

# House Party

## Graduation Celebrations Often Leave Teens at Risk

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By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.

High school commencements will soon mark a time of pomp, circumstance ... and underage drinking. Aided and abetted by the very adults charged with their safety, teens too often confuse celebration with intoxication, leaving them at risk for the serious consequences associated with adolescents and alcohol.

Driving adult America's enabling of underage drinking is a profound lack of awareness of its costs and the physical, social, and emotional toll it takes on teens.

The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine of the National Academies report, *Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility*, notes a disturbing trend of adult procurement of alcohol for teens. Moreover, it points to the resulting \$53 billion a year in losses from traffic deaths, violent crime, and other destructive behavior.

Here are the facts about youth and alcohol.

- The younger a child is when he starts to drink, the higher the chances he will have alcohol-related problems later in life.
- 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 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades; that the average age for teens to start drinking is thirteen years old; and that by 12<sup>th</sup> 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.

Still, a plethora of house parties dotting the path home from graduation reveals a commonly held view among adults that allowing teens to drink in private homes will keep them safe. It won't. Anyway, what gives the parent of one child the right to decide for the parent of another that such behavior is harmless and appropriate?

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An angry mother said, "I thought it was enough to make sure the parents would be home and supervising. It never occurred to me I had to ask if they were going to let the kids drink."

But the undermining doesn't stop there. Young people who would otherwise choose not to drink face a dilemma when adults make the offer. As one teen put it, "They don't even give us a chance to make the right decisions."

The legal and ethical ramifications of allowing or facilitating underage drinking are enormous – and fortunately not lost on a growing number of states beefing up prosecution of complicit adults. But, not until *all* segments of our society – including the parents who make the rules and supervise the teens – speak with one, clear, unambiguous voice about the perils of underage drinking will we successfully shatter the myths of invincibility and inevitability that propel it.

The best way to honor teens at graduation is to help them safely celebrate their achievement. Hosting alcohol-free parties, clearly communicating expectations for personal behavior, and enforcing consequences for violating the rules are just a few good ways to start.

The graduates have done their work. Now it is time to do ours.

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*Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc. (Students Against Destructive Decisions), has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. SADD and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration sponsor the **Think About It ... Prom & Graduation Season** campaign available to schools nationwide. For more information about SADD, call toll-free 877-SADD-INC. The SADD/Liberty Mutual Teens Today research can be found at [www.sadd.org](http://www.sadd.org) and [libertymutualinsurance.com](http://libertymutualinsurance.com).*