



Let's Talk About Alcohol!

By Kelly Wyttenhove, MA, Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor

April is Alcohol Awareness Month. No, this doesn't give you permission to have a glass of wine each evening. But it does encourage us to discuss the harmful effects of alcohol. In a society that supports alcohol use once one turns 21, it's hard to believe that up to 40% of all hospital beds in the United States are being used to treat health conditions that are related to alcohol consumption. As a Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor, I often tell individuals that alcohol is the worst drug that one can use, especially for individuals with a teenage brain.

When harmful effects of alcohol use are brought up in conversation, drinking and driving is often the focus. Some have experienced the consequences of driving under the influence first hand by receiving a DUI charge, while others may have lost a loved one at the hands of a drunk driver. "Don't drink and drive" is advice that both adults and teens hear frequently. But would it surprise you that traffic deaths only account for 32% of underage drinking related deaths? The remaining 68% includes homicide, suicide, and poisoning. Maybe the focus of our discussion should be on ALL harmful effects of alcohol, not just what happens when we get behind the wheel.

Because alcohol is legal to consume at a certain age, it can be difficult for parents to discuss the dangers of alcohol use with their teens. While some parents may consider these discussions ineffective, some reports show that a majority of kids ages 8-17 identify that their parents are the leading influence on their decisions about drinking. In fact, teens are 80% less likely to drink if parents communicate that underage drinking is completely unacceptable. So, parents, let's start talking about it!

Starting the Conversation

1. Consider your teen's schedule and find a time where you will have his or her undivided attention. Grab some ice cream when the sun comes out and find a place to chat one-on-one.
2. Say something that shows you are open-minded and ask your teen about his or her own experiences. "Do you know kids who drink?" "How has it affected them?"
3. Share your own experiences and opinions and how they have changed over the years. Focus on having a discussion; don't lecture!
4. Listen and try to understand without being defensive. This is especially important as teens like to talk about themselves and their opinions. They definitely do not like to be told what to think.
5. Communicate family values and set clear expectations and consequences. Reconsider some common approaches that parents take, such as allowing teens to drink a controlled amount of alcohol under parent supervision. Research actually shows that kids whose parents allow them to drink at home drink more often and heavily outside the home.
6. Did you drink when you were a teenager? This question is a classic. Some parents make this topic off limits while others choose to admit their mistakes and emphasize negative outcomes. Whichever route you choose, honesty is important.

If you are looking for some fuel for your discussion, here are a few reasons that make many teens choose not to drink.

1. Underage drinking is illegal. Most teenagers do not want to get arrested, which will likely be the result if the police are aware of underage drinking.
2. Drinking can make you sick or pass out. No one enjoys vomiting or being around someone who is vomiting.
3. Drinking can lead to sexual assault. Although both you and your teen trust the people that he or she is spending time with, even small amounts of alcohol can impair one's judgment and lead to poor choices.
4. Drinking can lead to early death. Even one night of heavy drinking can have life-changing results: pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, death from alcohol poisoning, or fatal car crashes.
5. Drinking might lead to being an alcoholic. This research is clear. The younger a person is when they start drinking, the greater chance that they will develop alcohol problems later in life.

While conversation about the dangers of alcohol use is the starting point, parents follow through is essential. There needs to be ongoing communication between parents and teens about alcohol use. Parents, if you have concerns about your teen's alcohol use despite continued discussion, please seek support. There are many preventative services for teens that may reduce the chance of their alcohol use becoming increasingly problematic. But remember, your son or daughter cannot read your mind. Alcohol awareness starts with discussion.