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# Whose kids? Our kids!

# Teens and alcohol

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**T**eenagers today use alcohol at alarming rates. Alcohol consumption increases dramatically from 7th grade into high school at a similar rate for both boys and girls. Teens who begin using alcohol before age 15 face even higher risks for alcohol-related problems and for future abuse and addiction. And as students get older, they not only use alcohol more often, they are also more likely to drink with the intention of getting drunk.

What are some of the problems when teens get drunk? In addition to breaking the law (which is serious in itself), teens who drink excessively are more likely to be sexually active, to use illegal drugs and to be injured in accidents. Alcohol-related accidents are the leading cause of death among teens in this country.

**“In our house, it was clear that underage drinking was wrong. Support from my parents was important to me when I felt pressure from my friends to drink.”**

—12th grader

## Parents make a difference!

**P**arents have a critical and influential role in determining the decisions and choices their teenagers make, especially with tough issues such as underage drinking. It is very important for parents to monitor their teens—to know where they are, what they are doing and whom they are with.

Teens whose parents do not know their whereabouts and plans (called “low parental monitoring”) are much more likely to use alcohol. Conversely, teens whose parents do know what their children are doing (“high parental monitoring”) are less likely to use alcohol. Parents who monitor their teens effectively are not intrusive; rather, they

respect their teens and allow them independence. However, parents have clear expectations about where their teens can go and what they can do. They also expect teens to keep them informed about their whereabouts and activities.

Parental monitoring is very effective; it not only reduces the odds that teens will use alcohol, but it also reduces the odds that teens will drink to excess. Teens who are closely monitored by their parents are less likely to have been drunk in the past month than teens that are not closely monitored.

## How can you monitor your teen’s activities?

- ✓ Know and approve of where your child is going.
- ✓ Know what your child will be doing.
- ✓ Know your teen’s friends and who your teen is with.
- ✓ Know how your teen will get to and from any activity or event.
- ✓ Create some ground rules about going out. You can say, “Because you are now a teenager and will probably be away from home more often, I always need to know your plans.” Be sure you know the answers to where, what, who and how.
- ✓ Call the parents of your teen’s friends when parties or other activities are planned. Ask if there will be adult supervision.
- ✓ Don’t be afraid to say no to teens if they ask to attend an unsupervised activity.

The protective effect of parental monitoring also carries over to other behaviors, such as sexual activity and delinquency. Parental monitoring provides strong protection for your teen.

## How can you communicate effectively with your teen?

- ✓ Talk with your teen *now* about the risks of drinking, as well as family rules and the consequences for breaking those rules; don't wait until a problem arises.
- ✓ When possible, both parents should discuss alcohol issues with their children and be united in their message on "no drinking."
- ✓ Don't bargain with your teen or send mixed messages, such as allowing drinking if there is no driving or allowing drinking at home when a parent is present.
- ✓ Don't give in to your teen's argument that "everyone does it."
- ✓ Encourage your teen to participate in healthy behaviors, such as youth clubs and team sports or to volunteer after school in the community.
- ✓ With your teen, agree upon the rules and expectations regarding alcohol use.
- ✓ Determine the consequences for breaking the rules as well as rewards for following the rules.
- ✓ If your teen chooses to use alcohol, do not accept or ignore it. Approach your child and impose the agreed upon consequences. Following through with consequences (when rules are broken) and rewards (when rules are followed) is essential.

"Don't drink, don't drink—that's what they tell me. Yet my mom and dad come home after bowling sometimes giggling and stumbling. Right—don't drink." —8th grader

- ✓ If you want to prevent your teen from drinking, communicate clearly that drinking is wrong for minors. Teenagers who get mixed messages from their parents or messages that teen alcohol use is okay are more likely to use alcohol and to use it excessively. Mixed messages do more harm than good. When kids are told that drinking may be appropriate for them in certain situations, they often conclude that permission has been granted for almost any situation.

### Copycat behavior

Parents can also make a difference if they are positive role models in their own use of alcohol. All too often, youth get the message from all aspects of society that to have a good time, they need beer, wine coolers or other alcoholic drinks. It's important to show teens it isn't necessary to use alcohol to have a good time, to form relationships, to relax or to cope with stress. Parents who use alcohol should do so responsibly and in moderation. And certainly, parents should never drink and drive. Your habits, good and bad, will rub off.

## How can you model appropriate use of alcohol?

- ✓ Don't involve your children in your drinking: No getting a beer for you, no helping to mix drinks, no serving drinks to guests. This goes for your 7-year-old as well as your 17-year-old.
- ✓ Be a model of responsible and moderate drinking; children should never see a parent drunk.
- ✓ Don't use drinking as an escape or as proof of being an adult.
- ✓ Don't put pressure on a family member or guest to drink.
- ✓ Communicate drinking as morally neutral—it is neither virtuous nor evil.

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