



SADD Op-Ed:

More Than a Village: Underage Drinking in America

By Stephen G. Wallace

January 12, 2004

A recent report from the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine of the National Academies (Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility) sounds the alarm on an epidemic of underage drinking in America. In the spirit of "it takes a village," it also serves up a strategy suggesting the participation of most all segments of society. From parents and pubs, to cops and congressmen, everybody has a role to play. As well they should.

Teens Today research from SADD and Liberty Mutual Group points to some startling facts about youth and alcohol.

- Drinking increases significantly between the 6th and 7th grades.
- The average age for teens to start drinking is thirteen years old.
- By 12th grade, more than three in four teens are drinking.

Long the poor stepchild of anti-drug efforts, underage drinking remains a substantial threat. Indeed, the Academies estimate the annual cost to be \$53 billion in losses from traffic deaths, violent crime and other destructive behavior ... say nothing of the damage to mental health, school performance and relationships with parents and peers. The fact is that too many adults send too many messages that encourage or enable teen drinking. And too many parents expect or ignore it.

It is past time to reconcile the forces of indifference and indulgence that perpetuate underage drinking with the urgent need to keep young people safe and alive.

The Academies call for a series of steps they believe will change the face of "normative" behavior when it comes to adolescents and alcohol – not the least of which would be a national media campaign designed to educate adults about the extent and risks of underage drinking and their own role as facilitators. After all, the Academies note, most underage drinking involves adults – who sell it, buy it or allow parties in their homes. Just as important, the report tackles head on the issue of alcohol advertising that is attractive to teens and appeals to the social conscience of the entertainment industry to limit youth exposure to content that portrays alcohol consumption in a favorable light.

Perhaps most significant, the report suggests an array of youth-oriented interventions aimed not just at increasing self-esteem or decreasing peer pressure, but also at activities that educate, intervene and enforce. Making those activities effective, however, requires a close examination of the factors that influence young people to drink in the first place.

Not surprisingly, some teens say they drink to have fun, to fit in, or just to do what their classmates seem to be doing. But engaging in destructive behaviors is not just about "having a good time." Many teens, particularly older ones, drink to escape problems. Left unaddressed, those problems can pose a significant risk to healthy social and emotional development. So too does a lack of experience in solving them.



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The data also indicate other key drivers of decisions about alcohol, including depression, anxiety, stress, and boredom; a desire to feel grown up and to take risks; a fear of getting caught; and the influence of parents, friends, and siblings.

So what does this tell us? That there are practical approaches adults can take to reduce the likelihood that young people will turn to alcohol.

- Monitor their emotional health – and intervene at signs of trouble. Anxiety, and its close cousin depression, correlates highly with alcohol use. So does boredom ... so find things for teens to do that both stimulate and challenge.
- Help them achieve their goals. Teens want to be successful, to grow up and to take risks. Channel that risk-taking toward activities that enhance healthy socialization with peers and positive feelings about themselves. Also, take time to point out ways in which alcohol use can interfere with success in academics and athletics.
- Establish (and enforce) consequences for bad behavior. Young people need clear boundaries and appreciate adults who care enough to patrol them.
- Encourage relationships with good role models, be they adult, teen or child. According to *Teens Today* research, 6th – 12th graders report parents, close friends, and other family members are most influential in their decisions not to drink.

Understanding teen drinking platforms deployment of the many people and programs needed to prevent it. As the ancient African proverb teaches, it will take a village. Maybe more.

Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc., has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. SADD sponsors school-based education and prevention programs nationwide and makes available at no charge the *SADD Contract for Life* and the *Opening Lifesaving Lines* brochure, both designed to facilitate effective parent-child communication. Toll-free: 877-SADD-INC For more information on the SADD/Liberty Mutual *Teens Today* research, visit www.saddonline.com or www.libertymutualinsurance.com.

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