



What's New For Schools

NATIONAL COUNCIL ON ALCOHOLISM AND DRUG DEPENDENCE OF MIDDLESEX COUNTY, INC.

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Youth and Mental Health

By Dena Charbonneau, MSW, LSW, CPS

Mental health is how people think, feel, and act as they face life's situations. It affects how people handle stress, relate to one another, and make decisions. Mental health influences the ways individuals look at themselves, their lives, and others in their lives. Like physical health, mental health is important at every stage of life.

Like adults, children and adolescents can have mental health disorders that interfere with the way they think, feel, and act. When untreated, mental health disorders can lead to school failure, family conflicts, drug abuse, violence, and even suicide. Untreated mental health disorders can be very costly to families, communities, and the health care system.

Mental health disorders are more common in young people than many realize. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA), at least one in five children and adolescents has a mental health disorder. At least one in ten, or about six million people, has a serious emotional disturbance.

Mental health disorders in children and adolescents are caused mostly by biology and environment. Examples of biological causes are genetics, chemical imbalances in the body, or damage to the central nervous system, such as a head injury. Many environmental factors also put young people at risk for developing mental health disorders. Examples include:

- Exposure to environmental toxins, such as high levels of lead

- Exposure to violence, such as witnessing or being the victim of physical or sexual abuse, drive-by shootings, muggings, or other disasters
- Stress related to chronic poverty, discrimination, or other serious hardships
- Loss of important people through death, divorce, or broken relationships

Information released by the New York University Child Study Center shows that there is an extraordinary crisis of depression and anxiety among American adolescents. Depressed adolescents are more likely to drink alcohol, take non-prescription drugs, and have sex, compared to their peers who have not experienced bouts of depression. Depressed teenagers are more sensitive to the environment than depressed adults, therefore school professionals must be alert for signs and symptoms of depression in their students.

Identification of mental health disorders is important, because children and adolescents with mental health issues need to get help as soon as possible. Some signs that may point to serious emotional disturbances in children or adolescents are:

A child or adolescent is troubled by feeling:

- Sad and hopeless for no reason, and these feelings do not go away
- Very angry most of the time and crying a lot
- Worthless or guilty often

Continued on Page 4

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NCADD of Middlesex County, Inc. is a private, non-profit community-based health organization serving Middlesex County. Our mission is to promote the health and well-being of individuals and communities of Middlesex County through the reduction or elimination of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use problems. Tax deductible contributions may be made to:

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Need for Parity in New Jersey

By Ezra Helfand

An improbable convergence of state and federal health insurance parity legislation may lend momentum to both initiatives that seek health coverage for addicted and mentally ill individuals comparable to what insurers provide for other illnesses. In New Jersey, the state Senate passed a parity bill in December, with the Assembly version of the bill possibly coming up for an Assembly Budget and Appropriations Committee hearing in the near future. On the Federal level, both the Senate and the House are considering separate parity bills.

The main case for support of parity is that it will enable the delivery of proper treatment for addicted and mentally ill individuals. But it is expected that parity will also produce measurable cost savings. Those savings include health costs that result from an array of illnesses that arise from prolonged alcohol or other drug use. Available data from other states reinforce the position that savings that will come of parity. Vermont, for example, found that overall spending for addiction and mental health care declined from 18 to 8 percent in the first two years of the parity law.

Advocates in New Jersey are stressing that the federal initiative does not obviate the need for parity at the state level. In fact, New Jersey may opt out of a federal parity bill since the state version is more comprehensive than at least one bill proposed nationally.

NCADD of Middlesex County, Inc. is fully supportive of New Jersey's efforts to implement a parity bill. On legislative initiatives such as this, elected officials will certainly hear from the insurance companies. Have they heard from you?

Educator Alert - SPYKES!

Groups like NCADD of Middlesex County, Inc. who continually fight underaged drinking have been recently raising concerns about a new malt-liquor beverage with 12 percent alcohol that sells for less than a dollar, comes in bottles the size of nail polish, and has a flavor just right for young folks.

With prom season and all its attendant hazards around the corner, some law enforcers and health advocates are adding one more cause for parents to worry -- a new alcoholic beverage called Spykes that is sized, flavored and priced in a way that critics say is aimed at teens.

Spykes come in colorful two-ounce containers and in kid-friendly flavors like Spicy Mango, Hot Melons, Spicy Lime, and Hot Chocolate. This product comes with more than twice the alcohol concentration of beer. And according to the nonprofit Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), they are the latest attempt by Anheuser-Busch to get children interested in alcohol.



NCADD joins with CSPI and other groups to urge the brewer to launch an immediate nationwide recall of Spykes and is calling on state attorneys general to investigate.

According to Anheuser-Busch's spykeme.com web site, Spykes are designed to be consumed on their own, or to add sweetness (and additional alcohol) to beers. The site, which notably has no age-verification system for users, also provides improbable cocktail recipes, like the "Fruit Stand," which contains a Hot Melons Spykes, Bacardi Limon rum, and beer; as well as teen-friendly accessories like Instant Messaging icons and cell phone ringtones. Spykes cost 75 cents to \$1 each.

Educators and parents should know that Spykes are also fortified with caffeine, ginseng, and guarana—ingredients typically associated with energy drinks that are popular with young people. Health officials have expressed concern that caffeinated alcoholic beverages can give young people the impression that they can drink more without becoming intoxicated or that the prospect of driving after drinking might seem safer.

NCADD urges everyone to contact the manufacturer of Spykes, Anheuser-Busch, and ask for a voluntary recall of this product.

Continued from Page 1

- Anxious or worried often
- Unable to get over a loss or death of someone important
- Extremely fearful or having unexplained fears
- Constantly concerned about physical problems or physical appearance
- Frightened that his or her mind either is controlled or is out of control

A child or adolescent experiences big changes, such as:

- Showing declining performance in school
- Losing interest in things once enjoyed
- Experiencing unexplained changes in sleeping or eating patterns
- Avoiding friends or family and wanting to be alone all the time
- Daydreaming too much and not completing tasks
- Feeling life is too hard to handle
- Hearing voices that cannot be explained
- Experiencing suicidal thoughts

A child or adolescent experiences:

- Poor concentration and is unable to think straight or make up his or her mind
- An inability to sit still or focus attention
- Worry about being harmed, hurting others, or doing something “bad”

- A need to wash, clean things, or perform certain routines hundreds of times a day, in order to avoid an unsubstantiated danger
- Racing thoughts that are almost too fast to follow
- Persistent nightmares

A child or adolescent behaves in ways that cause problems, such as:

- Using alcohol or other drugs
- Eating large amounts of food and then purging, or abusing laxatives, to avoid weight gain
- Dieting and/or exercising obsessively
- Violating the rights of others or constantly breaking the law without regard for other people
- Setting fires
- Doing things that can be life threatening
- Killing animals

For more information or to find out about treatment available to youth with mental illness, call the National Mental Health Information Center at 1-800-789-2647 or visit the Center’s web site at: <http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov>.

Attention Middlesex Educators

Using a newspaper in the classroom improves student vocabulary skills, increases knowledge and encourages a positive attitude toward learning. If you are interested in receiving free copies of *The Home News Tribune*, please call Ezra at NCADD at 732-254-3344 or email at ezra@ncadd-middlesex.org.