

Summer Safety: Talking to Teens About Underage Drinking

Summer has finally arrived! The warmer weather and longer days usher in numerous festivals and activities throughout our region and we collectively look forward to the season when we can slow down and feel a bit more carefree.

As adults, we also fondly remember the summers of our youth, when we no longer had full time school obligations and more time to spend with friends. It is this freedom, combined with less adult oversight, that leads to national spikes in underage drinking during the summer months. It is therefore critical to talk to the teens in your life throughout the year, but especially during the summer, around the dangers of underage alcohol consumption.

The latest national **data** found 30% of high school students drank some amount of alcohol during the past 30 days, and 14% admitted to binge drinking. Seventeen percent of high school students surveyed said they rode with a driver who had been drinking, and 6% drove, themselves. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, excessive drinking is responsible for more than 4,300 deaths among underage youth each year (www.cdc.gov).

It has been demonstrated that parental attitudes and parental expectations are the single biggest determiner of whether a kid will drink. Dr. Ben Nordstrom, the executive director of Responsibility.org states, "Just having the conversation as a parent where you make your expectations, or you make your values clear, that's going to be the single best thing you can do."

The following tips can be helpful in talking to your teen about alcohol consumption:

- **Ask your teen's views.** Find out what your teen thinks about alcohol.
- **Debunk myths.** Teens often think that drinking makes them popular or happy. Explain that alcohol can make you feel "high," but it's a depressant that can also cause sadness and anger.
- **Discuss reasons not to drink.** Explain the risks of alcohol, and appeal to your teen's self-respect. If you have a family history of alcoholism or drinking problems, be honest. Explain that your teen might be more vulnerable to developing a drinking problem.
- **Plan ways to handle peer pressure.** Brainstorm with your teen about how to respond to offers of alcohol. It might be as simple as saying, "No thanks" or "Do you have any soda?"
- **Be prepared for questions.** Your teen might ask if you drank alcohol when you were underage. If you chose to drink, share an example of a negative consequence of your drinking.

A few messages to drive home during these discussions center around health and safety. With his children, Nordstrom emphasizes that there is no place for alcohol when it comes to driving, and that they should never get in the car with someone who has been drinking. Instead, call home for a ride, no matter the time of night. He also recommends talking about the impact underage drinking has on brain development. Research shows a teenage brain responds differently to alcohol than an adult brain and can impact brain structure and function.

Like any serious conversation with teenagers, it's not uncommon to get one-word responses or even blown off. But keep at it. "It seems like they're not listening, but they are," Nordstrom said. "It's very important for parents to recognize that they have a lot more power than they think they do, they have a lot more influence than they might believe, and that this is a critical time in a kid's development, and just being open with them, encouraging dialogue and making sure that they understand what your hopes are for them is the best thing that you can do."

Plus, even an awkward conversation is better than no conversation.

Have a safe and enjoyable summer!

For more tips and resources visit:

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/tween-and-teen-health/in-depth/teen-drinking/art-20047947>

<https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/make-a-difference-child-alcohol#Talkingwith>

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Monthly Messages are brought to you by the Tompkins County Youth Services Department, a proud partner of The Community Coalition for Healthy Youth.

If you have further questions or comments about this message or would like information on how to become involved with the Community Coalition for Healthy Youth, please email bnugent@tompkins-co.org.

