

Wake up!

*Today's drinking teens
are tomorrow's dysfunctional adults*

The report that three in 10 Clatsop County eighth-graders reported using alcohol in the previous 30 days in the 2003 "Oregon Healthy Teens" survey should shock us and lead to big changes in our communities.

That this statistic doesn't surprise anyone is the most shocking thing of all – we live submerged in a culture in which substance abuse and its consequences hardly register. Statewide, a slightly smaller but still highly troubling proportion of one in four eighth-graders reported drinking alcohol.

Considered along with the 19 percent of Clatsop County eighth-graders who said they had used marijuana (compared to 13 percent statewide) and the 13 percent of local kids who smoked cigarettes (11 percent statewide), this report on early-teen drinking confirms many local families are in trouble and that these problems ripple downward to children.

Some will say, and perhaps correctly so, that eighth-grade brava-do leads some kids to claim to be drinking more actively than actually is the case. Having children who aspire to damaging behavior is slightly preferable to their actually committing the deed, but it suggests something unsavory about society when drinking is regarded as cool by 13-year-olds.

The Clatsop County Commission on Children and Families released these statistics and a state-

required comprehensive plan outlining ways to improve the quality of children's lives. In the wake of these and other findings, the commission has bought a drug, alcohol and tobacco prevention curriculum for use in county school districts for use in kindergarten through eighth grade.

Correctly viewing alcohol use as a symptom of family dysfunction, the local commission and others like it around Oregon are working on a host of broader topics, including child-abuse prevention, parent education and family strengthening, positive youth development, social services in the schools and quality childcare.

Significant progress on any of these is hobbled by the state's constrained finances. But it is ironically the case that the need for state aid in dealing with such issues is greatest when bad economic times put more pressure on families. Poor state support for its youngest citizens led the nonprofit Children First for Oregon to give the state a D+ overall grade for 2004, the lowest grade since the group began its review in 1992.

We shortchange Oregon's neediest people at our peril – today's eighth-grade drinkers will be tomorrow's troubled adults. We need to maintain hope that incremental progress is possible on even the most intractable problems. We need to work together, saving one life at a time.