MAKE A DIFFERENCE: TALK TO YOUR TEEN ABOUT ALCOHOL

Wake up! Teens will drink. In the U.S.A., alcohol is the most commonly used drug among teens. Once your child starts middle school, you should begin talking about the risks of underage drinking and the importance of making good decisions.

KNOW THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNDERAGE DRINKING
Alcohol makes teens impulsive and irrational, which can result in some fatal consequences. Teens who drink are more likely to engage in risky and violent behavior.

- **Alcohol-related fatalities.** Alcohol-related accidents are a leading cause of teen deaths. Teen drownings, suicides and murders also have been linked with alcohol use.

- **Sexual activity.** Drinking alcohol is closely linked to unprotected and early sex in teens. Teens run the risk of receiving a sexually transmitted disease (STD) or having an unwanted pregnancy. Make sure your teen understands how alcohol impairs people's judgment and talk about how it would feel to regret something later.

- **School problems.** Teens who drink tend to have more academic and conduct problems than do teens who do not drink.

- **Alcoholism.** People who begin drinking as young teens are more likely to develop alcohol dependence than are people who wait until they are adults to drink.

- **Violent crime.** Teens who drink are more likely to be hurt in a violent crime, such as rape, assault or robbery.

Furthermore, research shows that alcohol use might permanently distort a teen's mental development. Excessive drinking can cause irreparable damage to a developing brain. Long-term risks from alcohol abuse include cancer, high blood pressure, and liver disease.

TALK WITH YOUR TEENS ABOUT ALCOHOL
You matter! Studies show that when parents disapprove and set boundaries, children are less likely to drink. When parents are permissive, children are likely to drink more.

It can be tough to talk to your teen about underage drinking. You might be unsure of what to say, and your teen might try to dodge the conversation. The key to communicating effectively is being a good listener. With teens, it is important to make the time to listen to them, especially when they are ready to talk. To have a meaningful discussion, choose a time when you and your teen are relaxed. Establish a regular “talk time” with your teen to have a one-to-one conversation; this will encourage talking. Don’t worry about covering everything at once. If you talk often, you might have a greater impact on your teen than if you have only a single discussion. Ask your teen's views. Find out what your teen knows and thinks about alcohol. Encourage them to be open with you about their thoughts.

Think about why your child is drinking. It could be family problems, such as marital conflict; a family history of alcoholism or drinking problems; a history of childhood abuse or other major trauma; behavior, school or mental health problems; or close friendships with teens who drink or use other drugs (peer pressure). Whatever it is, talk about it.
Do not yell, nag, or lecture. You must remain firm and your body language should emphasize you mean business. Yelling doesn’t convey your seriousness. Teens don’t take yelling serious. Also, avoid scare tactics. Instead, explain the risks discussed above and appeal to your teen's self-respect. Explain that alcohol is a powerful drug that slows the body and mind.

**STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO KEEP YOUR TEEN SAFE**

As a parent, you have tremendous influence on the life of your child. In addition to talking to your teen, consider other strategies to prevent underage drinking:

- **Develop a strong relationship with your teen.** Your support will help your teen build the self-esteem he or she needs to stand up to peer pressure — and live up to your expectations.

- **Know your teen's activities.** Pay attention to your teen's plans and whereabouts. Encourage participation in supervised after-school and weekend activities.

- **Establish rules and consequences.** Rules might include no underage drinking, leaving parties where alcohol is served and not riding in a car with a driver who's been drinking. Agree on the consequences of breaking the rules ahead of time, such as loss of privileges, and enforce them consistently. *Research shows that when teens are raised with a strict ‘no drinking’ policy, they are far less likely to drink; if they do drink, they drink less.*

- **Set an example.** If you drink, do so only in moderation and responsibly. A parent’s drinking habits actually has a greater impact on their child’s use of alcohol than a child’s friends. Don't serve alcohol to anyone who's underage. You might be tempted to be the cool parent and either drink with your child or supply them with alcohol at their next party. Don’t do it.

- **Encourage healthy friendships.** If your teen's friends drink, your teen is more likely to drink, too. Get to know your teen's friends and their parents.

Sometimes no matter what you say, or how hard they try to avoid drinking, they are going to drink. In these circumstances, consider strategies to get them home safely:

- **Plan ways to handle peer pressure.** Brainstorm with your teen about how to respond to offers of alcohol. It might be as simple as saying, "No thanks" or "Do you have any soda?"

- **Teach your teen about sensible drinking.** Teach them to pace drinks, to alternate alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, and to always eat a decent meal before drinking.

- **Always communicate support.** Make it clear that your child can call you at any time for a ride home from a party, even if they are slightly drunk.

- **Have a Plan.** Before they leave the house, plan alternative ways of getting home and make sure that they have a designated driver if they end up drinking alcohol.

**CONCLUSION**

Remember, your responsibility is to give your teen the guidance and support necessary to make good choices. Teach your children the realities and dangers of alcohol and build up their self-esteem with praise and open communication. Drinking can become an addiction. If you think your teen might have a drinking problem, act fast and seek professional help.