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SOAPBOX

Message to kids: Don't drink, period

In response to *Anti-drinking message learned* [May 25], first my heartfelt thanks and support to Peggy Sapp of Informed Families for once again bringing critical information about the dangers of drugs and alcohol to school-age children.

Although the presentation at Jose de Diego Middle School was meant to be shocking, unfortunately the real-life consequences of drinking and driving do mirror what the students experienced.

Additionally, I strongly suggest that parents also be invited to attend these sessions for I am frequently surprised by the lack of knowledge (or denial) exhibited by this group.

But most importantly, the popular message to middle and high school students of "do not drink and drive" should come to a screeching halt at the first three words — "do not drink."

Kids need to hear the stronger message of abstinence, not the softer implied message of "it is OK to drink; just do not drive if you do."

Unfortunately, this is the twisted message eventually perceived by teens.

Underage drinking accounts for 25 percent of all alcohol consumed in the U.S., according to a new report recently released by The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. Center President Joseph Califano warns, "Underage drinking has reached epidemic proportions in America."

The report also found that five million high schoolers (31 percent) say they binge drink at least once a month with the gender gap disappearing. Both male and female ninth-graders are just as likely to drink.

Alcohol is the top drug of abuse for American kids. Other statistics revealed in the study show that individuals who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to become alcoholics and lifetime alcohol abuse is greater for those who start at age 14.

Apart from the disturbing statistics, what is most disconcerting as an addictions specialist dealing primarily with the adolescent population, is what the research have have con-

firmed: teens have easy access to alcohol because parents are too often unwitting co-conspirators who see underage drinking as a rite of passage.

The message to our kids: Do not drink. Period.

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