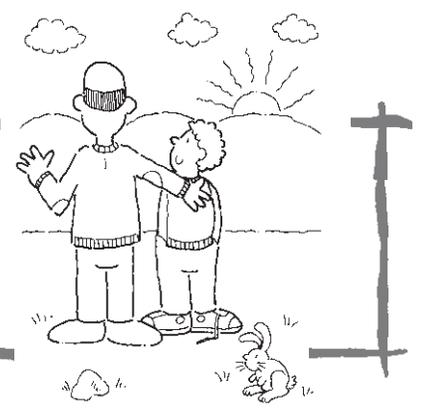


# Alcohol: Your Child and Drugs



One of the most abused drugs in our society is alcohol. It's also a drug that many people start using at very young ages. Though it's illegal for people younger than 21 years to drink, many children are introduced to alcohol well before they reach that age. The earlier they begin using alcohol, the higher the risk they will have problems with it later in life. This publication was written by the American Academy of Pediatrics to help parents understand the dangers of alcohol and how to prevent alcohol use.

## Why parents should worry

- Eighteen percent of 8th graders and more than 37% of 10th graders have been drunk at least once.
- Nearly 30% of 10th graders say they drank alcohol in the past month.
- Five thousand people younger than 21 years die each year as a result of underage drinking.

Also, young people who began drinking alcohol before 15 years of age are 4 times more likely to develop alcohol dependence during their lifetime than those who began drinking at 21 years or older.

Alcohol is often the first drug that young people try. Since alcohol is legal for those older than 21 years and found in most American homes, it's often easy for children to be around alcohol and its use. Some parents may feel relieved when they find out their teen is "only" drinking alcohol. They may even think it isn't dangerous. Not true! Alcohol can harm your child's normal brain growth and development. Also, if young people like the feeling they get from alcohol, they may be interested in trying other drugs as well.

## Risks linked to alcohol use

Even if a person only drinks alcohol occasionally, it can play a part in a variety of risky behaviors. Just one drink can impair decision-making and slow down reaction time. Underage drinking is not legal and is also linked to

- **Early sexual activity**, multiple partners, unintended pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections, including AIDS.
- **Drunk driving.** In 2004 2,115 young drivers aged 16 to 20 died in motor vehicle crashes; approximately 32% had been drinking, and 26% were legally drunk at the time of the crash.
- **Using other drugs** such as marijuana or cocaine.
- **Health concerns** like stunting brain growth, liver damage, hormone imbalances, and addiction to alcohol.
- **School problems** like poor grades and dropping out.
- **Accidents** and injuries that can be deadly or cause long-term problems.
- **Crime**, violence, and safety concerns.

## Why young people drink

Young people drink alcohol for a variety of reasons.

1. Curiosity. They have heard that getting drunk is fun and they want to find out for themselves.
2. As a rite of passage. They see drinking as "something everyone does on their way to adulthood."
3. To get drunk. This explains why teens drink until they are out of control. Binge drinking (having at least 4–5 drinks in a short time, like 2 hours) is alarmingly common. Eight percent of 8th graders, 16% of 10th graders, and nearly 25% of high school seniors have reported binge drinking in the last 2 weeks.
4. To "fit in" with friends who drink.
5. To feel relaxed and more confident.
6. To escape problems, such as depressed feelings, family conflicts, or trouble in school or with a boyfriend or girlfriend.

## Stages of alcohol use

The same pattern of use and abuse exists for alcohol as with other drugs such as marijuana or cocaine. The following is how experts explain the stages of alcohol use:

Stage	Description
Abstinence	No use.
Experimentation	The first 1 or 2 times your child drinks alcohol (more than a few sips). Children at this stage are curious about what it feels like to be drunk or high.
Non-problematic use	Repeated drinking in social situations without associated problems. Children at this stage drink in order to have fun with friends.
Problem use	Drinking for purposes other than recreation <i>or</i> drinking associated with a single problem, such as to deal with tension with parents or a school suspension. Children at this stage have begun to use alcohol to help manage their emotions.
Abuse	Drinking that has a negative impact on daily functioning <i>or</i> that is associated with recurrent and significant risks and problems. Children at this stage have experienced problems because of drinking but continue to drink anyway.
Dependence	Loss of control over alcohol use. Children at this stage have developed a compulsion to drink and no longer can simply decide to "just say no" or "stop drinking any time they wish."

## How can I tell if my child is drinking?

Certain symptoms and behaviors are warning signs for alcohol use. Look for

- Alcohol odors on your child's breath or clothing
- Alcohol in your child's room or backpack
- Obvious intoxication, dizziness, or bizarre behavior
- Changes in dress and grooming
- Changes in choice of friends; alcohol use by your child's friends
- Frequent arguments, sudden mood changes, and unexplained violent actions
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- Loss of interest in activities
- School problems like declining or failing grades, poor attendance, and recent discipline problems
- Runaway and delinquent behavior
- Talk about depression or suicide; suicide attempts

## How to prevent alcohol use

Parents can help their children resist alcohol use in the following ways:

- **Boost confidence** and self-worth by praising your child often for what she does well. Avoid constant criticism.
- **Listen to what your child says.** Pay attention and really listen. Be helpful during periods of loneliness or doubt.
- **Know the facts and correct any wrong beliefs** your child may have, such as "everybody drinks."
- **Know who your child's friends are and set clear limits.** Do not support friendships with others whose parents do not set similar limits. Real friends do not urge their friends to break the rules, like drinking alcohol, or reject them if they don't. Insist that a parent be at any parties your child attends. Don't let your teen go to parties where alcohol is served.
- **Make promises.** Have your child promise never to get in a car when the driver has been drinking. You must promise your child that you will always be willing to pick him up, no questions asked, when a safe ride home is needed. Promise each other you will talk about it the next day.
- **Help your child deal with emotions.** Let her know that strong emotions are normal. There are healthy ways to express strong emotions. Talk about any concerns and problems. Assure your child that everything has an upside, and things do not stay "bad" forever. Be a good role model in the ways you express, control, or relieve stress, pain, or tension.
- **Talk about things that are temptations and those that are important to your child.** Talk about school and your child's need for peer-group acceptance. Discuss life goals and desires. Talk about the risk of using alcohol and drugs and how that might prevent reaching those goals. Teach children exactly how you expect them to respond if someone offers them alcohol.
- **Encourage healthy ways to have fun.** Family activities, sports and physical activities, interests in the arts, and hobbies can all be good uses of leisure time.

## Parents who drink alcohol

Parents who drink should be careful how alcohol is used at home. Having a drink should never be shown as a way to cope with problems. Don't drink in unsafe conditions—before or while driving a car, mowing the lawn, boating, etc. Don't encourage your child to drink or join you in having a drink. Parents who are problem drinkers or who use alcohol often and in large amounts place their children at increased risk of alcohol dependence. Studies show that alcoholism runs in the family, so children of alcoholic parents are more likely to become alcoholics.

## Alcohol and the media

No matter how often they hear how dangerous it is to drink alcohol, many young people today still think it's cool. A big reason for this is the media. Alcohol companies spend billions of dollars every year promoting their products on TV, in movies and magazines, on billboards, and at sporting events. In fact, alcohol products are among the most advertised products in the nation.

Alcohol ads never mention the dangers, such as alcoholism and drinking and driving, or how it affects an unborn infant (fetal alcohol syndrome). Most ads show drinkers as healthy, energetic, sexy, and successful. Ads are trying to boost sales of a product, so this product—alcohol—is made to look as appealing as possible!

**The following are tips on how parents can address issues related to alcohol and the media:**

- Talk about ads with your children. Help them to understand the sales pitch—the real messages in these ads.
- Teach your children to be wary consumers and not to believe everything they see and hear on TV.
- Make sure the TV shows and movies your children watch do not show drinking alcohol as cool or glamorous.
- Don't let your children wear T-shirts, jackets, or hats that promote alcohol products.
- Talk with your children's school about starting a media education program.

- **Use teachable moments.** Discuss the tragedies resulting from alcohol use that are reported in the news. Ask your child what he thinks happened in the story and how tragedy could have been prevented.
- **Join your child in learning all you can about preventing alcohol abuse.** Programs offered in schools, churches, and youth groups can help you both learn more about alcohol abuse.

Your pediatrician understands that good communication between parents and children is one of the best ways to prevent alcohol use. If talking with your child about alcohol is difficult, your pediatrician may be able to help open the lines of communication. If you suspect your child is using alcohol or any other drug, ask your pediatrician for advice and help.

## About teen confidentiality

All teens should be screened for alcohol and other drug use as part of routine medical care. Your child's doctor will want to ask questions about alcohol in private in order to get honest answers. If your child does report alcohol use, the doctor will determine whether your child needs very brief advice, a return visit, or a referral to a specialist. Every doctor will have his or her own policy about what information must be shared with a parent and what will stay confidential (meaning stay between the patient and the doctor), but most doctors will protect a teen's confidentiality if they believe that the teen's drug use is not an immediate safety risk to the child or others. It is important for you to respect the doctor's decisions about confidentiality in order to encourage your child to have an open and honest discussion with the doctor.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

## From your doctor

