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# Alcohol

What Families Need  
to Know to Help  
Protect Young People

For the full set of Alcohol Guides,  
visit [drugfree.org/alcohol](https://drugfree.org/alcohol)

**Partnership  
to End Addiction**

## Introduction

As parents and caregivers, we want to do all that we can to protect our children, and we worry about what alcohol may do to their health and well-being. In this guide, we break down the risks of youth drinking, why it appeals to youth and what you can do to protect your child from its harms.

You are your child's greatest influence and health advocate. So, whether your child has not yet tried alcohol, has begun to drink or drinks regularly, we're here to help.

**1 in 3**

young people aged 12-20 reported drinking alcohol in 2019.<sup>1</sup>

**21%**

Of those reporting were aged 12-17.<sup>2</sup>

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## The facts about youth drinking

Alcohol is the most widely used substance among teens and young adults, and it poses substantial health and safety risks. Although young people tend to drink less often than adults do, when they do drink, they frequently drink more or more intensely compared to the average adult.<sup>3</sup> **That's because young people consume more than 90% of their alcohol by binge drinking.**<sup>4</sup>

The good news is the number of teens drinking has dropped over the past few decades.<sup>5</sup> However, when we consider the consequences of youth alcohol use — poor judgment, driving under the influence, accidents and alcohol poisoning, as well as damage to the developing brain or addiction — it's important for parents and other caregivers to be informed and involved when it comes to youth drinking.

### What is binge drinking?<sup>10</sup>



For **females**, it's consuming **four or more drinks within two hours.**



For **males**, the quantity jumps to **five or more drinks** in the same time period.

### What constitutes a drink?<sup>11</sup>



5oz  
of wine



12oz  
of beer



1.5oz  
of liquor

A common view is that youth drinking is the norm, **but most young people actually do not drink.**

According to a national survey of nearly 50,000 teens, 41% of high school seniors said they never had a drink, and 70% reported that they had not consumed any alcohol in the month prior to the survey.<sup>6</sup> **In fact, youth drinking has declined steadily over the past decades, as has binge drinking.**<sup>7</sup>

If you find yourself wondering why your child doesn't "get" that alcohol comes with risks, you're not alone. Recent data show that three-quarters of 12th graders report that they don't see great risk in having one or two drinks nearly every day.<sup>8</sup> Another recent national survey found that 9% of teens would not be worried about a friend regardless of how frequently that friend drank alcohol.<sup>9</sup>



**11%**

of young people  
aged 12 through 20  
reported binge drinking  
in the past 30 days.<sup>12</sup>

**5%**

were 12 to 17.<sup>13</sup>

**6 in 10**

12th graders have had an  
alcoholic drink in their lifetime.<sup>14</sup>

**25%**

have done so  
by 8th grade.<sup>15</sup>



## Why do young people drink alcohol?

Regardless of whether a young person drinks “to feel good” or “to feel better,” their environment often shapes their beliefs and attitudes toward alcohol.

“Because my friends do.”

“It’s a normal part of being social.”

“It helps me feel less anxious or depressed.”

“My parents are ok with it.”

### Peer influence

Sometimes friends urge one another to have a drink, but it is just as common for youth to try drinking because alcohol is readily available. They see their friends or older siblings enjoying it and, to them, alcohol use is part of a normal teenage or young adult experience. Popular media reinforces this idea. Ads often glamorize alcohol use to attract new drinkers and rarely show the downsides of alcohol use.

### Mental health and stress

Drinking can be seen as a way to self-medicate unhappy or uncomfortable feelings, thoughts or emotions, including those that accompany depression, anxiety or other mental health problems, especially if they are not adequately treated. If kids are feeling stressed, they may turn to alcohol seeking relief. Alcohol reduces inhibitions, making it tempting for a young person who wants to test limits or feel more confident in social situations.

### Parents’ attitudes and behavior

Your attitudes toward drinking have a significant impact on your child’s attitudes and behaviors. [Numerous studies](#) show that children of parents who are more lenient or permissive about youth drinking — allowing their children to drink on occasion, not monitoring the alcohol in the home or modeling alcohol use as a means of relaxing or having fun — are more likely to drink and to do so heavily than children of more restrictive and cautious parents.<sup>16</sup> When parents allow teens to drink with them (with the exception of small amounts for religious practices or rituals) or host parties for kids in which alcohol is allowed or served, they convey the message that underage drinking is okay. This increases the risk that it will happen more frequently or intensely.

## Why be concerned about youth alcohol use?

Drinking at a young age can impact the health and safety of young people, now and in the future.



### Brain Development

The human brain is not fully developed until early adulthood, usually the mid- to late-twenties. There is [rapid brain development in adolescence and young adulthood](#), especially the parts of the brain responsible for decision making and judgment. Exposure to alcohol interferes with this development.



### Mental Health

Alcohol slows down the nervous system. Drinking alcohol to soothe anxiety or other mental health problems may seem to help in the short term, but symptoms typically worsen in the long term when alcohol is involved. Alcohol use is a significant risk factor in youth suicide.<sup>19</sup>



### Risky Behaviors

Young people increase their likelihood of making poor decisions and unhealthy choices, including risky sexual behavior, as alcohol also affects the parts of the brain responsible for self-control.



### Physical Health

It may be hard to imagine now, as your kids are teens and young adults, but youth who drink are at higher risk for developing liver disease. Alcohol use during or before puberty can damage hormones and interfere with healthy physical development. Heavy drinking in adolescence can also lead to chronic health problems.



### Impaired Driving

This is one of the most common concerns when it comes to youth alcohol use. Motor vehicle crashes are a leading cause of death among young people, who are more likely to be killed in an alcohol-related crash compared to adults.<sup>17</sup> One out of five teen drivers involved in fatal crashes in 2016 were under the influence of alcohol.<sup>18</sup>



## Alcohol use can lead to poisoning and other injuries

Sadly, higher levels of car crashes, homicides, alcohol poisoning, falls, burns, drowning and suicide are associated with youth alcohol use. Binge drinking can lead to so much alcohol in the bloodstream that the parts of the brain that control basic life functions such as breathing, heart rate and temperature begin to shut down, resulting in severe symptoms and, in some cases, death.

### Know the signs of alcohol poisoning

It's important to know what to do should a young person experience alcohol poisoning and to let them know how to help a friend.

Recognizing the following signs and symptoms can save a life:

**M** Mental Confusion  
**U** Unresponsive  
**S** Snoring/Gasping for Air  
**T** Throwing Up

**H** Hypothermia  
**E** Erratic Breathing  
**L** Loss of Consciousness  
**P** Paleness/Blueness of Skin

If you find that a young person is experiencing alcohol poisoning — even if you do not see all of the symptoms — seek medical care immediately. If they are conscious, **call the Poison Control Center at (800) 222-1222**. If unresponsive, call 911 for emergency services. While waiting for help, position them onto their side so they don't choke on their own vomit. Be prepared to administer CPR if needed and never leave the person alone. At its most severe, alcohol poisoning can lead to death.

Make sure you are informed about your state's **Good Samaritan Law**. While different states have different variations of this law, its general purpose is to help protect bystanders from legal consequences when they try to help someone in need who has engaged in illegal substance use.<sup>20</sup> Some Good Samaritan

Laws apply to underage drinking, so that a youth who is drinking will not get in trouble (and neither will the underage victim) for calling 911 to get help for someone who may be experiencing alcohol poisoning and needs medical attention. Not every state's Good Samaritan Law applies to this situation, so it is important to do some research on your home state's law. Whether or not your state's law applies to underage alcohol use, however, make clear to your child that the priority in a dangerous situation is to protect their own and others' health and safety, regardless of the legal consequences.

It's not uncommon for teens and young adults to both drink and use marijuana or other drugs. Mixing alcohol with other substances, such as prescription medicine or marijuana, is especially dangerous and potentially deadly. It can cause nausea and vomiting, headaches, drowsiness, fainting, loss of coordination, internal bleeding, heart problems and breathing difficulties.

Using another drug can also make someone lose track of how much alcohol they've had, increasing the risk of alcohol poisoning. Likewise, alcohol use can impair thoughts and memory. It can prevent a teen from keeping track of how much of a drug they've used, increasing the risk of serious consequences, including overdose or death.

Marijuana, specifically, can prevent a person from vomiting. This increases the risk of alcohol poisoning in someone who drank a lot while under the influence of the drug. Many young people do not recognize this danger. They might drink alcohol to counteract or enhance the effects of other drugs, often with devastating consequences



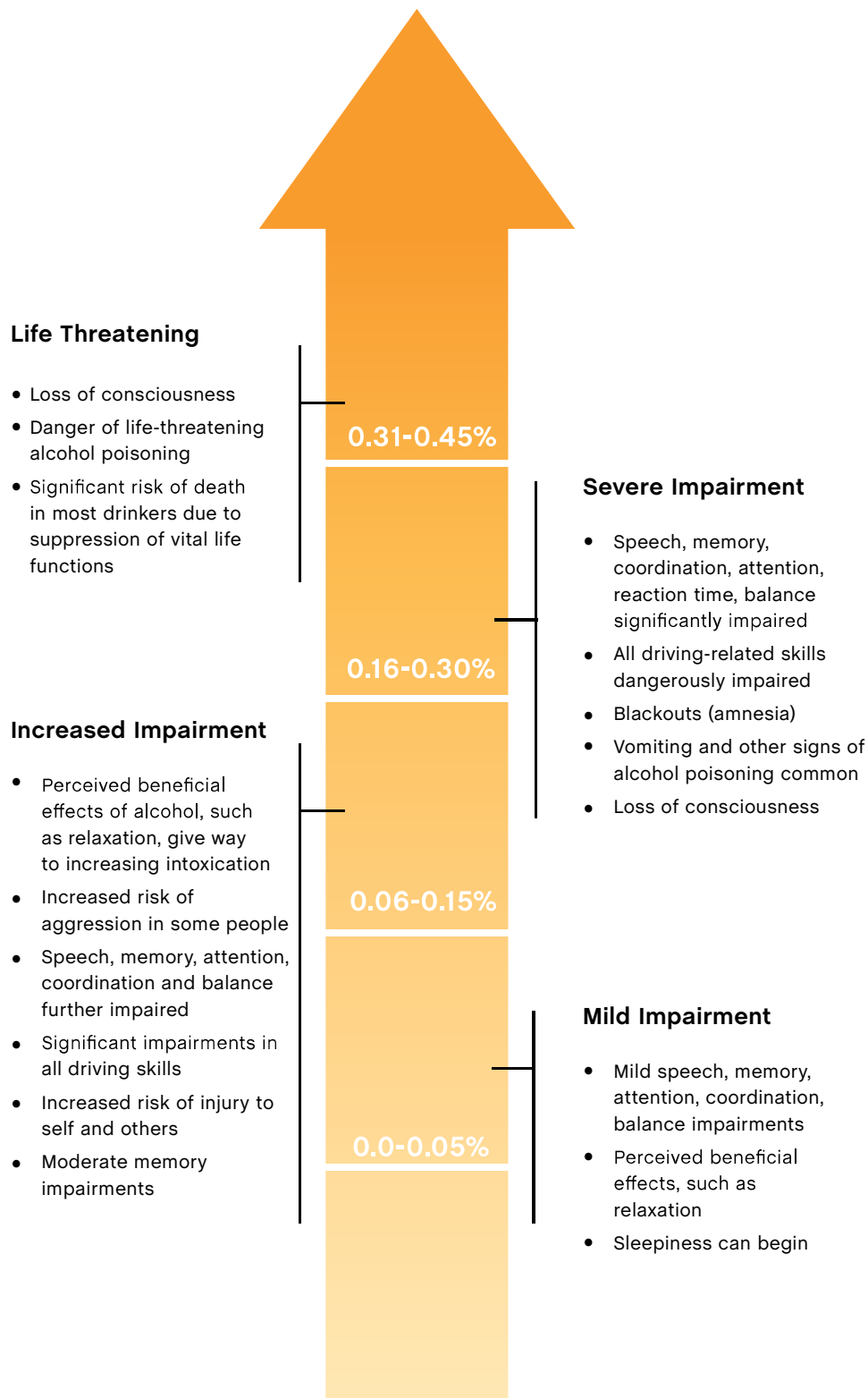


## What you need to know about Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC)

The more one drinks at a time, the higher one's **blood alcohol concentration (BAC)**. This increases the risk of impairment, especially when driving, and the risk of alcohol poisoning. A BAC level represents the percent of one's blood that is concentrated with alcohol. For example, a BAC of 0.10 means that 0.1% of the person's bloodstream is composed of alcohol. The legal intoxication level for adults in most states is a BAC of 0.08. For those who are under age, it is any measurable amount, such as 0.01 or 0.02, above zero.

There are many misconceptions about ways to "sober up" after drinking and reduce one's BAC, such as taking a cold shower, drinking coffee or eating food, but these do not work. The effects of alcohol only wear off over time. Be sure that your child knows this so that they don't falsely think that they can safely drive or do anything else that requires motor coordination or attention after drinking any alcohol.

### As BAC increases, so does impairment



Source: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism



## Substance use disorders

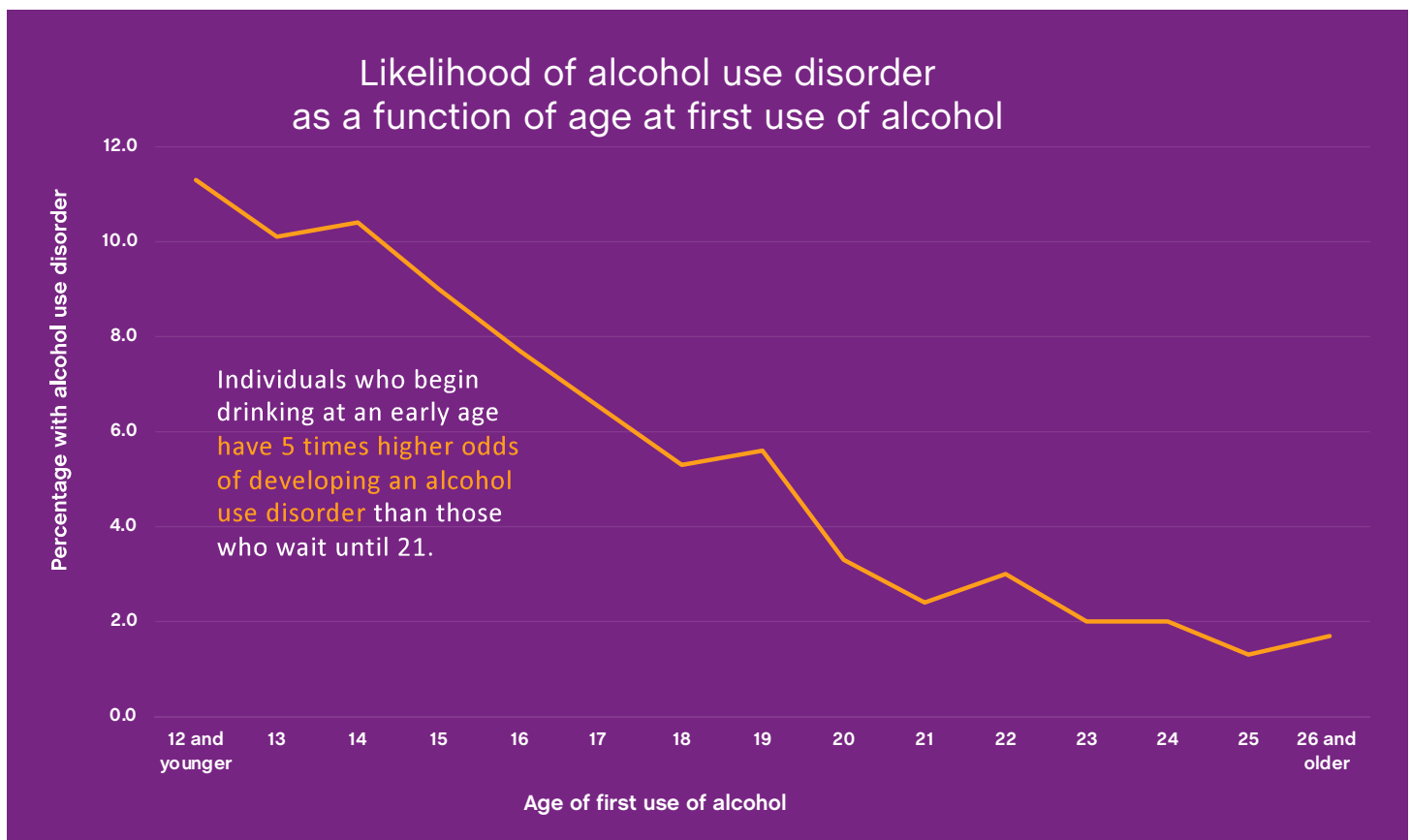
One important reason to understand more about youth alcohol use is to prevent the risk of addiction.

Individuals who begin drinking during adolescence have significantly higher odds of developing an alcohol or other substance use disorder (addiction) than those who begin drinking at age 21 or later.<sup>21</sup> The earlier a person starts drinking, the more likely they are to have a problem with drinking later on.<sup>22</sup>



## Genetics and biological vulnerability

Having a family history of an alcohol use disorder puts individuals at approximately four times higher risk of developing an alcohol use disorder themselves.<sup>23</sup> Genetics play less of a role in a person's decision to use alcohol than environmental factors like peer influence or parents' attitudes about drinking. Still, genetic vulnerability is important to consider when determining the risk that one's alcohol use can lead to addiction.

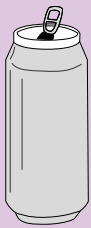
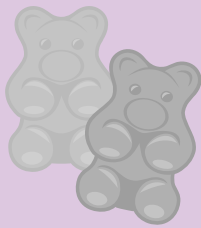




Source: 2018 data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health

## What types of alcohol do young people use?

The reasons young people choose to drink a particular brand or type of alcohol are often influenced by advertising, the cost (the less expensive, the better) and accessibility and flavors, as they tend to prefer sweet flavors that mask the harsh taste of alcohol.

Aside from drinking, some youth consume alcohol in less traditional ways. Some can be more discreet (and therefore easier to hide from adults) compared to traditional alcohol beverages because their packaging resembles non-alcoholic products.

Flavored beverages	Edible alcohol	Alcohol vaping	Powdered alcohol
			
<p>Carbonated or malt-based drinks, which are often sweet, resembling soda or energy drinks. They have a high alcohol content, but don't look or taste like alcohol. Promoted as containing fewer calories than beer.</p>	<p>While the most familiar example may be Jell-O shots, kids find "rummy bears" and alcohol-soaked fruit to be appealing.</p>	<p>Inhaling or smoking the vapors of alcohol is dangerous because alcohol isn't metabolized in the stomach or liver. It increases how quickly someone becomes intoxicated and the risk of alcohol poisoning.</p>	<p>States banned sales due to its risk of overuse and because kids could access and use without being caught.</p>

There are other non-traditional and dangerous ways to use alcohol. For example, some young women have been reported to soak tampons in alcohol before inserting them — mostly to avoid the calories associated with drinking alcohol—which can damage the vagina and increase the risk of blood poisoning.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, alcohol enemas (or “butt chugging”) are very dangerous, frequently leading to hospitalization.<sup>25</sup> Alcohol sprays and snorting alcohol are some other reported forms of alcohol consumption. There is a lack of research on how often these nontraditional methods are actually used, with at least one study suggesting that it is relatively rare.<sup>26</sup>



## What you can do to protect your child

You've read the reasons kids drink and the associated risks, so what can you do to protect your child, especially in the face of a culture that promotes drinking? Despite what many parents believe and feel, you actually have tremendous influence over whether your children drink. In fact, kids themselves have shared that their parents have the greatest influence over their attitudes and behaviors around substances.

### How to safeguard against youth drinking

#### Know the facts

Do what you can to be well informed about how, where, when and why kids use alcohol. This will help your children to see you as a credible and honest source of information, rather than turning to less reliable sources like friends or social media. Use the information included in this guide, as well as our other resources and those of [other reputable organizations](#), and try to learn as much as you can.

Research shows that [most kids, thankfully, are well aware of the risk](#) of drinking and driving and have internalized this message. Still, the dangers of youth alcohol use go well beyond drinking and driving, so [be aware of other risks](#) and discuss them with your children. Learn more about what the [research](#) says about youth drinking.

#### Have frequent and honest conversations

Look for [opportunities to discuss drinking](#) with your child in a calm and reasonable way. When you think about it, there is likely no shortage of ways into this conversation: news stories, school lessons, advertisements, seeing someone drinking on TV or when passing a bar. Be ready to listen rather than give a lecture and be sure to focus on health and safety rather than threats and punishment. In these conversations, get their perspectives, acknowledge the potential appeal and help them weigh the risks against the perceived benefits. When answering their questions, offer honest, accurate, science-based information rather than trying to scare them, and try to have these conversations frequently, calmly and early, before they try drinking.

Some parents or caregivers believe that it is better to teach their children to drink responsibly or in moderation than to have clear rules against underage drinking.

Many feel that, as long as their child doesn't drink and drive, some alcohol use before the age of 21 is to be expected and is not especially worrisome.

Beliefs like these are understandable, but are not supported by a growing body of research. This evidence increasingly points to the specific harms of any alcohol use prior to adulthood.

Indeed, numerous studies have shown that kids whose parents let them drink before they reach the legal age of 21 are, on average, more likely to drink in riskier ways and experience future alcohol-related problems than kids whose parents do not permit any underage drinking.<sup>27</sup>

If there is a history of problem alcohol use or addiction in the family, your child's risk of developing a problem with alcohol increases. Be aware and make your children aware — as you would any health condition or disease that runs in the family — so that they know to be more careful about drinking alcohol compared to friends or peers who may not have a family history of alcohol problems.

#### Try to understand why

Most kids start drinking due to curiosity, because friends and family drink, or because they think it's cool or want to fit in. Over time, drinking can become habit-forming. Kids may use alcohol to address other needs, such as relief from boredom and stress, or as a way to cope with mental health issues or to relieve social pressures. In more severe cases, some young people develop an addiction to alcohol and continue drinking to avoid withdrawal symptoms.

Some good conversation starters might include, *What are your thoughts about seeing pictures of friends drinking on Snapchat?* or, *Why do you think movies seem to show the fun side of drinking, but rarely the downside?*



Hill Street Studios/DigitalVision via Getty Images

If you know your child drinks, it helps to understand why by asking questions like, *What do you enjoy about drinking* or *How does drinking make you feel?* Answers to these questions can highlight your child's needs that can be addressed in a healthier way. It is also important to challenge young people on their perceptions of what is 'normal' when it comes to youth alcohol use. Research shows that young people tend to overestimate how much their peers drink. This increases the risk that they will drink to 'be normal' or just like their peers.

### Share your expectations

Be clear, and if you choose to set consequences, be sure to follow through and make sure that these consequences are not overly harsh or long-lasting. At the same time, try to encourage and reward healthier choices. Help ensure that your child has other ways to have fun, feel cool, fit in, alleviate stress and address anxiety or depression.

Communicate your expectations and rules for when your child goes out with friends. Include regular check-ins so that your voice (and influence) is top of mind. If they find themselves in a situation where they are offered a drink or feel unsafe, be sure they know that you will be there for them. You will help them get out of that situation and back to safety without scolding, lecturing or punishing them.

If your child is under the influence of alcohol, discuss the circumstances of the event in a calm manner at a later time. Make every effort to understand why they ended up in that situation, what their reactions to it were and how they might react differently and more effectively should it happen again.

Youth can access alcohol by purchasing fake IDs or asking or paying older peers or adults to purchase alcohol for them. Talk to your kids in advance about these practices. Explain how they are illegal and share your expectation that they won't engage in this kind of behavior and what the consequences might be if they break the rules.

### Help your child avoid and manage situations where there may be alcohol

Many of you may imagine your child experiencing peer pressure where other kids are directly goading them into drinking. It's actually more common for kids to find themselves in situations where others are drinking. They may choose to drink to "fit in," rather than avoid being directly bullied or pressured.

Help prepare your child for each type of situation. For example, this could be a sleepover where the parents are not home or are not vigilant, a party or other social gatherings. Help them practice resistance skills to use in a real social situation. You might ask, *What would you say if someone offered you a drink?* and see how your child would handle the situation. Practicing responses such as, *No thanks, I'm not interested*, said with direct eye contact and assertive body language, can help your child be prepared. Allow them to use you as an excuse to get out of a tricky situation. Some families develop a signal system. This is when your child can text you a word or symbol so you know to pick them up from the party and provide them an excuse to leave.

### Monitor your children and their access to alcohol in and out of your home

Keep alcohol in the home locked up, out of sight and out of reach. Monitor the supply so that you are aware if alcohol has gone missing.

Supervise any social gatherings in your home to ensure there is no underage drinking, and make sure your teens know the rules ahead of time. Ways to ensure that friends do not bring alcohol into your home include having them leave their bags at the door and not allowing them to bring in their own beverages of any kind, since they might look like water bottles or soda cans, but actually contain alcohol. Be present and pop in to offer snacks or chat with guests. Remember, it's your home and your responsibility to ensure that your child and their friends are safe is more important than their right to privacy.

Be aware of the [social hosting laws](#) in your state and their implications for personal liability in the event of underage drinking in your home.

To reduce the risk that your child will drink in someone else's home, contact their friends' parents to determine their rules, level of supervision and their thoughts on youth drinking. Share your expectations of no alcohol use. It may be awkward, but it's your call to allow your child to socialize only with peers whose families' alcohol-related views and actions do not jeopardize your own child's health and safety.

### Set a healthy example

If you drink, try to model responsible drinking behavior. Avoid suggesting that alcohol is needed to relax, have fun or reduce stress. Instead, show healthier ways of coping, reducing stress and having fun, such as going for a bike ride or playing a game. Try not to let your child see adults in the home get drunk or lose control and, if you or another adult in the home is experiencing alcohol-related problems, seek help. Your child will see that seeking help is the healthy and responsible thing to do, absent of any shame, and will carry this with them as they grow up and face their own life challenges.



Johner Images via Getty Images



## How to know if my child is drinking

Foster an open and honest relationship, and be awake and aware when they get home from a social event to monitor physical changes in appearance or manner. A close hug, looking into their eyes or having a substantial conversation usually can tell you a great deal about whether your child has been drinking or using other substances.

The following are some signs that your child might be drinking:

<p><b>Behavior changes</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses chewing gum or mints to cover up breath</li> <li>• Frequently breaks curfew</li> <li>• Has cash flow problems</li> <li>• Drives recklessly, or has car accidents or unexplained dents in the car</li> <li>• Avoids eye contact</li> <li>• Makes secretive phone calls</li> <li>• Makes endless excuses for not fulfilling responsibilities</li> <li>• Exhibits uncharacteristically loud, obnoxious behavior</li> <li>• Laughs for no reason</li> <li>• Has become unusually clumsy, stumbling, lacking coordination, poor balance, slurred speech or difficulty speaking</li> <li>• Disappears for long periods of time</li> <li>• Has periods of sleeplessness or high energy, followed by long periods of “catch up” sleep</li> </ul>	<p><b>Health issues</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lethargic</li> <li>• Unable to speak intelligibly, slurred speech or rapid-fire speech</li> <li>• Headaches</li> <li>• Sweatiness</li> <li>• Frequent sickness</li> <li>• Sudden or dramatic weight loss or gain</li> <li>• Vomiting</li> <li>• Seizures</li> <li>• Accidents or injuries</li> </ul>
<p><b>Mood and personality shifts</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shows changes in relationships with family members or friends</li> <li>• Has frequent mood changes or emotional instability</li> <li>• Acts sullen, withdrawn, depressed</li> <li>• Shows loss of inhibitions</li> <li>• Is silent, uncommunicative</li> <li>• Seems hostile, angry, uncooperative</li> <li>• Is deceitful or secretive</li> <li>• Is less motivated, unable to focus, hyperactive or unusually elated</li> </ul>	<p><b>School and work concerns</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Absenteeism or loss of interest in school</li> <li>• Loss of interest in extracurricular activities, hobbies or sports</li> <li>• Failure to fulfill responsibilities at school or work</li> <li>• Complaints from teachers or supervisors</li> <li>• Changes in grades or academic performance</li> </ul>
<p><b>Hygiene and appearance problems</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unusual smells on breath or on clothes</li> <li>• Messy appearance</li> <li>• Poor hygiene</li> <li>• Red, flushed cheeks or face</li> </ul>	<p><b>At home and in the car</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alcohol goes missing in the home</li> <li>• Money or valuables disappear</li> <li>• Alcohol smell in the child’s bedroom or in the car</li> <li>• Hidden stashes of alcohol</li> </ul>

## What to do if you discover your child is drinking

Helping your child avoid drinking or delay the start of alcohol use for as long as possible will be important for their health and safety. If they are drinking, don't dismiss it as normal youth behavior. Instead, talk about it. Try to understand why your child is drinking and how those motivations can be addressed through healthier means. Alcohol use can be considered especially problematic if it affects their health, relationships, school or work and daily functioning. If you find this to be the case, seek professional help.

### Take a health, not a punitive, approach

It's helpful to think of youth drinking as a health rather than a discipline problem. Address it as you would any other risk to your child's health and try to resist the urge to punish them. Do what you can to keep the lines of communication open, show that you are concerned about their health and safety, and keep the discussion from dissolving into a useless standoff.

[Our online skill-building course](#) can help you with conversation skills and techniques to encourage healthier behaviors in your child. Share your concerns about how drinking will affect their mental and physical health, safety and ability to make good decisions and fulfill current and future goals.

### Go easy on yourself

You are up against many forces: peer pressure, pervasive alcohol advertising and marketing that glamorize drinking and play down the risks, and young people's natural desire to try risky and adult-like behaviors. With patience, love and the right interventions, you can help your child understand the risks of drinking and the benefits of quitting. If necessary, you can also help provide them the assistance they need to stop.

### Get Help

Get your child counseling or other professional help if their drinking persists. Depending on your child's age and level of alcohol use, there are different interventions available to them — and you. Several online and text-messaging programs are available

to help teens and young adults who drink cut back or stop, and there are other digital platforms to help you guide your child toward healthier behavior.

If your child is unable to stop drinking or significantly cut down, [our resources can help you navigate the treatment system](#). Alcohol use disorder can be treated effectively, especially if you catch it early. There are effective medications to help reduce alcohol use and many types of therapy that are effective on their own or together with medication treatment. The most important thing is to ensure that the treatment provider you choose is offering evidence-based treatment rather than “tough love” or other unsubstantiated interventions. [For adult children who may be drinking excessively](#), even if legally, [moderation management may be helpful](#) to reduce their drinking and negative alcohol-related consequences.

Substances, including alcohol, will continue to change with the times, but the one thing that will remain constant is the need for information and support when raising a teen or young adult. You are the most important, and most powerful, influence in your child's life. Partnership to End Addiction is here to help you all along the way.

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