

Facts & Conversations



Parents & Underage Access To Alcohol



White Plains
Hospital Center



New York-Presbyterian
Healthcare System



Morgan Stanley
Children's Hospital
of New York-Presbyterian
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Facts & Conversations is a series of communications provided by Health Alliance on Alcohol (HAA).

Publications to Date Include:

Underage Drinking
Peer Pressure
Prom, Graduation, and Alcohol
College & Alcohol
Teen Driving & Alcohol

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This series is also available in Spanish.



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Introduction

Adolescence is marked by experimentation and a feeling of invulnerability. Many teens see alcohol consumption as a rite of passage and cannot imagine that any of the possible unwanted consequences of underage drinking will actually happen to them. Parents know this about adolescence and, sometimes in an effort to give their children a “safe” way to experiment with alcohol they make poor decisions, such as providing underage teens with alcohol and a “safe” place to drink it. This can create more problems than it solves for both the parents and the children.

The teenage years can be hard on parents who must balance their ability to influence their children and be responsible parents. During the teen years, parents also start to identify with their children as friends. Blurring the lines between being a parent and being a friend is confusing for children, and parents should own the parenting role rather than trying to befriend their children. Parents who want to be seen as “cool” with their own children and their children’s friends can achieve this goal without providing alcohol to underage children. There are ways for parents to succeed, and this book offers some guidance and assistance in addressing one of the thorny issues of adolescence — access to alcohol.

Here are a few thoughts to keep in mind — underage drinking remains a widespread public health problem and has been found to be associated with the three most common causes of deaths in teenagers:

- motor vehicle accidents
- homicides
- suicides^{1,2,3}.

Studies have shown that the earlier in life teens start drinking, the more likely they are to have alcohol related problems in the future, including alcohol dependency⁴. In the long term, drinking that begins early in life can impact life choices and self-esteem. Additionally, the long term effects of alcohol on the developing brain are not yet fully understood. We now know that the “decision maker and impulse controller” of the brain may be permanently and negatively affected by underage drinking. Additionally, it is well documented that underage drinkers are more likely than adults to experience the unwanted consequences of the over-consumption of alcohol, resulting in great cost to the individual and their family^{3,4,5,6}.



Unfortunately, studies show that adults remain the major source of access to alcohol for underage drinkers.

Limiting underage children’s access to alcohol has been shown to be an effective way to limit and curb the problems related to underage drinking^{3,6,7}. Parents have an important role to play in addressing the issues of access to alcohol and underage drinking. Maintaining regular and open communication with teens is vital to avoiding and addressing the problem of underage drinking. Part of being a proactive, well-informed parent includes awareness of local and state regulations regarding access to alcohol. Awareness and communication can help keep teens and their families safe from the personal and legal consequences associated with underage drinking.

A photograph of a glass of beer on a table, with a key resting on the surface next to it. The background is a warm, yellowish-brown color.

The Facts

A) Why is providing alcohol to teenagers a problem?

Many parents drink in a responsible manner. However, many who are parents today drank at young ages and some lived through their teen years when it was legal to consume alcohol. Additionally, some families have well-established social traditions and customs that include alcohol consumption by all family members. Some parents simply do not believe that providing alcohol to teenagers is a problem. Yet alcohol remains one of the most commonly used substances amongst teens.

Teens admit to drinking an alcoholic beverage in the last 30 days ⁸ .	17% of 8 TH GRADERS
	33% of 10 TH GRADERS
	47% of 12 TH GRADERS

There are many parents who believe their children are going to drink anyway and that it is safer to have them drink at home where they can be supervised by adults — either parents, adult siblings or adult relatives. Adults are often surprised to learn that they could face potential liability for problems resulting from underage alcohol consumption in their home. Some parents mistakenly believe that it is okay for teens to drink as long as they don't drive. However, accidents and injuries do not always involve a car.

Underage drinking poses risks other than car-related injuries and death. In fact, both the underage drinker and the person providing alcohol may, depending on the role each played in an incident, incur criminal and civil liability when accidents or injuries occur. This can result in jail time, loss of employment and/or loss of personal assets. Adults are often surprised to learn that they face potential

liability for problems resulting from underage alcohol consumption in their home. However, this is one of the most effective and compelling strategies for curtailing the provision of alcohol to minors^{9,10,11}.

B) What are the facts?

Most parents and underage children know the minimum drinking age, but it is important to know there are other alcohol-related laws that apply to adults and parents.

Being Underage and Using Alcohol. Throughout the U.S., you must be 21 to drink. In some states, it can be an offense for minors (less than 21 years of age) to purchase, attempt to purchase, drink and/or possess alcohol. Penalties can include driver's license suspension and/or revocation until the teen turns 21.

Using a Fake ID. Fake IDs are illegal. Specific laws vary by state. It can be illegal to create, purchase, attempt to purchase or possess a false identification, use one for alcohol purchase or attempt to use for alcohol purchase. Criminal charges may include forgery and fraud. Administrative charges such as driver's license suspension and/or revocation could also occur. Most importantly, criminal charges are a matter of public record and become a negative mark on a young person's permanent record. This can impact and limit a child's future school and job choices.

Zero Tolerance Laws. All 50 states have laws that make it illegal for people under 21 years of age to drive with any amount of measurable alcohol in their blood. In some states, underage drinking can result in a loss of driving privileges until the offender turns 21.

Social Hosting. Generally, social hosting is the act of serving or providing alcohol to a person or persons under the minimum drinking age of 21. While this usually refers to a situation in which there is a group of minors at a party, any adult who provides alcohol to a minor could be considered a social host. It is important to know that the "social host" definition extends to adults when alcohol is consumed in their home, whether or not they are physically present during the consumption of alcohol. Even if no injury or damage occurs, the adult can be held accountable. If injury or death ensues as a result of alcohol use, the adult who served the minor can be held liable and accountable. Penalties include time in jail, fines, license suspension and/or civil lawsuits^{1,2,12,13,14}.

These laws can differ from state to state and, in some cases, can vary between communities within the state.

The Alcohol Policy Information System (APIS) is one Web site reference where such information can be accessed: <http://alcoholpolicy.naaa.nih.gov>¹².

c) What is the impact of social hosting?

A “key” party is a common example of a social host environment: The situation can look like this: parents will allow their teenager to have a party with alcohol as long as all of their friends who attend leave their car keys in a bowl over which the parents have control.

While this might guarantee that none of the attendees of the party drink and drive, it does not guarantee that other unforeseen consequences of underage intoxication will not happen. We know that drinking can lead to teenagers participating in other risky behaviors.

Risky alcohol consumption can mean unintended negative consequences^{3,15}:

- Motor vehicle accidents
- Sexually transmitted infections/diseases
- Drowning
- HIV
- Burns
- Slowed brain development
- Suicide
- Psychological distress
- Homicide
- Long-term alcohol problems
- Unwanted and/or un-protected sex
- Alcohol poisoning

d) What is the role of parents in preventing underage access to alcohol?

Parents play a key role in preventing alcohol use by their children. Research shows that children are listening to their parents regardless of the behaviors, reactions or comments the teens may make.

Be a Role Model. As a parent, you can serve as an important role model for your children by making responsible choices with respect to your own alcohol consumption. Parents who never drink and drive, and who avoid drinking to excess, demonstrate positive role modeling for their children. Adult parties can be a key point of access to alcohol for children^{6,7,16}. Adults can set a good example by making sure alcohol is not the focus of the party, by making

alternate transportation plans for guests and by monitoring their guests' consumption of alcohol. Role modeling also includes sharing these plans with your children as a demonstration of responsible behavior¹⁷.

Set Rules. Parents can set clear rules and communicate regularly with their children regarding alcohol. If your home is a setting where underage drinking is not acceptable, teens will be less likely to drink. Studies reveal that parents have the strongest impact on their child's decision to drink. Make it your business to know who your child's friends are, what they do when they get together and whether or not there is adult supervision.

Ask your child what his or her plans are — particularly at high-risk times (i.e. prom, graduation, staying over at a friend's home, during the holidays) and take the opportunity to restate your values about alcohol consumption.



Studies reveal that parents have the strongest impact on their child's decision to drink.

Monitor Alcohol in the Home. Parents can monitor the alcohol they keep in the home and restrict children's access to it¹⁸. As mentioned in the Introduction, most underage drinkers report that they access alcohol through adults, often in a parent's or friend's home.

There are several options in this regard for parents. These include having no alcohol in the home at all, storing alcohol in a locked closet or monitoring the alcohol supply regularly to ensure that the supply has not decreased without the parents' knowledge. On this note, there are some well-established tricks teenagers use to deceptively access alcohol in the home: one is to refill the alcohol bottles with drinks that are similar in color (for example, iced tea for rum, or water for vodka) in the hopes that their parents will not realize that the alcohol is missing. Also, in a party setting where adults are drinking responsibly, teens may surreptitiously mix alcohol into their own soft drinks, or take and hide alcohol for later use.

Think about the situation in your own home. Perhaps liquor is locked in a cabinet, but you may have beer in the refrigerator. Or is alcohol stored in the garage or basement? If so, how accessible is it to your teenager? Be aware of how teens can access alcohol and do what you can to prevent it.

Know Your Child's Friends. Are they known to drink? Many teens access alcohol from their friends, but not all teens drink. Your child, and his or her friends, can choose not to drink at all or choose friends who don't drink. You may want to approach and discuss underage drinking with the parents of your children's peers and make sure that the rules of families in whose homes your child spends time match your own. Also, you can confirm with those parents that alcohol is not accessible in the home and that unsupervised parties are not condoned there¹⁸. By creating a network of parents who agree that serving alcohol to underage youth is unacceptable, you can help ensure that there is a clear, consistent and reinforced message being received by the teens in your child's peer group.

Build a Parents' Network. When you know the parents of your children's friends, you will be able to connect and compare notes, seek advice and collaborate on things that work well or have worked well in the past with respect to teens, access to alcohol and underage drinking. Having an active network of parents with whom you can share advice regarding the challenges of raising teenagers will not only be personally helpful, but will contribute to the establishment of a community effort to curb underage drinking.



When you know the parents of your children's friends, you will be able to connect and compare notes...

Prepare for Special Events. Holidays or other family events (i.e., weddings, etc.) present special challenges. Plan ahead and decide what your policy is with your children. Explain your policy and tell your children why you have made this decision. Remember, even at special events, it is illegal to provide alcohol to minors.

Do not Provide Alcohol. Parents should not illegally provide alcohol to teenagers. With limited exception, providing alcohol to underage persons is illegal and can result in criminal and/or civil lawsuits. Studies reveal that underage drinkers continue to access alcohol from friends, parents and other adults, and from many places outside the home. Statistics show that 43% of 9th to 12th graders in the U.S. have had at least one drink in the last month¹⁹. Easy access to alcohol in the home increases the frequency of drinking and the tendency to binge drink²⁰. Many parents think that consumption in the home is a safe alternative, but it is not. Additionally, some parents feel that their teens will be more open with them, consider them “cool,” and be more prone to confide in them. However, teens need their parents to be parents and to guide them through the difficult decisions teens face as they maneuver through adolescence.

Communicate with the Whole Family. In families with multiple children, there may be some who are minors and some who are of legal drinking age. Parents should have open conversations with all their children. Remind your adult children that they are role models to their younger siblings. Reinforce the rules: Your legal drinking age children should not provide alcohol to underage siblings or anyone else underage.

Aunts, uncles and other adults are very important influences in an adolescent’s life. Directly address the issue of access to alcohol with any adult in your teen’s life. In today’s world, where families take a variety of forms, this may mean additional conversations with separated parents, step-parents, grandparents or other caregivers in whose home your teen spends time. Tell these adults that alcohol is not to be given to your underage child, whether under that adult’s direct supervision or not. Do not assume that adults will “do the right thing” when a teen asks them to provide alcohol^{4, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15}.

A photograph of two young women with long hair, one with curly hair and one with straight hair, talking to each other. They are wearing light-colored, textured sweaters. The image is overlaid with a dark red banner at the bottom containing the title.

Conversations

Here are some general guidelines for discussing access to alcohol with your teenagers. It is never too early to start these conversations. Remember, adolescents develop in stages, both physically and psychologically, and it is helpful to tailor the conversation to the psychological stage of your teen. Most importantly, this should not be a one-time discussion. You should establish regular and ongoing communication about alcohol throughout the teenage years. While it is easy to think, “I have a good kid, I do not have to worry about this,” the statistics show that even “good” kids may sometimes drink. Even if your children choose not to drink, they may have teenage friends who may be drinking. It will not hurt your child to have these conversations — it can only help them to understand that you want to help them make healthy and good decisions.

A) The Early Adolescent (ages 11—14)

Early adolescents tend to be preoccupied with themselves and their changing bodies. They are often egocentric in their approach to the world. Although peer acceptance is important to them, at this stage they usually still believe that crazy, risk-taking behaviors are ridiculous and self-destructive.

Early adolescents are intellectually immature; often they are still concrete thinkers. Unable to think beyond the present moment, they cannot conceive of the future consequences of their present actions. Nonetheless, these teens are critical observers. They will look for any hypocrisy in your words or actions. They will not listen to you if you have a “do what I say, not what I do” approach.

Be consistent in your behaviors and your message to your teenager. Make sure your child knows your house rules and your opinions regarding underage access to alcohol and underage drinking. Be a role model for your teen. The reality is that, as an adult, you may choose to drink, but if you do, do so

responsibly and point out your choices to your teen. If you choose to drink, make arrangements so that you do not drive. Then explain your planning to your children. Do other adults drink irresponsibly in your home? In your presence? Around your teen?

Make it your business to know where and with whom your child is spending time. State that you are aware that alcohol may be present at a given event. Emphasize to your child that it is illegal for minors to drink, that you are worried about his or her safety if he or she drinks and that underage drinking is not something that you condone. Talk to your teen to be sure they are armed with refusal skills for use in peer pressure situations. Talk to your young teen about why you like to be present when they and their friends get together. Explain that you would not want any one of them to get hurt or face difficult situations. Ask how they would feel if they went to a friend's home and saw that friend was drinking with their parents. Explain that you will speak with the other parents about accessibility and ensure your views on underage drinking and access to alcohol are known.



Talk to your teen to be sure they are armed with refusal skills for use in peer pressure situations.

Start conversations at times when it make sense. If your culture or religion uses alcohol for ceremonies or traditions, point out how that differs from social drinking. Use the media, news shows or television shows to point out issues and make your opinion clear.

B) The Middle Adolescent (ages 15—17)

During the middle adolescent years, teens struggle more with peer relationships and emancipation from their parents. They seek to define their own identities. The search for peer acceptance, the struggle for independence from parents and the testing of limits can truly challenge any parent. Many serious problems of adolescence are associated with experimentation with drugs, tobacco, drinking and sexual activity.

Review house rules with your teen. Reinforce the communication with consistent implementation of your rules. When your child is planning to have friends over, remind him or her that whether or not you are present, they may not drink in the home or anywhere else.

Ensure that discussions about access to alcohol and similar topics happen when you are spending relaxed time with your child. This will help avoid lectures and being judgmental. Start conversations when it makes sense to do so.

If your teen's friends are over and talking about a friend who is drinking, wait until the visit is over, then find an appropriate time and setting to talk to your teen about it. It is often easier for a teen to talk about a friend than to talk about themselves.

Develop a strategy with your adolescent to get them home safely if he or she does drink or is in an unsafe environment. For example, a parent can make a deal with their teen — the teen uses the “code word,” signaling they need to get out of an unsafe situation. The parent picks up the teen no questions asked. The teen agrees to discuss the situation (and consequences, if it applies) the next day.

Find other parents who have similar concerns regarding access to alcohol and underage drinking. Work with them, the school or your community to provide alcohol-free events and alternatives.

c) The Late Adolescent (ages 18—21)

Late adolescence is the period approaching adulthood and your young adult is usually physically and intellectually mature. Many of the crazy, risky behaviors of middle adolescence have decreased. The late adolescent is usually seen as more serious and goal-oriented. However, teens at this age may still have surprising lapses in good judgment, especially during times of celebration. Late adolescents may want information from their parents but usually will not approach them for advice. For now, the conversation will most likely need to be initiated by the parent. Restate your concerns about your child's safety and your expectation that he or she not drink. You may be met with eye-rolling and snickers but usually your child is listening.

When teenagers will be spending time in your home, try to monitor the potential for consumption of alcohol. Some parents may choose

to lock up the alcohol in the home. Find out if another home your child is visiting has alcohol that's easily accessible or what measures other parents use to ensure that alcohol will not be consumed in their home. Make sure that your teen has a way to get home safely. Be available to them if they have no safe plan to get home. Advise your child of the hazards they face if he or she is the sober driver of a car full of people who have been drinking. This is the time to put more emphasis on the decision-making skills of your child as he or she prepares to leave for his or her first job, apartment, or to live on campus while attending college. Opportunity to access alcohol increases significantly in late adolescence, so take the time to have reinforcing conversations about your views on underage drinking.



The teen uses the “code word”, signaling they need to get out of an unsafe situation.

Turning 21. You may wish to share with your child of legal drinking age some techniques on how to negotiate with friends when using his or her home for parties or participating in happy hour drinking with colleagues (avoiding drinking and driving, unwelcome advances toward co-workers, poor impressions with the boss).

You may want to discuss the negative effects alcohol can have on academic performance, the ability to perform well at their jobs and potentially even the ability to keep an apartment — should neighbors complain about noise, visitors and partying. Repeat the messages you have consistently been delivering throughout the earlier years about access to alcohol, and consuming alcohol and driving. This is the time when loss of a driver's license will most “hit home” with an older adolescent. Remember to keep the lines of communication open so you will have the ability to continue ongoing conversations.



Final Thoughts

Parents of teenagers have the power to impact their child's behavior in regard to underage drinking. Understand the dangers and consequences of underage drinking and be aware of the liability parents can face if they knowingly or unknowingly allow underage alcohol consumption in their home. This can be crucial to ensuring their child's safety and reducing potential legal responsibility.

By acting as good role models, drinking responsibly (if they choose to drink), setting clear rules regarding underage drinking and knowing what is going on with their teenager, as well as his/her friends and their families, parents can truly make a difference.



About

Health Alliance on Alcohol

A national education initiative on underage consumption of alcohol through parent/child communications.

NewYork-Presbyterian Healthcare System

The NewYork-Presbyterian Healthcare System, the largest secular not-for-profit nongovernmental health care system in the U.S., is committed to providing high quality, cost-effective, and accessible care to communities throughout the greater New York metropolitan region. The System, made up of 33 acute care hospitals, 100 ambulatory sites, four residential health care facilities, three specialty institutions, two rehabilitation hospitals and more than 18,500 affiliated physicians, serves one in four patients in the greater New York metropolitan area. The System is also the largest not-for-profit employer in New York City.

System members are affiliates of the Joan and Sanford I. Weill Medical College of Cornell University or Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. During 2006, System institutions discharged more than 540,000 inpatient cases and saw more than 5,700,000 cases on an outpatient basis. For additional information, visit www.nyp.org.

White Plains Hospital Center

White Plains Hospital Center (WPHC) is a 292-bed voluntary, not-for-profit health care organization with the primary mission of offering high quality, acute health care and preventive medical care to all people who live in, work in, or visit Westchester County and its surrounding areas. Centers of Excellence include the Dickstein Cancer Treatment Center, The William & Sylvia Silberstein

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Notes

Notes



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