

Guest Editorial to the Mobile Register

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Underage drinking continues to be a major concern not only in the Mobile community but also nationwide. Recent statistics indicate that among youth 12-17 years of age more than 7.2 million drank at least once in the past year and 2.7 million drank about once a month or more in the past year. These statistics are from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Household Survey on Drug Abuse.

Teenagers begin drinking at an early age, many consuming their first drink around twelve years of age. Some studies show, however, that one third of fourth graders and more than half of sixth graders say they have been pressured by friends to drink alcohol. By the time they are high school seniors, more than 80% of students say they have used alcohol. Teenagers who begin drinking before age fifteen are four times more likely to become alcoholics. Alcohol consumption has also been linked to as many as two thirds of all date rapes and sexual assaults. Alcohol is the number one killer of teenagers in automobile accidents. Consequences of teenage drinking are far reaching and can be devastating to individual teens and the culture.

Peer pressure is the number one reason that teens drink alcohol. The need for social acceptance among peer groups is tremendous and kids will engage in many behaviors in which parents may not approve in order to be accepted by a social group. Drinking is the most common behavior. Alcohol is easily accessible. Most teens will say that they get alcohol from friends or family, can easily purchase their own alcohol at certain stores and have access to fake identification cards. Surveys indicate that boredom, stress, and thrill seeking are also reasons teens drink. Divorce, job loss, death or serious illness of a parent or sibling, change of school or residence, and drug use are all issues that bring anxiety and stress to teens. Unsupervised teens that are bored or impulsive are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior. Juvenile authorities tell us that most juvenile crimes occur between three and seven in the evening when children and teens are unsupervised.

A recent study by the Century Council found that nearly half of all mothers think underage drinking is acceptable in certain circumstances and expected to occur during the teen years. The study also noted that mothers underestimate the occurrence of underage drinking among their own daughters and misjudge the seriousness of the issue. That is why parents' attitude and actions matter. When we convey an attitude of acceptance, teens will think it is o.k. Parents' attitude is the key to deterrence of underage drinking. Studies show teens that have a healthy relationship with parents are less likely to drink.

Underage drinking can result in a variety of consequences: academic failure, social problems (such as running around with the wrong group of friends), physical problems, sexual activity, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, memory impairment, increased risk of suicide, car wrecks, and injury or death as a result of alcohol use and abuse. Another consequence of underage drinking is the link to later addiction. The younger a teen begins drinking the greater the chance of alcohol abuse later in life. Other factors related to the probability of alcohol use are genetic factors and impulsivity and aggressiveness of children.

Recent discoveries in brain development have emphasized that brain maturation in teenagers is not complete in some areas of the brain until the young adult reaches the mid- twenties. Areas affected include the pre-frontal cortex and hippocampus. These areas affect learning, judgment and memory and were found to be smaller in alcoholic dependent seventeen-year-olds. The effect of alcohol on learning, judgment and memory during the teen years should be a major deterrent for alcohol use.

These are many reasons parents should be vigilant in teaching teens about the dangers of alcohol use. Start early talking about alcohol and its dangers. School age children can begin to learn the health consequences of alcohol use as they learn to protect their own bodies. By the time kids are in middle school they need to know how to say "no" to peers who offer them a drink. Unless a parent accompanies a teen 24 hours a day, he cannot stop a teen from drinking. But parents can make a difference in a teenager's choice to drink alcohol. A parent's attitude and actions toward drinking can influence a teen's decision to drink. What can parents do to minimize the likelihood that their teen will participate? Below are some suggestions to parents to discourage teens from drinking alcohol:

1. Convey a “no tolerance” policy for drinking. It is against the law for anyone under the age of 21 to drink in our state. That should be enough reason for parents to say “no” to underage drinking. Most cities have ordinances against underage drinking parties in private homes. Parents can be fined or serve jail time for allowing alcohol to be consumed in their homes.
2. Never leave your home unattended overnight. Your teen may not be a party animal, but it is likely that other teens who know the parents are out of town may come (invited or not) and turn your home or just your yard into a party place. Parents are liable for what happens even if they are not at home.
3. Don’t be afraid to check on where your teens are going. Many times a teen will say “my friend is having a party” and “yes, the parents are going to be home.” Call and check with parents to make sure the party will be chaperoned and that alcohol will not be allowed.
4. Network with other parents to provide safe places for teens to gather. Make sure that other parents are not allowing teens to drink on their property. Agree to notify one another if parents become aware that a teen is drinking.
5. Talk to your teenager about the dangers of underage drinking, i.e. impaired judgment, death, addiction, illegal behavior, sexual assault, a juvenile record. Show them newspaper articles about alcohol related deaths and statistical studies about teenage alcohol use. This provides credibility to information you are telling them.
6. Talk to your teens about having fun without engaging in behavior that is dangerous and/or illegal. Encourage activities that will allow them to have fun without the pressures of drinking. Encourage after school activities in which they can have fun and excel.
7. Listen to your teens. Let them talk to you about pressures they encounter and help them make good decisions. Encourage them and build their self confidence with your attitude and love for them.
8. Don’t drink in front of your teenagers. They are pressured enough without having to watch parents drink in front of them. If you choose to drink, show them you can drink responsibly and can abstain when appropriate. Lock up liquor in your home. Better yet, do not keep liquor in your home while your minor children are living with you.
9. Report to the police any underage drinking parties in your neighborhood.
10. Make agreements with teens about privileges, such as driving a car and going out with friends, that can be suspended if a teen is caught drinking.
11. Teaching children age appropriate facts concerning alcohol use will educate children about the dangers. Talking to kids about how to say “no” when someone offers them a drink will equip them to handle the situation when parents are not around.

Parents can influence the decision of teens to drink by their responsible actions as parents and attitudes toward drinking and obeying law.

Parents’ attitude toward alcohol abuse is a powerful tool in preventing it in their children. Be vigilant in preventing underage drinking. It could save lives.

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