

LINN COUNTY JUVENILE DEPARTMENT

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Dear Parents,

My name is Torri Lynn and I am the Director of the Linn County Juvenile Department. Our department works very close with your school district and I want to bring several issues to your attention as parents.

One big topic is to make sure you are aware of some recent changes within our state around the legalization of marijuana for recreational use and how it could affect your son or daughter. Possession or consumption of marijuana by someone *under the age of 21 is illegal*. As I'm sure you are aware, voters passed Measure 91 legalizing marijuana a little more than a year ago and it just went into effect July 1, 2015. With the legalization of Marijuana for adults, it puts marijuana on a similar level legally as alcohol. As a result, I want to provide you with statistics from youth here in Linn County and urge you as a parent not to take these changes in the law, lightly.

As a parent of teenagers myself, I personally know the struggle of dealing with societal norms in comparison to the expectations I have for my own family. All families do not have the same values regarding the use of alcohol and drugs and their availability to teens. It takes diligence on the part of parents and guardians to continue to keep your children safe from the many dangers they still encounter as they work towards adulthood. We can't keep our children in a bubble but there are things we can do to help them avoid making poor decisions in dangerous situations. We all like to believe that "our kids" make good decisions and in fact most of the time they do, but remember "peer pressure" is at an all-time high in their lives and with immediate access to friends through social media, they are dealing with pressures we never had to when we were their age.

Marijuana is still *illegal for anyone under the age of 21 to use or possess*. If your child is found to be under the influence or in possession at school, law enforcement will be notified and there will be a resulting report to the juvenile department, also known as a "referral".

Don't believe the marijuana campaigners, do your own research. Marijuana is not the same potency as it was in the 1960's and 70's (6-15% THC). Today's marijuana is twice as strong, and with new methods to extract only the THC, your children can access marijuana products which may contain up to 90% THC.

Know the signs of marijuana use: changes in your child's behavior, changes in academics, the smell of burnt marijuana, bloodshot and/or watery eyes, a green tint or color to the tongue, forgetfulness or difficulty tracking a conversation, changes in eating patterns

(“munchies”), and unusual giggling or laughing. Be sure to look at the whole picture; the presence of any one of these signs doesn’t mean your child is using drugs, but it is an opportunity to pay closer attention and ask more questions - two things teens hate.

General Safety Precautions:

Know who your child’s friends are, meet them and get an idea of what type of person they are. The old saying about “first impressions” can still be very relevant. If your gut tells you something is wrong, it is time to ask more questions.

Know your child’s whereabouts and don’t be afraid to “check-up” on them. If they say they are spending the night at a friend’s house, ask about parental supervision and then have a conversation with the parent who will be supervising.

Many parents ask questions about supervision when their children are younger, but as they grow older, who else is going to be there to ensure the safety of our child or children? Believe me, marijuana and alcohol can be just as deadly as a loaded handgun. I could tell you many stories about young people engaging in risky behaviors such as sex, driving and criminal behavior while under the influence of illegal substances. The consequences of these risky behaviors negatively impacted not only their own lives but many others as well.

Did I mention that your child’s brain is not fully developed? Then you add in marijuana, various illicit drugs and alcohol to an already impulsive, adolescent decision-maker, and I think you can understand how this is a recipe for disaster.

Social Media:

Just as dangerous is the issue of Social Media. Our department works regularly with families in this area of concern. The World Wide Web can be a fantastic tool but it is also very dangerous for youth to have unlimited access to the internet. We have had youth referred to our department for “sexting” which is the behavior of sending sexually explicit pictures and videos between both boys and girls. Parents are shocked and disappointed when they find out their child has engaged in this behavior. Believe it or not, it is very common among teenagers. Adolescents need supervision while using the internet and they need clear boundaries to be enforced.

Be aware of the use of cellphones and computers and what is being sent and received on these devices.

Look at their social media accounts with them so your teens know you are checking on them. This will help them remain honest and accountable for their behavior. Sometimes

a great excuse for teens who are experiencing peer pressure can be “my parents check my account”, so they don’t look at inappropriate sites, photos, and videos.

A recent study found that about 23% of teenagers have sent and received sexually explicit photos. Don’t fall into the trap of believing your child would never do that. Even the seemingly perfect kids make mistakes.

Have a conversation with your teen about appropriate use of technology. Also make sure you following through and check on what your teen is viewing to ensure it is appropriate.

Decide if youth should have phones and or computers in their bedrooms. Most explicit photos are taken in bedrooms and bathrooms in their own house while parents are home and most frequently after bedtime and late at night.

Today’s ease of accessing the internet is not like decades ago when teens had access to only a magazine hidden by one of their friends to view occasionally. Today, youth have access to very graphic pictures and videos that are only a few clicks away. The long-term effects of pornography on an adolescent brain, is of great concern. How will this shape their future adult relationships? This question is currently being researched but the theory is that learning about intimate adult relationships through pornography will have a negative effect on “real relationships” and a teen’s expectations regarding what adult relationships should be like.

I hope that this letter has been informative. Our goal is to help parents and guardians in an ever-changing world, be aware of current trends and issues so you can help your children and teen(s) make appropriate choices and become productive citizens.

For additional resources please log onto the Linn County Juvenile Department website.

Sincerely,

Torri Lynn
Director, Linn County Juvenile Department