

Underage Drinking

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), alcohol is the most commonly used substance of use among young people in America. Drinking when underage poses serious health and safety risks. Although it is illegal for people under 21 years of age to drink alcohol, people from 12-20 years of age consume about one-tenth of all alcohol consumed in the United States. Compared to adults, adolescents tend to consume higher quantities of alcohol per occasion. More than 90% of the alcohol consumed by young people is in the form of binge drinking (CDC).

Teens may try alcohol for a variety of reasons including peer pressure, to escape stress, to fit in socially or even boredom. Early initiation of drinking is associated with a number of adverse consequences, however, many teens experiment with alcohol without fully recognizing the risks associated with underage drinking. In particular, several studies have found that early-onset drinking is linked to the risk of greater substance abuse problems later in life. 95% of the 14 million people who are alcohol dependent began drinking before the legal age of 21 (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism). In addition, research also has shown that the teen age brain is more vulnerable to alcohol than the adult brain. Underage drinking can interfere with normal brain development and change the brain over time. During adolescence, the brain is growing and maturing more rapidly than other ages. Alcohol specifically affects areas of the brain responsible for information processing, learning and memory. While adults who drink can also experience problems, learning and memory are more compromised by alcohol in adolescents than in adults. Teens who drink are also more likely to experience problems in school, social problems, adverse mental health issues (including higher risk of suicide), abuse of other drugs and legal problems, compared to teens who abstain from alcohol until the legal age of 21.

Parents and other caring adults play a leading role in preventing underage drinking. In fact, 80% of teens say their parents are the biggest influence on their decision to drink (American Academy of Pediatrics). Prevention starts by engaging in conversations about alcohol use. Experts agree that it is important to talk early and often about underage drinking. Talking to children and teens about alcohol should not be a one- time event, but rather, an open, honest and ongoing conversation. Keeping lines of communication open with children and teens can build trust and help them feel more comfortable to ask questions and share concerns. Prevention experts recommend the below tips when talking with kids about alcohol.

- Stay informed about underage drinking as well as the risks associated with youth alcohol use.
- Rely on information from credible resources such as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA or NIDA Teen), National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism or the Partnership to End Addiction.

- Talk honestly about the dangers of underage drinking and establish clear rules about not drinking while underage.
- Emphasize that drinking or buying alcohol before age 21 is illegal.
- Set expectations about what your child should do if offered alcohol (i.e. “If there is alcohol at a party, call me and I’ll pick you up”).
- Talk about choices and consequences to help them take responsibility for their decisions.
- Teach and encourage healthy coping skills to deal with issues like stress and peer pressure.

Still not sure how to start the conversation? The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the Partnership to End Addiction, and Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD) offer several helpful resources and free guides to help engage in conversations with youth about underage drinking.

SAMHSA: “Talk. They Hear You.” Substance Use Prevention Campaign Resources

<https://www.samhsa.gov/underage-drinking/parent-resources>

MADD: “Power of Parents” Handbooks

<https://www.madd.org/the-solution/power-of-parents/#resources>

Partnership to End Addiction: “Alcohol- What Families Need to Know to Help Protect Young People”

https://drugfree.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Alcohol-Guide_Families_030821.pdf

References: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, National Institute on Drug Abuse, Partnership to End Addiction, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration