



Day 27: Lessons from Laura

Here is my very healthy and happy Laura when she was in 9th grade. She's the girl on the right in the cute tie-dye t-shirt. I was sure that because of where we lived and the great schools that my children attended, that drugs were a problem that only affected schools in poorer neighborhoods. Was I ever wrong! Laura bought her first drugs at Roswell High School leading to the disease of addiction that ultimately claimed her life a month ago at age 29.

Addiction can happen even in the most healthy and supportive families.

Without knowing it, some of us fall into certain parenting traps that put our children more at risk. CASA, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, conducted an interesting study of parents of children age 12-17 focusing on what they do and don't do that puts their child at greater risk for substance abuse and addiction.

The reality is that 1 in 5 middle schoolers go to schools where drugs are used, kept or sold and that number escalates to 2 and 3 students in high school. Laura's high school, Roswell High, was a very strong suburban upper-middle-class school, yet alcohol was sold at school and added to water bottles, pot was used by 75% of the students and other more dangerous drugs were readily available. Even with these alarming statistics, CASA found that a full 1/3 of parents didn't believe that having their child in a school where drugs were readily available didn't make the risk that their child would try them higher. Only 39% of parents believed that the goal of making their child's school drug-free was realistic.

Here are some results of the CASA study on parenting styles that created a higher risk of children abusing substances, leading to addiction. Based on the study, here are some questions you should be asking yourself.

It's 10:00, do you know where your child is? If you don't know where your child is on a school night and if they are hanging out with friends at a later and later hour, you dramatically increase the risk that they will abuse substances. 50% of teens that came home after 10:00 PM and 30% of teens that came home between 8 and 10 were engaged in substance use, according to the study. Not knowing where your child is, monitoring where they go, or letting them hang out on school nights is a very risky business.

Are you the supplier of drugs for your child? If you have addictive prescription drugs lying around the house or a large supply of alcohol, you may inadvertently be the person that is supplying drugs to your child. The study shared that among kids who abuse prescription drugs to get high, 34% say they get them from their homes; another 31% say they get them from their friends' homes. It's up to you to secure those substances that are way too tempting for your child to try. It's no different from keeping your firearms locked up.

Are you unaware of the drug situation in your child's school? Not understanding the profile of your child's school and the prevalence of drugs is equivalent to standing in the middle of the interstate with your eyes closed and hoping the car won't hit you. Remember that Laura's high school in a very good neighborhood exposed their students to a large and easily available supply of drugs. I was one of those parents who was uneducated and unaware.

Are you aware of the ease of acquiring drugs? In the CASA study, teenagers report that buying drugs was easier than buying beer. 10 years ago, the study revealed that 23% of teens were able to get pot in an hour or less, and 42% were able to get it in a day or less. Today, a teenager's ability to buy much more dangerous drugs like heroin, cocaine, or meth is incredibly easy. It's important that you understand the ease in which your child can acquire them.

My Takeaways

All parents should monitor their children on school nights, keep dangerous prescription drugs out of their children's reach, and demand that their children's schools be drug-free. You should go back to school and fully educate yourself on the types of drugs available, how children access them, and what your school's position is on reducing the number of available drugs at school.

When both my son and daughter had left Roswell High School, I went back to the young and progressive principal and asked for some simple actions to reduce the problem. Don't let them bring water bottles to school – the water fountain is just fine. Monitor the parking lots adjacent to the school to reduce trafficking of drugs during school hours. Bring drug dogs in to randomly check backpacks and lockers. Drug test students that participate in extra-curricular activities. Those seem simple but are a start to begin to reduce the presence to and access of drugs in schools.

Hindsight is 20/20 and if I knew then what I know now, I would have been much more diligent in protecting Laura from the risks that she faced of accessing and acquiring drugs just down the street in her high school.