

Get Real About Teenage Drinking

Part Three: Truth and Consequences

By Stephen Wallace, M.S.Ed.

At the center of the great debate that characterizes America's ambivalence toward youth and alcohol lies a profound lack of awareness of the costs of underage drinking and the physical, social, and emotional toll it can take on those who engage in this illegal, and thus inherently irresponsible, behavior.

In a recent report, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine of the National Academies note \$53 billion a year in losses from traffic deaths, violent crime, and other destructive behavior related to underage drinking. And that doesn't account for the falling grades and failing relationships that often go hand in hand with teens and booze.

Getting real on underage drinking means getting the facts.

- Alcohol use by teens affects still-developing cognitive abilities and impairs memory and learning.
- Teens who drink are more likely to commit or be the victim of violence (including sexual assault) and to experience depression and suicidal thoughts.
- Alcohol-related automobile crashes kill thousands of teens each year and injure millions more.

It's also a fact that young people use alcohol more frequently, and more heavily, than all other drugs combined. *Teens Today* research from SADD and Liberty Mutual Group reveals that drinking increases significantly between the 6th and 7th grades; that the average age for teens to start drinking is thirteen years old; and that by 12th grade, more than three in four teens are drinking.

Unfortunately, many young people fall prey to the "Myth of Invincibility," believing that



there are no real, or lasting, effects of alcohol use. They're wrong.

In turn, many of their parents subscribe to the "Myth of Inevitability," convinced that drinking is a rite of passage and that there's not much they can do to influence their child's choices (according to *Teens Today*, more than half of parents believe that "drinking is part of growing up" and teens "will drink no matter what").

They're wrong, too.

- More than a third of middle and high school students say they have not consumed alcohol.
- Parents who talk with their teens about underage drinking, set expectations, and enforce consequences are significantly less likely to have children who drink. (This influence holds true for other teen behaviors as well, such as drug use and early sexual activity.)
- A majority of young people say they want parental guidance in making decisions about personal behavior, including alcohol use.

There are some who hold that "teaching" teens to drink at home will keep them safe. And there are others who advocate for lowering the drinking age, citing as rationale examples of "responsible" drinking by teens in European countries with fewer alcohol restrictions.

Here's the truth.

- The younger a child is when he starts to drink, the higher the chances he will have alcohol-related problems later in life.
- It is estimated that more than 20,000 lives have been saved by minimum drinking age laws since 1975, due to a decrease in automobile crashes.

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- About half of Europe's countries have intoxication rates among young people that are higher than such rates in the United States.

Agreeing to disagree about this important issue obscures an alarming indifference about youth and alcohol. But it does nothing to keep teens safe and alive. Not until our society speaks with one, clear, unambiguous voice about the perils of underage drinking, as the National Academies suggest, will we successfully shatter the myths of invincibility and inevitability that propel it.

Our highways and hospitals are lined with young people who made poor, even fatal, choices about alcohol. Still many more suffer silently, unable to meet their own life goals or to realize the promise their friends, parents, and other caring adults see in them.

Sadly, that is what's real about underage drinking.

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