens on the subject of drinking and drugs. Their message is at once sobering and promising.

Here on the generally fit and healthy Vineyard, substance abuse is a problem. The comprehensive health report on the Island released four years ago noted that though we are thinner and smoke less than mainlanders, almost a tenth of the Island population fits the profile of problem drinkers, and cirrhosis of the liver occurred in slightly higher rates on the Vineyard than the general population. Wider research indicates that people who begin drinking at an early age face enormous risks of becoming alcoholics

The task force takes that environment as its basis, but accentuates the positive with kids to help bend the Island alcohol trend for the better. The task force surveyed teens and found a majority of Island high school students do not drink. The task force now promotes this in eye-catching posters, to help kids realize they are not alone when they resist peer pressure to drink.

Likewise the task force is talking to parents, who have the most at stake in keeping kids safe, and are the most influential, even when they feel they are not. Theirs is a tough act, navigating the ever-shifting balance between freedom and responsibility, between trust and care, as their teens grow. As Students Against Drunk Driving chairman Stephen Wallace put it: "Something funny happens on the way to commencement. At graduation time, even clear-thinking teens may suddenly feel unburdened by the strictures of law . . . Many adults are simply unaware of the choices that teens face every day . . . Others simply look the other way . . . Either way, their children lose."

The teen years only come once. Encourage young people to seize this time — in ways they can remember, without a hangover or regrets, without car accidents or fights. As the youth task force shows, there is plenty to celebrate, and ways to do it without any embarrassing, messy scenes you'd rather forget.