

WELLNESS UPDATE 1999, #6

ALCOHOL AND ATHLETES

Alcohol remains the most used and abused drug in America. Unfortunately, many of the users and abusers are high school students. **According to a 1997 Iowa Department of Education Survey, 80% of Iowa high school students, grades 9-12, indicate they have had at least one drink of alcohol during their lifetime. Results from the same survey indicate 52% reported having at least one drink in the last thirty days and 37% consumed five or more drinks in a row during the last thirty days!**

Many national studies have reported that high school student-athletes drink alcohol at about the same rate as other high school students and some studies report slightly higher use by student-athletes. The latest Iowa High School Athletic Association survey indicates 37% of Iowa high school student-athletes, grades 9-12, drank during the past year, but only 20% drank during their last competitive season.

There are many reasons why student-athletes choose not to drink alcohol. Among those reasons are the values taught by their parents, the positive influence of their coaches and teammates, the possible negative effects on athletic performance, and the possibilities of penalties if they're caught.

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The following are some of the **benefits for student-athletes who choose not to drink alcohol:**

- 1) academic or athletic performance will not be hampered;
- 2) the risk of breaking school rules or the law is greatly reduced;
- 3) problems related to being alcohol impaired such as drunk driving and sexual decision-making are eliminated;
- 4) there is no risk of becoming addicted to alcohol; and,
- 5) the ability to develop appropriate life skills such as stress management, problem solving, conflict resolution, interacting with others, and goal setting is enhanced.

Beer, wine, and distilled spirits, or "hard liquor," all contain similar amounts of alcohol. A 12-ounce beer, 12-ounce wine cooler, 5-ounces of wine, or a shot of 80-proof distilled alcohol all contain about one-half ounce of pure alcohol. **From an**

alcohol content perspective, alcohol is alcohol is alcohol, regardless of what one chooses to drink.

Alcohol does not enhance athletic performance. It is a sedative which hinders judgement and coordination, impairs perception, and slows response time and mental processes. **Research has shown the negative effects on athletic performance can last as long as 24 hours after consuming as little as one or two beers, or the equivalent!** Reaction time, balance, coordination, and speed are reduced for 14 - 24 hours after having only a few drinks. Strength and power may be negatively affected for several days after drinking.

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Alcohol is also a diuretic which increases urine output and causes dehydration. **When used while recovering from exercise (after a game), alcohol will hinder the muscles' ability to replenish their energy supplies. This lengthens recovery time after exercise and rehabilitation time after injury.**

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While this information offers good reasons for young student-athletes to choose not to drink alcohol, the most compelling arguments against the use of alcohol by young people may come from parents, coaches, and other significant adult role models. Billions of dollars are spent annually on alcohol marketing. Student-athletes receive many messages promoting their use of alcohol. Many of these messages are subtle hints that alcohol use will improve athletic ability, increase their chances of being successful in life, and make them more sexually attractive. It is impossible to stop this kind of advertising or to protect youth from it. **It is possible for adults to counteract the promotion of alcohol by setting positive examples, using teachable moments, consistently enforcing rules, and learning how to respond when concerned about a student-athletes' behavior. All these efforts will greatly assist student-athletes in making difficult choices about the nonuse of alcohol.**

SETTING POSITIVE EXAMPLES

Adults can set positive examples about alcohol use or nonuse by choosing

not to use or setting personal guidelines for responsible use, such as using in moderation and when it is appropriate, and legal to do so. Approximately 1/3 of all adults abstain from the use of alcohol completely. By demonstrating abstinence as a choice, adults send the message that choosing not to use is an acceptable choice one can make throughout his or her life. Another 40% of adults use alcohol appropriately, moderately, and legally. These adults experience no problems through their use of alcohol. By making this choice they send the message that, **if one does choose to drink, it should be done at the appropriate time and place, using moderate amounts safely, and legally.**

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TEACHABLE MOMENTS

Teachable moments are opportunities for coaches and other adults to use everyday situations and current events to teach adolescents positive messages about alcohol use or nonuse. When using teachable moments, remember, sixty one-minute messages are much more effective than one, sixty minute lecture!

The following are examples of teachable moments: 1) discussing how to celebrate victories without the use of alcohol, 2) reinforce the positive choices student-athletes make by not going to the parties where alcohol is present, 3) discuss the breaking of team rules and the effect it has on the entire team, 4) discuss some of the real consequences of alcohol use and also some of the reasons people choose to use.

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EFFECTIVE CODES OF CONDUCT

The reason for developing a school's code of conduct is not to punish those who break the rules. **A code of conduct which is well thought out, clearly written, and effectively communicated in a variety of ways, sets behavioral standards to assist youth in making good decisions.** The five essential elements to effective codes of conduct are: 1) *certainty* - the enforcement of consequences must follow all violations; 2) *severity* - the consequence must be a fair penalty for the act committed; 3) *celerity* - the process must be prompt; 4) *consistency* - the process

must be consistent for all participants; and, 5) *due process* - students' rights must not be violated and they must be given due process as required by law.

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RESPONDING TO CONCERNS

Adults may choose not to become involved when concerned about a young person's behavior for a variety of reasons. Those reasons usually include: 1) inadequate training and preparation to address the situation; 2) lack of support from the school or community; 3) lack of knowledge about where to seek support; 4) fear of a negative reaction from the people involved; and, 5) lack of time to adequately address a student's problems. **When a significant adult fails to respond to a student-athlete's inappropriate behaviors that lack of response is often interpreted as a lack of caring or an acceptance of the behaviors.**

In order to respond effectively when concerned about a student-athlete's behavior, adults should observe and identify behaviors of concern, share concerns with the young person, uphold team expectations and rules, provide support by letting the person know you care about them, and know where to refer the person so they can receive the appropriate help.

1) *Observing and Identifying Behaviors of Concern:* Any behavior that is out of the ordinary can be cause for concern. It is not important to identify the cause of the behavior, but it is important to visit with the individual about their behavior. Waiting to determine the underlying cause of the behavior can cause unnecessary delays in responding.

2) *Sharing Concerns:* Sharing concerns is a process through which one can share their concerns about inappropriate behavior without knowing the cause, blaming, labeling, yelling, accusing, or threatening. The process involves using a series of "I" statements to discuss the facts regarding the situation and the feelings involved. The process also involves listening to the student-athlete. Those statements begin with:

a) "***I care*** . . . ," Let the person know you care about them and they are important to you and the team. You can let them know you care by telling them or through a smile or other gesture.

- b) “***I see***” Focus on what you have seen or heard that caused you to be concerned.
- c) “***I feel***” Let the person know how you feel about their behavior. It is important for them to know their behavior is affecting others. Feelings are expressed using one word, ie. “angry,” “worried,” “scared.”
- d) ***LISTEN TO THE STUDENT-ATHLETE.*** Listen to what the student-athlete has to say. Use good nonverbal listening skills, avoid distractions, and ask questions. Remember, you picked the time and place for this discussion so be prepared for silence. Also, be prepared for a heart-wrenching story or anger.
- e) “***I want***” Once you have listened to the student-athlete’s perspective be prepared to tell them what you want. Do you want them to follow the rules? To talk to someone else? To stay on the team? This is your opportunity to re-emphasize your expectations.
- f) “***I will***” What are you willing to do to provide support? This lets the student-athlete know they are not alone and that you do care about them.

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3) Upholding Team Expectations and Rules: One of a coach’s responsibilities is to uphold team expectations and rules. This can be accomplished by reminding student-athletes what those expectations and rules are, and consistently following through on necessary consequences.

4) Providing Support: Providing support does not mean accepting inappropriate behaviors. It does mean one can express disapproval for certain behaviors without disapproving of the person(s) involved in those behaviors. Providing support is accomplished by letting the person know you care about them, but will you not accept the inappropriate behavior.

5) Referral: It is important for coaches to know when they are “getting in over their heads” when dealing with behaviors of concern. When this occurs, the coach should suggest the student-athlete talk to someone more qualified to help. The coach may offer to go with the student-athlete to visit with this person. While it is unlikely a coach will have knowledge about all available resources, it is usually possible for them to know of one person who can act as their primary resource. That person may be a school nurse, counselor, school psychologist, administrator, a member of the clergy, or another educator. The key at this point is to help the young person make contact with someone who can help them resolve their problem.

SOURCES: Berning, Jacqueline, Ph.D., RD. "Alcohol and Athletic Performance," Gatorade Sports Science Exchange, 1996; 1997 Iowa Youth Risk Behavioral Survey, Iowa Department of Education, Grimes State Office Building, Des Moines, IA 50319; Goldberg, Linn, MD & Elliot, Diane, MD. ATLAS Sports Menu, SunBurst Communications; Kleiner, Susan, Ph.D., RD. "In High Spirits," The Physician and Sports Medicine, Volume 24, Number 9, September 1996; Ringhofer, Kevin, Ph.D. & Harding, Martha. Coaches Guide to Drugs and Sports, Human Kinetics, Champaign, IL, 1996; Sims, Marvin, MSW, CAC. What Every Student Athlete Must Know About Drugs, contact Marvin Sims, 1265 Melrose Avenue, Iowa City, IA 52246; Walder, Gary, MD & Hainline, Brian, MD. Drugs and the Athlete, Chapter 11, pp124-135, FA Davis Company, Philadelphia, 1989; Williams, Melvin, Ph.D., FACSM, "Alcohol and Sports Performance," Gatorade Sports Science Exchange, Volume 4, Number 40, September 1992.