

The Summer Social Scene

Under-age alcohol use is an issue for many families. Experimentation with alcohol can begin in middle school and may escalate in high school. Teens who begin to drink before the age of 15 are four times as likely to develop alcohol dependence than those who start at age 21. Teens - with questionable judgment to begin with - can get themselves into dangerous situations in a car or at a party if they drink alcohol (date rape is more likely to occur when teens are drunk). In addition, frequent alcohol use can lead to symptoms that mimic depression - irritability, lack of energy, and loss of interest in school or other activities.

Despite the dangers of under-age drinking, and despite the fact that it is illegal, some parents say they want to teach their children to drink "responsibly." They may argue that it's a good thing to allow their teens to have one or two beers at home under "supervised" conditions. Others allow parties at their homes with alcohol and take away car keys so no one may drive home. One parent recently decided to have a high school graduation party for her daughter. She provided beer for the teens with the stipulation that they were only allowed two beers each!

Parents need to be aware of the message these behaviors give to adolescents. Teens have a hard enough time making good choices as they navigate through adolescence without being confronted with confusing messages from parents. When teens are allowed "supervised" drinking, they hear this as a message that drinking is permissible. They do not necessarily make the distinction that it is all right to drink at home but not outside the home. They may also come to believe that the law in general can be overlooked if it is inconvenient or a barrier to their wishes.

The summer is a time when a teen's social scene can be very active because there is no school, rules tend to be more relaxed, and kids have more free time. Parties or informal get-togethers may crop up almost any night, and kids tend to hop from one house to another as plans change from moment to moment. When parents are out of town and teens are left behind, their homes are likely places for parties to happen spontaneously - and they can quickly get out of control as word spreads and more and more kids arrive on the doorstep.

What Can Parents Do?

- Take a firm stand against under-age drinking. Talk to your children about alcohol and do not condone any drinking. This firm stand will help your teens say no.

- If there is a history of alcoholism in your family, make sure that your teen knows about this and the danger it poses for him or her.
- Teach your teens skills in saying no to alcohol and other illegal substances.
- Make the consequences for drinking very clear, indicating that the type of consequence mirrors the seriousness of the behavior.
- Do not allow any other teen to bring alcohol into your home and do not allow it to be served at your teen's party. You will have to supervise and monitor the comings and goings of the other teens who might carry alcohol in via backpack, or hide it in the bushes to be retrieved later. So don't be shy about searching backpacks. You can alert your teen beforehand that you plan to do this so that all the partygoers will know the rules in advance. You can also tell your child that you will not hesitate to call the parents of the teen bringing in the alcohol so that he or she can be brought home. If word spreads about this, you are less likely to have a problem. Finally, it's a good idea to have some help with supervision. One or two parents can't effectively watch over a large gathering.
- If you are going out of town, do not leave teenagers unsupervised. They may be responsible and mean well, but when word gets out that parents are away, others may show up to party. Some may be people your teen does not even know. These gatherings can get out of hand quickly, with damage to your property, or worse, with someone getting hurt. In fact, in many states the adults of the house are legally responsible if they allow alcohol in their homes at a party and then someone gets hurt or hurts another in an alcohol-related accident while driving home.
- If your child is going to a party, set firm rules about notifying you about when it is and where - get an address and phone number. Talk to the parents hosting the party beforehand to make sure that they will be there and that no alcohol will be served or tolerated. Most teens hate it when parents insist on calling other parents, but a realistic response can be that either you call or the teen does not attend. Also, have some rules about changes of location as teens tend to change plans all evening long. Make it clear that they need your permission to go somewhere else.

Be prepared to be unpopular. Your teens may not like your rules, and other parents may disagree. But remember, your job is to be a parent to your teen. He or she does not need you to be a friend. Keep in mind that you are protecting your child's health and well-being.

For more information and resources on adolescent health visit the AMA Adolescent Health Web site at www.ama-assn.org/go/adolescenthealth or the AMA Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Web site at <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/3337.html>

This information was adapted from materials that originally appeared on the Tips on Teens Web site authored by Susan Panzarine, PhD and Elaine Rubenstein, PhD, LCSW-C. Dr. Panzarine is the author of *A Parent's Guide to the Teen Years: Raising Your 11- to 14-year-old in the Age of Chat Rooms and Navel Rings*, published in 2000 by Checkmark Books. Dr. Rubenstein maintains an active private practice, working with teenagers and their families.

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