

Opinion: Building connections with your kids can prevent substance use, addiction

By Chris Herren and Creighton Drury

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Every year, Chris Herren draws upon his personal journey to recovery to talk with thousands of young people about substance use, emotional health and wellness; at the same time, the organization Creighton Drury leads – Partnership to End Addiction – engages with parents from all over the country through its helpline, to address their very real concerns about their children’s substance use. As the school year commences, Chris and Creighton are calling upon parents and students to stay connected and keep talking.

Under normal circumstances, growing up and making your way through college is tough enough. But these days, the challenges students face are even greater. Young people are now returning to school amidst a global pandemic, political unrest, widespread economic hardship and a reemerging movement to dismantle the systemic racism that has always plagued our nation.

It comes as no surprise that college students appear to be doing what so many have done for years before them to deal with stress and blow off steam: party with friends. It’s even less surprising that the blowback has been swift and widespread, as officials, parents and peers alike worry how these gatherings will contribute to the spread of COVID-19.

But, our concern should not be limited to students’ inability to uphold social distancing guidelines. We should show the same level of concern for why so many young people continue to engage in excessive drinking and other substance use while in college.

The consequences of adolescent substance use can be more than a bad hangover – they can be devastating, long-lasting and, in a worst-case-scenario, fatal. Research tells us that more than 20 million Americans are affected by addiction, a disease with roots in adolescence. On top of that,

more than 9 in 10 people with substance use disorder began using one or more substances before the age of 21. Each year, more than 150,000 people die from overdose and/or alcohol-related deaths. Yet, we also know for a fact that addiction is preventable.

One of the keys to preventing addiction is ensuring strong, loving connection. For parents, maintaining a strong connection with your child may feel exceptionally challenging right now, in no small part because of the pandemic. Yet, we know young people who have a close relationship with a parent – one characterized by warmth, trust, open communication and emotional support – are at significantly reduced risk of substance use.

So are those who feel a strong attachment to their school or have adult mentors in their lives looking out for them; people they feel comfortable turning to, when in need. As college basketball players, we found important mentors in our basketball coaches and team leaders. Indeed, meaningful bonds shared with compassionate and supportive parents, other adults and friends is the most powerful buffer to the countless influences in a young person's life that can steer them toward substance misuse and other unhealthy behaviors.

So as students settle into their new routines and classes amid COVID-19, don't just focus on pointing out the rules being violated and what your student is doing wrong. Try to understand their stress, anxiety and the perfectly normal need to socialize. Prioritize helping your student understand and address these feelings through healthier means. Let them know it is okay to speak with someone about the stress they are feeling, and the reasons why they might be feeling a bit more inclined to risk losing all they have worked to attend a party and use a substance.

Parents can help their children navigate stressful situations by asking their children meaningful questions. Don't just ask how many people they're spending time with. Ask how they're spending that time. Ask if they're fostering relationships that support them emotionally, as well as socially.

Encourage them to make choices that help protect their mental health and wellbeing, in addition to their physical health. And ask about substance use. Ask them "Why?" Why do you feel the need to use alcohol or drugs? Not to shame or punish them, but to ensure you're uncovering "the why" and supporting them with the education, compassion and empathy they need.

At a time in which requiring social distancing among students seems to be the best way to safeguard their health and prevent COVID-19, we should also be taking steps to build connections that safeguard their mental health, prevent substance misuse and decrease the odds of lifelong addiction.

Chris Herren, former professional basketball player and wellness advocate, is the founder of Herren Project, Herren Talks and Herren Wellness. Creighton Drury is CEO of Partnership to End Addiction, a national nonprofit working to transform how our nation addresses addiction.