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## HOPE Newsletter - Issue 26

### High School Students and Drinking

By **Melanie Haiken, M.J.**

When it comes to teen drinking, parents would be wise not to look the other way. The consequences -- from drunk driving accidents to date rape and violent crime -- make it clear that teen drinking is much more than just harmless youthful experimentation.

#### **The damage done**

Ideally, no parent wants his or her teen to drink. First, it's illegal -- and according to the U.S. Department of Justice, 131,800 kids were arrested for violating liquor laws in 2013 alone. Second, it can be dangerous -- especially if your child has car keys. According to the Marin Institute, a social policy institute devoted to the study of children and alcohol, about 5,000 youth under age 21 die each year as a result of alcohol-related injuries and 38 percent of those deaths involve car accidents. Drinking is also linked with suicide, use of other drugs, and irresponsible sexual behaviors. And according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), the younger kids are when they begin to drink, the more likely they are to become problem drinkers later in life.

What may surprise parents more, though, is what heavy drinking can do to the adolescent brain. Sandra Brown and Susan Tapert of the University of California at San Diego studied the effects of heavy alcohol use on teenagers' brains and found some disturbing results. One study compared magnetic resonance images (MRIs) of 10 healthy women to 10 women who were binge drinkers as adolescents and found that the former drinkers were hampered by "sluggish" thinking when trying to recall information.

Another unsettling study compared the cognitive skills of alcohol-dependent and non-dependent teens. It found that teens who were heavy drinkers had impaired memory and poor verbal skills. In fact, say researchers, alcohol abuse may be more damaging to adolescents than it is to adults because it can kill cells in parts of the brain that are still developing.

#### **Setting your kids on the right path**

So what's a concerned parent to do? Most importantly, work to maintain a strong relationship with your teen -- one in which he or she feels free to talk openly. Kids who have good relationships with their parents are more likely to feel self confident and less likely to give in to peer pressure to drink. Set clear, realistic expectations, make sure your teen knows the

consequences of breaking the rules, and be consistent in enforcing those consequences. The NIAAA suggests your family rules could include:

- Kids will not drink until they are 21.
- Older siblings will not give younger members of the family alcohol or encourage them to drink.
- Kids will not stay at parties where alcohol is served.
- Kids will not be passengers in a car with a driver who has been drinking.

Some parents use consequences like grounding the child, taking away his or her cell phone, or removing TV or activity privileges -- whatever fits the seriousness of the offense.

**Let your teenager know how proud you are when she resists the peer pressure to drink.**

Encourage your teen to participate in plenty of fun, supervised activities. According to the NIAAA, kids who are involved in enjoyable activities are less likely to be bored and turn to alcohol for fun. At the same time, keep track of your child's activities so you won't be caught off guard when it turns out he or she wasn't down at the track after school doing extra sports practice. It's always a good idea to give your teen a curfew, so you both know when he should be home.

Next, make sure your teen's environment doesn't convey the message that drinking is acceptable, or that it's a good way to cope with stress, social anxiety, and other problems. Start by looking at yourself -- do you set a good example by staying away from alcohol, or drinking only in moderation? If you come home from a hard day at work and say, "I need a drink," you may be telling your child that alcohol is a good way to deal with stress. Give your teen some tips on healthy ways to deal with stress or problems, like exercising, listening to music, or talking things out. Make sure your kids know that even though alcohol is legal (for adults), it can be just as dangerous as illegal drugs when misused.

Watch out for movies, TV shows, magazine ads, and other ways your teen could get the message that drinking is just part of a normal high school existence. Discuss media images and the difference between them and real life.

Help your teen figure out ways to deal with peer pressure ahead of time. What should her response be if someone offers her a drink at a party, or someone who has been drinking offers her a ride home? The NIAAA says the best course is to be firm in saying no and to not make excuses. You should also let your child know how you will support her -- maybe by offering to pick her up anytime, anywhere, with no lecturing if she finds herself in a difficult situation.

Be aware that teens who drink are more likely to be sexually active and to have unprotected sex than teens who do not drink. They're also more likely to have behavioral problems in school and try illicit drugs. So if your teen drinks, be on the lookout for other risky or troublesome behaviors, as well as for mental health issues like depression.

## Teen party pitfalls

One trend that's received a lot of attention is the decision by some parents to host teen parties in their homes and allow guests to bring beer or other drinks. On the surface, it makes sense; if the party is under your roof, you can make sure no one drinks and drives. Unfortunately, it doesn't always work that way. When large numbers of kids gather in one house, it's almost impossible to monitor what everyone is doing, or take the car keys away from every driver who has been drinking. Equally important, underage drinking is illegal, and in some states you could face jail time for allowing teen partygoers to drink in your home.

What's more, drinking parties often involve binge drinking, which has been associated with violence, sexual assault, rape, and alcohol poisoning. Even if you're at home when your teen is having a party, it's unlikely that you will be able to monitor everything that's going on behind closed doors. It's possible such an incident could occur under your roof.

To address this growing problem, communities across the country are passing laws that hold adults accountable when an underage drinking party is held in their home. Some communities have passed what are called "social host liability laws," which means adults who serve or provide alcohol to those under 21 can be held criminally liable if a minor is killed or injured, or kills or injures another person at the party or on the way home.

Other laws, known as teen party ordinances, make it illegal to host a party where underage youth are drinking. Under these laws, simply allowing a drinking party to be held with your knowledge is a crime. In other words, you are liable simply if alcohol is present at the party -- even if you did not provide it -- and you can be held accountable whether or not any injury or damage occurs.

Even if there aren't teen party ordinances in your community, in almost every state it is illegal to give alcohol to minors who are not in your family.

So be forewarned -- trying to be the "cool" parent may come with a high price tag. Though sometimes it may not seem like it, your kids look to you for guidance. Studies show that parents can have a huge influence on their kids' behavior. In fact, the main reason children choose not to drink is because they don't want to incur their parents' disapproval. In spite of the eye rolls and the foot-dragging, kids do listen. And what you say and do can make a difference.

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