

Alcohol: Your Child and Drugs

Guidelines for Parents

The American Academy of Pediatrics is an organization of 47,000 pediatricians dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.

Now available: *Caring for Your Adolescent: Ages 12 to 21*, containing 300 plus pages of advice for parents of teenagers and young adults, available at the special discount price of \$19.95, more than 15 percent off the \$24.50 list price. To order your copy, send your check or money order for \$19.95, plus \$4.50 shipping and handling, to: AAP Publications – Adolescent Book, 141 Northwest Point Blvd, PO Box 927, Elk Grove Village, IL 60009-0927.

For additional copies, contact:
American Academy of Pediatrics
Division of Publications
141 Northwest Point Blvd
PO Box 927
Elk Grove Village, IL 60009-0927

Minimum order 100
Price \$23.50/100 (members)
\$28.50/100 (nonmembers)
Copyright ©1991
HE0059



American Academy
of Pediatrics



2/94

American Academy
of Pediatrics



Alcohol: Your Child and Drugs

Why parents should worry

Children are challenged at younger ages than ever before to try drugs. Tobacco. Marijuana. Cocaine. However, the drug most often overlooked is the one most commonly abused—alcohol.

Alcohol is a legal drug for adults and it is found in many homes. As a result, it often is the first drug that most young people try. They are encountering drugs at increasingly younger ages.

- One out of 3 fourth graders believe that drinking is a “big problem” in their age-group.
- About 1 out of 7 fourth graders already have consumed alcohol to the point of intoxication.
- Four out of 10 sixth graders say there is pressure from other students to drink alcohol.
- Three million children aged 14 to 17 are problem drinkers.

Most young people admit that the main reason they drink is to get “high.” This explains why they often drink until they are drunk and out of control. A recent survey showed that 41% of high school seniors engage in this kind of binge drinking at least once every 2 weeks. Teenagers, like some adults, drink to escape problems, such as depression or family conflict. Others use alcohol as a way to fit in with their peer groups or to reduce their social uneasiness. Peer group pressure is one of the major reasons for adolescent drinking.

Parents who are alcoholics or problem drinkers place their children at increased risk for drug dependence. Studies suggest that a tendency toward alcoholism may run in the family. One out of 5 young adults with an alcoholic parent has become addicted to drugs.

Alcohol is a so-called “gateway drug” through which children first experience intoxication. After “getting high” this way, studies show that they may be more likely to try other drugs while drinking. Multiple drug use is dangerous. Mixing alcohol with another drug, such as marijuana, may distort the senses and cause motor-coordination problems. The effects of marijuana can linger in the system for days.

The use of alcohol, by itself or with other drugs, can retard the normal growth and development of young people. This may cause mental or physical harm.

Alcohol lowers inhibitions and it can lead to such risk-taking behavior as petty crime and violence. The costs in terms of poor school-work, family pain, and lost potential are high.

Alcohol also is known to lower normal social and personal restraints. Drinking is linked to greater sexual activity and promiscuity. This conduct can lead to unintended teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Teenage pregnancies have increased; 4 out of 10 girls will become pregnant during their teen years. Once pregnant, alcohol exposes the unborn baby to great risks. If a mother drinks while pregnant, the child could be born with major birth defects. This condition is called the Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

Youth and alcohol: a deadly mix

Driving under the influence has become the **leading cause of death** for young adults, aged 15 to 24 years. This age-group makes up only one fifth of the licensed drivers in the United States, yet they are involved in almost one half of all fatal car crashes. Young people tend to take more risks behind the wheel. This tendency and their inexperience as drivers creates a deadly mix.

- In 1984, 8,000 young adults between the ages of 15 and 24 died in auto accidents; in the same year another 220,000 were injured.
- Nearly half of all deaths among those 15 to 19 years old involve traffic accidents in which alcohol was a factor.

Stages of use

The basic attraction of alcohol or any other mood-altering drug is that it distorts the senses and produces a false sense of freedom and pleasure. It is this easy pleasure that leads a person to drink more and more often. This conduct often contributes to later problems with other drugs.

The same pattern of abuse exists for alcohol as with other mood-altering drugs such as marijuana or cocaine. Experts have noted these stages of drug use:

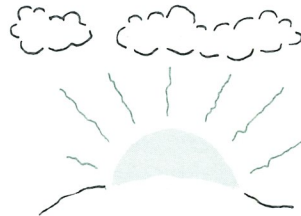
Experimenting with drugs. There is strong peer pressure to enter this stage "just for fun" and to be part of the group. Most use occurs on weekends and there often is no change in conduct between times of use.

Actively seeking drugs. A threshold toward dependence is crossed when the drug is used to produce good feelings during times of stress. Usage extends to midweek. There may be a marked change in conduct and schoolwork may slip.

Preoccupation with drugs. There is an almost total loss of control over the use of the drug. Attempts to limit drug use at this stage can cause withdrawal symptoms of depression, moodiness, and irritability. Family possessions may disappear as the drug user seeks money to support his habit. There may be trouble with the law for these same reasons.

Parents must learn the signs and symptoms of alcohol abuse among their children. Many young persons and adults are taken to the doctor too late for help. **Only 1 out of 4 recovers from the advanced stages of drug abuse.** The recovery rate is much higher for cases treated in the earlier stages.

Most adolescents never advance beyond the trial stage in drug use. Whether they do or do not depends for the most part on their personality, their family, and their community. Parents and professionals must try to halt this process.



How to prevent alcohol abuse

As with any disease, prevention is the best treatment. Parents must learn the facts about teen alcohol abuse in order to help their children remain drug free.

Parents should set a good example at home by limiting their own use of alcohol, cigarettes, and medications. The conduct modeled at home sets the stage for a child's later actions. Parents who don't drink should be aware that this alone will not guarantee that their children won't abuse drugs.

Parents who do choose to use alcohol in moderation must be careful how this drug is used in the home. Having a drink should never be shown as a way to cope with problems. Don't drink under unsafe conditions—driving the car, mowing the lawn, using the stove, etc. Never make light of getting drunk; make sure that your children understand that it is neither funny nor acceptable. Show your children that there are many ways to have fun without alcohol. Drinking does not always have to be a part of happy occasions or special events.

Education about alcohol should begin early. Give your children a sense of confidence and the means to resist peer pressure. This is their best defense against drug use or any other unacceptable behavior. Programs offered in schools, churches, and youth groups can help young people learn more about drug abuse.

Parents can further influence their children to say "no" to drug use in these ways:

- Build your child's self-esteem and avoid frequent criticism.
- Listen to what they say. Pay attention to them, and be helpful during periods of loneliness or doubt.
- Offer advice about handling strong emotions and feelings. Model how to control mental pain or tension.
- Discuss topics of concern to them, including alcohol, drugs, and the need for peer group acceptance.
- Encourage enjoyable and worthwhile outside things to do; avoid turning too much of their leisure time into chores.

Your pediatrician understands that good communication between parents and children is one of the best ways to prevent drug use. If talking to your child becomes a problem, your doctor may provide the key to opening the lines of communication. If you suspect your child is using alcohol or any other drug, rely on your pediatrician for advice and help.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.