

parentingmatters

Preventing Teen Drinking



Sara Lane, EdM

By Sara M. Lane, Ed.M.

Summer is a time for rest and relaxation. Schedules are lighter. School is out. Teens have fewer responsibilities. It is also a prime time for teens to experiment with alcohol. Whether it is at a weekend party, or at a friend's house in the afternoon, many teens will find themselves in situations where alcohol is present.

To help keep teens safe, it is important for parents to examine their views on teen drinking. Many parents falsely assume that everyone experiments with alcohol. However, data from Lexington's 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey supports the fact that not all teens are drinking. In fact, less than half (43%) of Lexington students reported having had at least one drink in the past 30 days.

Parents also tend to underestimate the seriousness of teen drinking. Though drinking alcohol is commonly accepted as a teen rite of passage, current research indicates that teen drinking is more dangerous than many parents think. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, people who begin drinking in their early teens are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than people who start as adults. Research also shows that the teen

brain is not fully developed until the early twenties. The American Medical Association reports that damage to the brain from teenage drinking can be long-term and irreversible.

Alcohol is also responsible for a large number of teen deaths. Drunk driving continues to be problematic for teens. During 2006, the National Highway Traffic Safety Association (NHTSA) found that eighteen percent of 15- to 20-year-old drivers and motorcycle operators involved in fatal traffic crashes had a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of .08 or higher.

Along with false beliefs, parents are not always aware of their own children's use of alcohol. A teen does not need to attend a wild party on the weekend to consume alcohol. The National Survey on Drug Use and Health reports that 30 percent of teen drinkers aged 12 to 20 drank in their own homes.

Teens are also drinking at younger ages than many parents think. The 2008 Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted by Emerson Hospital found that six percent of the eighth graders who had reported having drunk alcohol had consumed their first alcoholic beverage before age 12.

WHAT'S A PARENT TO DO?

•Parent involvement

It's critical for parents to stay involved with their teens. Many parents feel their teens need them to step back and be less involved in their



lives. The opposite is true. Your teen wants you to be involved in his or her life now, more than ever. Get to know your teen's friends and where your teen is spending his or her free time. Connecting with the parents of your teen's friends is also valuable.

•Talk with your teen

Educate your teen about the effects and hazards of alcohol use, then set clear expectations and consequences regarding teen drinking. Review your family rules about drinking and driving as well as being a passenger in a car with someone who has been drinking. Discuss possible situations that may arise around teen drinking. Provide solutions your teen can use to get out of difficult situations. Finally, establish a plan that allows your teen to contact you at any time of day with no questions asked so that you can provide support to your teen if your teen does encounter trouble.

A sample discussion could be, "if your ride starts to drink, call me. I will come and get you, without questions. It doesn't matter what time or where you are. Your safety matters most."

•Be prepared

One source of alcohol is your own home. By the time your child is in upper elementary school, it is time to keep track of the alcohol in your home. If possible, store the alcohol in one place, preferably a locked cabinet.

Check your supplies periodically. Tell your child that you know what you have and that you are monitoring it.

•Find alternatives

Help your teen find fun, amusing activities that do not involve alcohol. Teens often claim they drink because they are bored and have nothing to do. Also, encourage your teen to pursue friendships that make him or her feel confident and happy.

Parents play an important role in preventing teen drinking. There are many steps you can take to keep your teen safe. Most importantly, be proactive and be prepared.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign
www.TheAntiDrug.com

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI)
www.health.org

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
www.family.samhsa.gov

Sara M. Lane, Ed.M. is a parenting educator and the founder of Parents Prepare. She holds a Master's degree in counseling psychology from Boston University and a Certificate of Graduate Studies in family support/parenting education from Wheelock College. She has nearly twenty years of combined experience as a psychologist, group facilitator, college instructor, and parenting educator.

Parenting Matters columns are not intended as a substitute for therapy. If your child is experiencing problems, seek help from your pediatrician, child psychotherapist, clinical social worker or psychiatrist.