

# Local program speaks volumes about teens, drug abuse

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By [JAMES WALKER](#)

Hour Staff Writer

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NORWALK — Ginger Katz and Gov. M. Jodi Rell have something in common.

In 2007, every teen in America at some point is going to be "asked to do drugs" and the two women believe the strong voice of parents can act as a deterrent.

The new year is well underway but Rell has a New Years resolution she wants parents to make: Talk to your children about the dangers of drug use — a conversation a recent survey concludes is not happening in many homes.

Katz, the founder of "The Courage To Speak," has an upcoming educational program at Brookside Elementary School that includes a four-session parent component to teach parents to talk openly and honestly about the dangers of drug with their children.

"They're afraid to talk to their children about drugs," Katz said. "I don't mean a one-shot deal. I mean an ongoing conversation."

The Courage to Speak Foundation is a not-for-profit charitable organization "devoted to saving lives by empowering children and youth to be drug free and by empowering parents to help their children develop lifestyles free of drugs and destructive drug-related behaviors."

According to the 2006 Parent Attitude Tracking Survey by the Partnership for a Drug-free America, 37 percent of seventh to 12th graders acknowledge trying marijuana — but only 11 percent of parents believe their children had tried it.

The survey also shows that 20 percent of students reported using inhalants but only 4 percent of parents suspected their child had done so.

A recent poll, the "Crucial Conversations: Parents, Teens and Drug Use Survey," conducted by Utah-based VitalSmarts, found that parents are tongue-tied and avoid talking to their children about substance use despite believing their children have been exposed to drugs and alcohol at parties or through friends.

The most typical reasons for not speaking up is trust in their children's judgment, the issue had already been discussed, or parents expected their children would deny any use.

Jill Spinetti, acting president of the governor's Prevention Partnership, said "we all talk about New Years resolutions but when it comes to helping our children refrain from drugs and alcohol, talk is action."

"Many parents don't speak up, believing these conversations aren't necessary or don't work," Spinetti said. "In fact, teens do take cues from what their parents say — and don't say."

Katz said research shows only about a third of all parents talk to their children about drug use. On the opposite side of the coin, studies show teens that learn about the risk of drugs at home are 57 percent more likely to refuse them.

Katz said many parents don't want to raise the subject because some also went through an experimental drug phase and are afraid their children will question them about it.

Katz said parents should acknowledge their use followed by "Yeah, but it wasn't great." She said parents should also emphasize that drugs are much stronger in the 21st century.

Katz said the key is not to make it an inquisition but a general conversation. She said not doing drugs is about the care of a person's body and parents should make the conversation about health.

Dialogue is important and parents are important," she said. "Don't sit back because statistics say drug use is down. Don't let the numbers fool you. There are millions of kids doing drugs."

Katz said when she asks students during her programs how many knew people that did drugs, approximately 90 percent will raise their hands.

Katz said "refusal skills should be on the tip of the tongue (of every teen)."

"Parents can help do that," she said.