

# Mary Wolff: Don't discount your teen's use of alcohol or marijuana

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Mary Makley Wolff shakes her head in disbelief at the notion: Parents discounting their teens' use of alcohol or marijuana.

"At least it's not heroin," they'll tell her.

"There are still more people dying from alcohol than any other drug," says Wolff, director of the Coalition for a Drug-Free Clermont County. She adds that recent research shows that alcohol and marijuana abuse can adversely affect brain development, which continues until age 25.

Community leaders formed the coalition in 1995 with the mission of providing education about the dangers of drugs and alcohol to those 18 and younger. The coalition focuses on alcohol, marijuana, tobacco and prescription drugs.

Its large and active Opiate Task Force, created in 2013, concentrates on prevention, harm reduction, treatment and recovery. The Task Force developed a quick response team of addicts in long-term recovery, law enforcement and EMS who follow up with overdose victims.

Wolff points out that the Coalition for a Drug-Free Clermont County mainly works on Primary Prevention and environmental strategies "way up stream to change the environment," hopefully preventing the nightmare of addiction later in life. Research shows that the earlier the use of any substance in developing brains, the higher the chance of addiction.

Coalition members devote their prevention energies to youth 18 and under. They track data regarding non-use in the past 30 days, perception of parental disapproval, perception of peer disapproval and perception of risk. These core measures are tracked in the Student Drug Use Survey of which all Clermont County school districts seventh to 12th graders participate in every two years. They also focus on ways the greater community can support young people with building protective factors and having mentors who provide that "one caring adult" that often is essential to resiliency and overcoming childhood trauma.

"The data allows us to see where we're making headway and how we stack up nationally," Wolff says.

While grateful that attention to the opiate crisis has helped reduce overdoses the past three years, Wolff expresses alarm about "drugs of initiation" – alcohol, marijuana and liquid nicotine (e-cigarettes). The percentage of both middle and high school students reporting a perception of parental disapproval of these substances has decreased. So has the percentage of middle and high school youth reporting a perceived risk of using these drugs.

Attention to the opiate crisis and the legalization of marijuana in some states has helped shape perceptions, Wolff says.

Wolff notes that, on average, children in Clermont County first use alcohol, marijuana or nicotine at age 13. However local data shows that despite the perception that everyone uses alcohol and drugs, the majority of Clermont County youth do NOT use these substances.

“Alcohol and marijuana can be a pathway to addiction in some vulnerable people,” she says, noting that ongoing studies seek to more clearly define the problem.

The coalition continues to learn and evolve in its never-ending effort to prevent youngsters from going down that path. The organization started in the mid-1990s after a teen in the Goshen area died from huffing. U.S. Senator Rob Portman spearheaded drug-free communities funding. Events such as Red Ribbon Week in October and alternative after-proms consumed much of the coalition’s energy.

In 2011, the coalition received funding to expand its efforts from the Clermont County Mental Health and Recovery Board and Ohio Mental Health and Addiction services and, in 2015, the coalition obtained a federally funded Drug Free Communities Grant (DFC). This allows the coalition members to work with 12 sectors such as youth, parents, businesses, schools, law enforcement, government and civic organizations. The focus is on local conditions in the local community with local solutions as the most effective way to provide prevention of substance use among youth in Clermont County.

Among current activities:

- A youth-led Partners in Prevention group, with members of both West Clermont and Milford schools participating in a Pharming Affect peer-to-peer prevention program. (“We would like to have two representatives from every school district in Partners in Prevention,” Wolff said. “It’s a very powerful peer-to-peer group. We teach them SPF (Strategic Planning Framework).”)
- Hidden in Plain Sight, a program that teaches parents and grandparents how to search for signs of drug use in their children’s rooms and trains for crucial conversations with kids.
- Botvin Life Skills, an evidence-based health curriculum for middle schoolers with a high school refresher, a parent version for incarcerated moms and dads.
- Funding the Caring School Communities for West Clermont School District.
- The Solace support group for grieving families dealing with drug use and death and addiction.
- PAL (Parents of Addicted Loved Ones) in conjunction with Mercy Health – Clermont Hospital, another education and support group for families dealing with addiction.
- Participation in the first regional learning collaborative for youth prevention for Southwest Ohio and state legislative visits.
- Monthly meetings the second Tuesday of the month at the Clermont County Mental Health and Recovery Board office 2337 Clermont Center Drive, Batavia, Ohio 45103

For more information, please see: <https://drugfreeclermont.org/> or call Mary Wolff at 513-735-8143.