

## Teens and Alcohol: A Guide for Parents

Parents can have a major impact on their children's drinking, especially during the preteen and early teen years.

For young people, alcohol is the drug of choice. In fact, alcohol is used by more young people than tobacco or illicit drugs. Although most children under the age of 14 have not yet begun to drink, early adolescence is a time of special risk for beginning to experiment with alcohol.

The longer young people delay alcohol use, the less likely they are to develop any problems associated with it.

### Understanding Your Teen's World

Early adolescence is a time of immense and often confusing changes for your son or daughter, which makes it a challenging time for both your child and you. Understanding what it's like to be a teen can help you stay closer to your child and have more influences on the choices he or she makes – including decisions about using alcohol.

**Changes in the brain.** Research shows that as a child matures, his or her brain continues to develop too. In fact, the brain's final, adult wiring may not even be complete until well into the twenties. Furthermore, in some ways, the adolescent brain may be specifically "wired" to help youth navigate adolescence and to take some of the risks necessary to achieve independence from their parents. This may help explain why teens often seek out new and thrilling – sometimes dangerous – situations, including drinking alcohol. It also offers a possible reason for why young teens act so impulsively, often not recognizing that their actions – such as drinking – can lead to serious problems.

**Growing up and fitting in.** As children approach adolescence, "fitting in" becomes extremely important. They begin to feel more self-conscious about their bodies than they did when they were younger and begin to wonder whether they are "good enough" – tall enough, slender enough, attractive enough – compared with others. They look to friends and the media for clues on how they measure up, and they begin to question adults' values and rules. It's not surprising that this is the time when parents often experience conflict with their kids. Respecting your child's growing independence while still providing support and setting limits is a key challenge during this time.

## **Develop a Strong Parent/Child Relationship**

The best way to influence your child to avoid drinking is to have a strong, trusting relationship with him or her. Research shows that teens are much more likely to delay drinking when they have a close, supportive tie with a parent or guardian. Moreover, if your son or daughter eventually does begin to drink, a good relationship with you will help protect him or her from developing alcohol-related problems.

- **Establish open communication.** Make it easy for your teen to talk honestly with you.
- **Show you care.** Make it a point to regularly spend one-on-one time with your child.

## **Tips for Talking with Your Teen**

If your child feels comfortable talking openly with you, you will have a greater chance of guiding him or her toward healthy decision making:

- **Encourage conversation.** Listen without interruption.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Encourage your teen to tell you how he or she thinks and feels about the issue you're discussing. Avoid questions that have simple "yes" or "no" answer.
- **Control your emotions.**
- **Draw the line.** Set clear, realistic expectations of your child's behavior. Establish appropriate consequences for breaking rules and consistently enforce them.
- **Understand that your child is growing up.**
- **Encourage assertiveness.** Teach your teen to stand up for his or her beliefs.

## **Discuss Reasons Not to Drink**

In talking with your child about reasons to avoid alcohol, stay away from scare tactics. Most young teens are aware that many people drink without problems. Some good reasons why **teens should not drink**:

- **You want your child to avoid alcohol.** Clearly state your own expectation about your child's drinking.
- **Drinking is illegal.**
- **Drinking can be dangerous.**
- **You have a family history of alcoholism.**
- **Alcohol affects young people differently than adults.**

## **Discuss How to Handle Peer Pressure**

It's not enough to tell your young teen that he or she should avoid alcohol – you also need to help your child figure out how. What should their response be if they are offered a ride home with an older friend who has been drinking?

Brainstorm with your teen ways that he or she might handle these and other difficult situations, and make clear how you are willing to support your child. An example: “If you find yourself at a home where kids are drinking, call me and I’ll pick you up – and there will be no scolding or punishment.” The more prepared your child is, the better able he or she will be to handle high-pressure situations that involve drinking. Help your child develop a plan for saying “no”.

## **Important Facts about Alcohol**

Although many kids believe that they already know everything about alcohol, myths and misinformation thrive. Here are some facts to share:

- Alcohol is a powerful drug that slows down the body and mind. It impairs coordination; slows reaction time; and impairs vision, clear thinking, and judgment.
- Beer and wine are not “safer” than hard liquor. A 12-ounce can of beer, a 5-ounce glass of wine, and 1.5 ounces of hard liquor all contain the same amount of alcohol and have the same effects on the body and mind.
- On average, it takes 2 to 3 hours for a single drink to leave a person’s system. Nothing can speed up this process, including drinking coffee, taking a cold shower, or “walking it off.”
- People tend to be very bad at judging how seriously alcohol has affected them. That means many individuals who drive after drinking *think* they can control a car – but actually cannot.
- Anyone can develop a serious alcohol problem, including a teenager.