



It's good to know some of the research about the issue, but how does that help you parent? The following suggestions and information may provide you with food for thought, ideas for a conversation or something to investigate more in-depth. Underage drinking is a difficult issue for you and your teenager. The more you know, the better off your family will be.

### Practical tips:

#### 1. Teens drink for a number of different reasons – be aware of your teen's vulnerabilities.

There is no silver bullet to ensure your teenager will wait until their 21st birthday to decide whether they will drink or not. Every teenager is different and addressing this issue may look different each time you go through it. As you begin the discussion with your teen, it is important to understand why your teen may be drinking or even considering drinking.

Before you can address a behavior, it is important to know a little about why teens may be drinking in the first place. Teens report drinking because:

- They are bored and drinking gives them something to do
- They feel pressured by others to do so
- They are trying to escape from the challenges of their lives
- They believe it's a way to celebrate or blow off steam

#### 2. The conversation, rules and consequences have to involve things important to your teen.

Before you can have important discussions, set boundaries or dole out consequences, you have to create a conversation that is tailored to your teen. You cannot address underage drinking in a vacuum – the discussion has to include what is important to your teen.

What would they hate to lose or give up? Begin by simply talking about their passions: whether it is sports, drama, spending time with friends or driving the family car, the realities and consequences of underage drinking must have a personal connection to things and people they care about. For instance:

- You could lose your place on the team
- You could jeopardize your possibilities for a scholarship
- You could be injured and not be able to participate in an event

- You could hurt someone and have to live with that guilt forever
- You could be taken to jail
- You could lose your driving privileges

The reasons that will persuade your teen not to drink must be reasons that are real and important to them. The consequences you establish for breaking the rules can also involve the loss of these privileges to serve as a reminder when future decisions are made. And remember it is just as important to reward good behavior as it is to address mistakes.

#### 3. You have to set a good example.

This may begin with whether, and how, you choose to use alcohol -- but it doesn't end there. To have meaningful discussions with your kids, you have to be an involved parent. You cannot burst onto the scene, throw out consequences and then retreat. You have to participate in their lives for them to really hear you say how much you care about them, and why you want them to wait to make decisions about alcohol when they are older and more physically and emotionally ready.

Obviously setting a good example can begin with never driving after you have had something to drink. However, you must also set a good example in the choices you make on a daily basis. If you're asking your kids to honor the law, you need to honor the law. "Do as I say" just doesn't cut it with most teens. You shouldn't be surprised when kids break the rules if you are asking them to do things you are not doing yourself.

#### 4. Remember that mistakes are often an important part of the process.

Deciding whether you are going to drink alcohol is not a one time choice for teenagers. It is something that they may be faced with every week, on multiple occasions. They must decide to "just say no" on Friday night, Saturday night and maybe even several times each night. Or maybe they are pressured to drink on a Tuesday. According to teens, alcohol is almost always available and there are ample opportunities to make mistakes. This decision is ongoing, so your conversations should be ongoing as well.

Remember that one bad decision does not make a bad kid. Certainly rules and consequences are non-negotiable and teens need boundaries. But keep things in perspective and do not over-react if your teen does make a bad decision. Sometimes being caught breaking a rule can provide parents with a "teachable moment" that can affect future decisions and behaviors.

It is tough being a teenager. Most of them are doing the best they can to try and please a lot of people. Acknowledge that mistakes may be a part of the process and show compassion if and when you are required to dole out those consequences.

#### 5. Use specific examples of the impact of the misuse of alcohol.

Talking about alcohol-related problems in the life of a family member, friend or acquaintance may help make the topic more real. Most of the time, issues have to be first-hand to get the attention of cynical teens. Making poor choices about alcohol only begins with underage drinking, but the risks continue throughout life. Every family has someone they know and maybe love who has dealt with difficulties caused by alcohol. Whether the problem is alcoholism and its dramatic consequences or the devastating impact of impaired driving, you should consider talking openly about the impact of alcohol on the lives of people you know. This might provide some motivation for your teen to wait until the age of 21 to make their decision about drinking.

#### 6. Work to have a two-way conversation.

However difficult it may be, you must work hard to have a conversation with your kids instead of lecturing them. Pay attention to your tone of voice, facial expressions and body language. While eye-rolling and sighing may be your initial response, try to create an environment where your teen feels comfortable and validated in expressing his or her thoughts and opinions.

**When all is said and done**  
Underage drinking is a serious societal problem. As a parent, you can help shape the behavior and attitude of your children as it relates to alcohol. You can help to protect your child from the dangers of underage drinking. The best way to influence your child to avoid drinking before age 21 is to have a strong, trusting relationship with him or her. Research shows that children ages 10 and 11 whose parents fostered communication, were highly involved and set clear expectations were more likely to see underage drinking as harmful and were less likely to initiate early alcohol use. When those pre-teens turned 17 and 18, they were also less likely to use alcohol.

You can make a difference. Start the conversation today. For more information, please visit [www.madd.org](http://www.madd.org).

Underage drinking:  
You can prevent it when they're under your influence.



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## Parents want the best for their children.

In most homes, parents are willing to do whatever it takes to keep their kids safe. In their infancy, we have them immunized to ward off disease. When they begin to establish independence as young children we discuss “stranger danger” to give them skills to protect themselves. We set curfews and emphasize safe driving habits as our teens receive a driver’s license. And we are even willing to talk about the dangers of illicit drug use. As parents we set boundaries to keep our children safe.

However preventing teens from drinking before they are 21 may be the most difficult issue for a parent to discuss. Teen drinking is often thought of as a rite of passage, glamorized by teens on television shows and romanticized in almost every teen movie. It is a legal activity for adults and was often done with minimal consequences by the parents who are now trying to talk to their teens. Needless to say, tip-toeing through the pitfalls of a conversation about underage drinking leaves many parents speechless.



**This brochure is to help dispel myths, present truth and provide tools for talking to your kids about underage drinking.**

There are many good reasons why parents struggle with the conversation about teen drinking. Parents may not:

1. Fully understand the risks associated with underage drinking
2. Know how to defend the 21 minimum drinking age law and feel hypocritical establishing rules about underage drinking
3. Think their teens are drinking
4. Feel as if their teens will listen to them

### 1. You may not understand the risks associated with underage drinking.

Underage alcohol use is more likely to kill young people than all illegal drugs combined (Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance, 2002). It is a factor in the three leading causes of death for teens, and yet it remains unaddressed in many homes. Unlike their parents and grandparents, teens are now drinking with the goal of getting drunk. While underage drinking rates may have hit a plateau, or even declined in some cases, binge drinking rates remain high with teen apathy rising. For many teens, underage drinking is not just a weekend pastime. Tragically, there are an estimated 3.3 million teenagers in the U.S. who are alcoholics.

For some reason, parents struggle with whether to restrict their teens from drinking, despite the laws. Allowing your child to consume alcohol before the legal age of 21 can have serious negative effects:

- Among drinkers, those who had their first drink before the age of 13 were twice as likely to have unplanned sex, and more than twice as likely to have unprotected sex (Hingson, 2003).
- In 2003, 77 percent of high school seniors reported using alcohol; in comparison, 53 percent smoked cigarettes; 46 percent used marijuana, and 8 percent used cocaine (Monitoring The Future, 2004).
- In 2000, 2,339 youth ages 15-20 died in alcohol-related crashes. That’s 50 per week. (NHTSA 2000)
- Individuals who begin drinking at 14 are four times more likely to become alcoholics than those who postpone drinking until 21. (Hingson)
- Alcohol impacts both behavior and brain function differently in adolescents and adults. Adolescents are more vulnerable than adults to the effects of alcohol on learning and memory (White, 2003).
- The brain continues to develop into the early twenties and so prematurely introducing alcohol can seriously affect how the brain develops. Compared with a young non-drinker, a 15-year-old with an alcohol problem has showed poor brain activity during a memory task. This finding is noted by the lack of pink and red coloring.

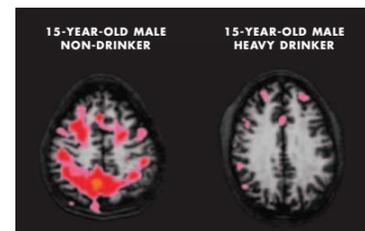
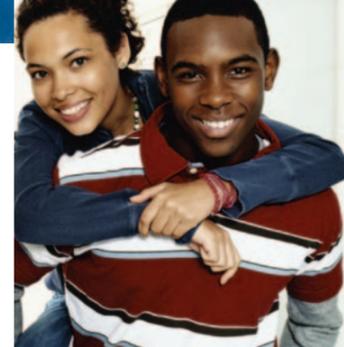


Image from Susan Tapert, PhD, University of California, San Diego.



### 2. You may not know how to defend the 21 minimum drinking age law and feel hypocritical establishing rules about underage drinking.

Many adults may not understand the need for the 21 minimum drinking age laws. And often after a teen drinking tragedy, the community begins to question the minimum drinking age laws. Adults may believe that without the restrictions teens wouldn’t feel as compelled to take the same risks. Other parents may believe that teens should be taught to drink responsibly.

Unfortunately, few voices are out there to defend the minimum drinking age law, to explain its relevance or to counter what might appear to be logical opposition. However this law has been able to reduce traffic fatalities involving drivers 18 to 20 years old by 13 percent and has saved an estimated 22,798 lives between 1975 and 2003. (NHTSA, 2003).

#### The following comments may sound familiar:

#### **If underage drinking wasn’t prohibited, it wouldn’t be so appealing to teens.**

In Europe, where the drinking age is often 16 or 18, alcohol abuse is a significant problem among teens, despite arguments to the contrary. According to the Prevention Research Center, European teens drink more often, more heavily and get drunk more often than American teens.

#### **We just need to teach our kids to drink responsibly like they do in Europe.**

The claim that Europeans learn to drink moderately and safely in a family setting is a myth. (Prevention Resource Center) And in case you’re under the impression that European teens are drinking responsibly, when compared to the U.S., the rate of binge drinking (five or more drinks in a row) was higher in every country except Turkey. In America, 22 percent of surveyed teens binge drank in the past 30 days. In Denmark, it was 60 percent, in Germany 57 percent, in Britain 54 percent and in Italy, 34 percent of teens were binge drinking every month.

### **If you’re old enough to die for your country in war, why can’t you have a beer at 18?**

One of the most compelling defenses against this logic is the fact that before the 21 minimum drinking age laws were enacted, the military was routinely and tragically losing countless young soldiers in alcohol-related crashes before or between their military assignments. By saving these young soldiers, the 21 laws have protected our military.

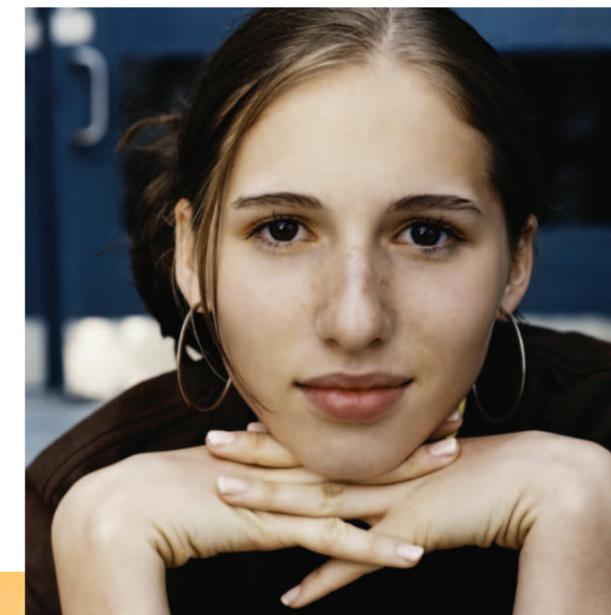
Another counter to this argument is that the 21 drinking age laws are not based on responsibility, but physiology. The human brain does not finish its development until a person’s early twenties. Further, the developing brain is very vulnerable to alcohol. While it is difficult to measure capacity and success, there are scientific indications that future potential is lost due to early alcohol use.

#### **I drank as a teen and I’m fine.**

This may appear like good anecdotal evidence that if you can survive teen drinking, anyone can. However there is new and evolving research that has the potential to change our perspective on teen drinking. Researchers are now able to measure diminished brain capacity and memory loss in teen drinkers. We are still learning how much alcohol it takes and how long the drinking must occur before the damage begins or causes significant problems. Just the possibility of limited potential should be enough to worry parents, caregivers and caring adults.

Parents must remember that there are more teens with access to faster cars driving on overcrowded roads.

There are probably a number of things that we may have done that we would prefer our kids didn’t do. Until they are 21, drinking should be one of them.



### 3. You may not think your teen is drinking.

Don’t make assumptions when your teen’s safety is on the line. Even if they aren’t drinking, they may have friends who are and are putting them at risk.

- In 2004, more than 40 percent of kids have had a drink of alcohol by the time they finish 8th grade. (MTF)
- In 2004, nearly 50 percent of 12th graders have had a drink of alcohol in the last 30 days.
- Almost all (95%) high school seniors believe it is easy to get alcohol and about half of them don’t view binge drinking on weekends as a great risk. (MTF 2004)
- Among teens aged 13 to 18, two out of three said it is easy to get alcohol from their homes without parents knowing about it. (AMA 2005)
- According to a 2005 study, girls nearly always ranked higher than boys in obtaining alcohol. (AMA 2005)
- One in four teens has attended a party where minors were drinking in front of parents. (AMA 2005)

### 4. You may not feel like your teen will listen.

In study after study, young people cite their parents as a primary factor in their decisions – typically higher than the emphasis placed on friends. Despite how it feels, you are being heard...above the music, in the midst of the cell phone calls and despite the continuous clicking of the keys on their computer keyboard. Don’t stop talking.

You can make a difference. Protect your teen’s brain and their future.