

The Truth About Drugs **by Janet Maurer, Ph.D., Director of Counseling Services**

Parents who braved winter's nasty chill were rewarded with an informative and provocative presentation about the state of drug use among teens today. Linda Kraft, a Project Associate from the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit, offered information which she said was "not for children's eyes." Ms. Kraft regaled us with stories about going to local "head shops" to purchase the drug paraphernalia she displayed, demonstrating many of the ingenious ways teens use everyday objects to both use drugs and hide this use from adults. The purpose of this demonstration was to keep parents informed because the more we know about what is going on in the lives of our children the better equipped we are to help them make safe choices. Ms. Kraft was emphatic that **drug and alcohol use and abuse among children is not about parenting**; but informed parents can help reduce its incidence by understanding what children are doing.

Highlights from this presentation include the following:

- Gateway drugs include marijuana, alcohol, tobacco, and inhalants.
- Contrary to public opinion, marijuana may really be a gateway drug to nicotine.
- Tobacco is a powerful drug too. For kids who smoke cigarettes, most will start drinking alcohol within 6 months. On the college level there is a 1:1 correlation between smoking and drinking.
- Age of first use of alcohol in PA is 11 ? years old.
- Kids have easy and legal access to inhalants: aerosol cans, silver and gold paint, magic markers, white-out, butane in lighters, glue, rubber cement, nitrous oxide in such products as ReddiWhip, Glade air freshener.
- It's a fallacy to think that if you teach children how to drink responsibly they won't abuse alcohol.
- Kids are at highest risk for substance use at times of transition (moving from lower to middle school, middle to upper school, upper school to college).

Another particularly intriguing fact to be aware of is the reference to "420." This number has several meanings to teens: April 20th (or 4/20!) is national pot smoking day, Hitler's birthday, and the day that the tragedies at Waco and Columbine occurred. According to the Grateful Dead, 4:20pm is also the time to take a pot break.

So what can parents do to help children make safe choices? It sounds simple, but the answer is to know your child. Pay attention to changes in friendships, clothing, attitudes, music, schoolwork. While changes do not necessarily mean that teens are using drugs or alcohol, they do provide you with something to talk about. Take the opportunity to open a dialog with your children about what is happening in their lives. *Remember: talk with your children, ask questions about them, be vigilant, keep the lines of communication open. Above all, maintain the relationship!*

(An excellent pamphlet was given to all participants: [Growing Up Drug-Free: A Parent's Guide to Prevention](#). Copies are available in the GA counseling offices).