

[addiction](#)

Underage Drinking and Teen Alcohol Use

It's normal for parents to worry about their children using alcohol. But there are ways to help your teen cope with the pressures to drink and make better choices.



The dangers of underage drinking

If you've discovered your child or teen is drinking alcohol, it's normal to feel upset, angry, and worried. Underage drinking can have serious implications that may not show up until later in your child's life. Using alcohol at a young age can impact how a teen's brain develops, disrupt their sleeping patterns, delay puberty, make it harder to concentrate at

school, and even increase their risk for liver and heart disease, high blood pressure, and certain types of cancer.

On top of that, there are also emotional and behavioral consequences to underage drinking. Alcohol use can affect a teen's mood and personality, trigger depression, anxiety, or suicidal thoughts, and lead to an increase in risky behavior such as driving while impaired, having unprotected sex, fighting, stealing, or skipping school.

Kids and teens are more likely to binge drink and are more vulnerable to developing a [problem with alcohol](#) than adults. Experts believe this may be because the pleasure center of a teen's brain matures before their capacity to make sound decisions. In other words, they're able to experience pleasure from alcohol before they're able to make the right choices about when and how much to drink. This can lead them to do things that are at best embarrassing, at worst life-threatening to themselves or others.

While parenting an adolescent is rarely easy, it's important to remember that you can still have a major impact on the choices your child makes, especially during their preteen and early teen years. With these guidelines, you can find the best way to talk to your child about alcohol, address any underlying problems, and help them to make smarter choices in the future.

Why kids and teens drink

The adolescent years can be a time of great upheaval. The physical and hormonal changes can create emotional ups and downs as kids struggle to assert their independence and establish their own identities. According to United States government statistics, by age 15, nearly 30% of kids have had at least one drink, and by age 18, that figure leaps to almost 60%. Similar patterns are reported in other countries.

While many teens will try alcohol at some point out of curiosity or as an [act of rebellion or defiance](#), there is no single reason why some decide to drink. The more you understand about potential reasons for underage alcohol use, though, the easier it will be to talk to your child about the dangers and identify any red flags in their behavior.

Reasons why teens drink include:

Peer pressure. This is among the most common reasons for underage drinking. As kids enter their teens, friends exert more and more influence over the choices they make. Desperate to fit in and be accepted, kids are much more likely to drink when their friends

drink. If your child's drinking coincides with a sudden change in peer group, it may be that their new friends are encouraging this negative behavior.

Environmental influences. Films and TV can make it seem that every "cool", independent teenager drinks. Alcohol advertising also focuses on positive experiences with alcohol, selling their brands as desirable lifestyle choices. Social media, in particular, can make your child feel like they're missing out by not drinking or cause them to feel inadequate about how they live their life. You can help by explaining how [social media portrays](#) a distorted rather than realistic view of other people's lives, including their alcohol use.

To cope with an underlying problem. The teen years are tough and kids may turn to alcohol in a misguided attempt to cope with problems such as stress, boredom, the pressure of schoolwork, not fitting in, problems at home, or mental health issues such as [anxiety](#), childhood trauma, ADHD, or depression. Since alcohol is a depressant, using it to [self-medicate](#) will only make problems worse. If your child is regularly drinking on their own or drinking during the day it could be they're struggling to cope with a serious underlying issue.

To appear older, more independent. Teens often want to prove that they're no longer kids. So, if drinking is exclusively for adults only, that's what they'll do. They may also copy your own drinking habits to establish their maturity. Remember that as a parent, your child is much more likely to mimic your actions than listen to your words. No matter how much you preach about the dangers of underage drinking, if you reach for a drink to unwind at the end of a stressful day, your teen may be tempted to follow your example. If you're worried about your child's alcohol use, you may want to make changes to your own drinking habits as well.

They lack parental boundaries. No matter how tall or mature your teen seems, they need boundaries, discipline, and structure as much as ever. While your rules won't be the same or as rigid as when they were younger, having no boundaries can be confusing and overwhelming for a teen. While you can expect a teen to test any boundaries, be clear on what is and isn't acceptable behavior and what the consequences are for breaking your rules.

How to talk to your teen about alcohol

As most parents know only too well, talking to a teen is rarely easy. It's easy to feel discouraged when your attempts to communicate are greeted by a sullen roll of the eyes, an incoherent grunt, or the slamming of a door. Or you may despair at the relentless anger or

indifference your teen displays towards you. But finding a way to talk to your child about alcohol is crucial—whether you're trying to prevent them from drinking in the first place or curb any existing alcohol use.

The earlier your child uses alcohol, the more problems they're likely to experience later in life, so it's never too early to start the conversation. The following strategies can help you open the lines of communication with an adolescent without sparking more conflict:

Choose the right time. Trying to talk to a teen about drinking when they're watching their favorite show, texting with their friends, or in the midst of a heated argument with you about something else isn't going to be productive. Choose a time when your teen hasn't been drinking and you're both calm and focused—and turn off your phone to avoid distractions.

Find common ground. Attempting to dive straight in to a discussion about drinking may be a quick way to trigger an unpleasant fight. A better tactic is to find an area of common ground, such as sports or movies. Once you're able to peacefully discuss a common interest, it may be easier to get your teen talking about the more sensitive issue of alcohol use.

Make it a conversation rather than a lecture. Allow your teen to talk and open up about their thoughts and opinions, and try to listen without being critical, disapproving, or judgmental. They want to feel heard and understood, so even when you don't like or agree with what they're saying, it's important to withhold blame and criticism.

Discuss reasons not to drink. Teenagers often feel invincible—that nothing bad will ever happen to them—so preaching about the long-term health dangers of underage drinking may fail to discourage them from using alcohol. Instead, talk to your teen about the effects drinking can have on their appearance—bad breath, bad skin, and weight gain from all the empty calories and carbs. You can also talk about how drinking makes people do embarrassing things, like peeing themselves or throwing up.

Emphasize the message about drinking and driving. If your teen goes to a party and chooses to have a drink, it's a mistake that can be rectified. If they drink and then drive or get into a vehicle driven by someone else who's been drinking, that mistake could be a fatal one—for them or someone else. Ensure they always have an alternative means of getting home, whether that's a taxi, a ride share service, or calling you to pick them up.

Keep the conversation going. Talking to your teen about drinking is not a single task to tick off your to-do list, but rather an ongoing discussion. Things can change quickly in a

teenager's life, so keep making the time to talk about what's going on with them, keep asking questions, and keep setting a good example for responsible alcohol use.

Plan ways to help your child handle peer pressure

As a teenager, your child is likely to be in social situations where they're offered alcohol—at parties or in the homes of friends, for example. When all their peers are drinking, it can be hard for anyone to say “no.” While fitting in and being socially accepted are extremely important to teens, you can still help them find ways to decline alcohol without feeling left out.

Having strategies planned ahead of times can help your child better handle peer pressure and resist the need to drink.

- Suggest reasons they can use to explain why they're not drinking, such as “I don't like drinking,” “I have homework to finish,” “I have to be up early for a game,” “My parents are picking me up,” or, “I'll get grounded if I'm caught drinking again.”
- Teach them to only accept a beverage when they know exactly what's in it.
- Make sure they have an exit strategy if they feel uncomfortable in a situation where people are drinking alcohol. That could involve a signal they make to a friend, a prepared excuse they have for leaving, or a text they send to you.
- Encourage them to have alternate plans, like going to the movies or watching a game, so they're less tempted to spend all night in a drinking environment.

Helping a teen who's already drinking

As disturbing as it can be to find out that your child or teen has been drinking, it's important to remember that many teens try alcohol at some point, but that doesn't mean they automatically have an abuse problem. Your goal should be to discourage further drinking and encourage better decision-making in the future.

It's important to remain calm when confronting your teen, and only do so when everyone is sober. Explain your concerns and make it clear that your fears come from a place of love. Your child needs to feel you are supportive and that they can confide in you.

Get to know your teen's friends—and their parents. If their friends drink, your teen is more likely to as well, so it's important you know where your teen goes and who they hang out with. By getting to know their friends, you can help to identify and discourage negative influences. And by working with their friends' parents, you can share the responsibility of

monitoring their behavior. Similarly, if your teen is spending too much time alone, that may be a red flag that they're having trouble fitting in.

Monitor your teen's activity. Keep any alcohol in your home locked away and routinely check potential hiding places your teen may have for alcohol, such as under the bed, between clothes in a drawer, or in a backpack. Explain to your teen that this lack of privacy is a consequence of having been caught using alcohol.

Talk to your teen about underlying issues. Kids face a huge amount of stress as they navigate the teenage years. Many turn to alcohol to relieve stress, cope with the pressures of school, to deal with major life changes, like a move or divorce, or to [self-medicate a mental health issue](#) such as anxiety or depression. Talk to your child about what's going on in their life and any issues that may have prompted their alcohol use.

Lay down rules and consequences. Remind your teen that underage drinking is illegal and that they can be arrested for it. Your teen should also understand that drinking alcohol comes with specific consequences. Agree on rules and punishments ahead of time and stick to them—just don't make hollow threats or set rules you cannot enforce. Make sure your spouse agrees with the rules and is also prepared to enforce them.

Encourage other interests and social activities. Some kids drink alone or with friends to alleviate boredom; others drink to gain confidence, especially in [social situations](#). You can help by exposing your teen to healthy hobbies and activities, such as team sports, Scouts, and after-school clubs. Encouraging healthy interests and activities can help to boost their self-esteem and [build resilience](#), qualities that make teens less likely to develop problems with alcohol.

Get outside help. You don't have to tackle this problem alone. Teenagers often rebel against their parents but if they hear the same information from a different authority figure, they may be more inclined to listen. Try seeking help from a sports coach, family doctor, [therapist](#), or counselor.

If your teen has an alcohol use disorder

You've found bottles of alcohol hidden in your child's room and regularly smelled alcohol on their breath. You've noted the steep drop-off in their schoolwork, abrupt changes in their behavior, and the loss of interest in their former hobbies and interests. Spotting these signs may indicate your child is abusing alcohol.

Witnessing your child struggle with a drinking problem (also known as “alcohol use disorder”) can be as heartbreaking as it is frustrating. Your teen may be falling behind at school, disrupting family life, and even stealing money to finance their habit or getting into legal difficulties. But you’re not alone in your struggle. Drinking problems affect families all over the world from every different background.

While you can’t do the hard work of overcoming a drinking problem for your child, your patience, love, and support can play a crucial part in their long-term recovery. For more, see: [Helping Someone with a Drinking Problem](#).

Binge drinking and alcohol poisoning

Binge drinking is defined as drinking so much within a short space of time (about two hours) that blood alcohol levels reach the legal limit of intoxication. For kids and teens, that usually means having three or more drinks at one sitting. Young people who binge drink are more likely to miss classes at school, fall behind with their schoolwork, damage property, sustain an injury, or become victims of assault.

Teens’ bodies are less able to process alcohol so they have a tendency to get drunk quicker and stay drunk longer than older drinkers. And since underage drinkers haven’t yet learned their limits with alcohol, they’re at far greater risk of drinking more than their bodies can handle, resulting in an alcohol overdose or alcohol poisoning when they binge drink. Mixing drinks, doing shots, playing drinking games, and natural teenage impulsiveness can all contribute to binge drinking and increase a young person’s risk for alcohol poisoning.

Alcohol poisoning can cause vomiting, confusion, impaired judgment, slow or irregular breathing, loss of consciousness, a drop in body temperature and blood sugar level, and even seizures or death.

What to do if your child develops alcohol poisoning

It can be extremely distressing as a parent to witness the after-effects of your teen’s binge drinking. If your teen is in an unconscious or semiconscious state, their breathing is very slow, their skin clammy, and there’s a powerful odor of alcohol, there’s a strong chance they may have alcohol poisoning.

- Don’t leave them alone to “sleep it off.”
- Turn your child onto their side to avoid them choking if they vomit.

- Call your country's emergency services number (911 in the U.S.) and wait with them for medical help to arrive.

The teen years don't last forever

When your teen abuses alcohol, it's easy to judge yourself or negatively compare your family to others. But it's worth remembering that the teen years don't last forever. With your guidance and support, your child can learn to resist the allure of underage drinking and develop a healthy, responsible relationship with alcohol when they reach adulthood.

If you're a teen with a problem

If you're a child or teen and are worried about your own or a friend's drinking, it's important to reach out to an adult you trust. If you don't feel you can talk to a parent, reach out to a family friend, older sibling, or school counselor, for example, or call one of the helplines listed below.

Acknowledging you have a problem with alcohol is not a sign of weakness or some kind of character defect. In fact, it takes tremendous strength and courage to admit your problem and decide to face up to it. The teenage years can often be challenging and stressful, and it's not unusual for people to turn to alcohol as a way of coping with their issues. But whatever difficulties you're facing at the moment, there is help available and there are healthier, more effective ways of resolving them. The first step is to reach out.

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Get more help

[Kids and Alcohol](#) - How to talk to your kids about alcohol, from preschoolers to teenagers. (KidsHealth)

[Alcohol Poisoning](#) - How to recognize the signs and help someone. (Mayo Clinic)

[Talk. They Hear You](#) - Articles, videos and other resources to help parents deal with underage drinking. (SAMHSA)

[Underage Drinking](#) - Articles providing tips on preventing underage drinking, talking to your child, and recognizing problems. (Drinkaware)

Helplines

In the U.S.: Call [SAMHSA's National Helpline](#) at 1-800-662-4357.

UK: Call Drinkline at 0300 123 1110, visit [Drinkaware](#).

Canada: Download [Finding Quality Addiction Care in Canada](#) for regional helplines.

Australia: Call the [Family Drug Helpline](#) at 1300 660 068.