

# The Solution: Prevention Skills Overview

## Skills and tips to prevent underage drinking

**In this section you will find proven counsel on how parents can help their children remain alcohol-free, divided into four topics:**

1. **The Power of Parents:** Teenagers still listen to their parents more than anybody else.
2. **Bonding:** Children who feel close to their parents are less likely to drink.
3. **Boundaries:** Parents need to set clear rules and expectations about no underage drinking.
4. **Monitoring:** Knowing where your children are, who they're with, and what they are doing helps prevent underage drinking.

"What parents may not realize is that children say parental disapproval of underage drinking is the key reason they have chosen not to drink."

Charles Curie, former Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) administrator, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <sup>1</sup>

## The power of parents

**Parents are the most powerful influence on their children's behavior.**

Believe it or not, teens still listen to their parents. In fact, kids usually listen to their parents more than anybody else, including their friends. In a recent survey on underage drinking, teens reported that parental disapproval is the #1 reason they choose not to drink.

**Parenting tops peer pressure.**

Around puberty, most children naturally begin to push away from their parents. It's a normal part of development. However, as a result, many parents feel that they've suddenly lost the ability to influence their teenagers. It's not true. While parents may feel that their teens are tuning them out and no longer listening to their advice, their teenage children are reporting just the opposite. So as a parent, stay involved. You *do* make a difference!

**Kids need help to stay alcohol-free.**

Education alone will not keep children from using alcohol when there are constant pressures and opportunities to drink. The areas of the brain that encourage impulsivity and risk-taking develop early in teens, while the areas that improve self-control don't develop until the very late teens or early 20s. <sup>2</sup> Parents must stay actively involved to help their children remain alcohol-free.

And staying involved isn't easy. Parents are busier than ever before, with work, managing a home, keeping in touch with family and friends, and helping in the community. Yet making the extra effort to stay closely involved by bonding, setting boundaries, and monitoring will make a powerful difference in keeping your child alcohol free. It is worth the extra effort to have your child grow up addiction-free, with a healthy, fully functioning brain. Putting in a little extra effort now will save a lot of time, grief, and effort later.

### **Parents often underestimate the problem.**

In Idaho, drinking now begins as early as the sixth grade, and parents are often unaware of their child's use of alcohol. In fact, in a national survey, 31 percent of kids who said they had been drunk in the past year had parents who believed their children were nondrinkers.<sup>4</sup>

### **What can parents do?**

First, they can learn and explain how alcohol can damage their child's brain and increase the risk of addiction. Then, they can apply the following three research-proven skills that help prevent underage drinking:

1. Bonding
2. Boundaries
3. Monitoring<sup>5</sup>

## **The Solution: Bonding**

Bonding is a feeling of being loved, connected to and valued by others. Research indicates that children are less likely to drink when their parents are involved in their lives and when children and parents feel close to each other. Family conflict and lack of bonding increase the risk of drinking.<sup>6</sup>

### **1. Create a positive, loving home environment**

To increase family bonding: Think of your child's feelings as an emotional bank account. Each positive thing you say is like a deposit. Each negative comment is a withdrawal. To keep from bankrupting your child's emotional account and damaging the relationship, you need to deposit more positives than negatives.

- Be kind and respectful of each other.
- Do fun activities together on a regular basis.
- Eat dinner together; have pleasant conversation. Research shows teens who regularly eat as a family (at least five times per week) are 33 percent less likely to use alcohol.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Have daily positive interaction

- Take time daily to talk with your children about their interests and activities. Get to know your kids by asking about their lives, hopes, fears and concerns. Stay involved with their education. Kids who make an effort to get good grades and are involved in school activities are far less likely to drink.
- Notice and compliment the good in your child. Try to maintain at least a 4-to-1 ratio of positive comments to negative ones.
- In correcting behavior or giving consequences, make sure your child knows that he or she is still loved.

## 3. Notice your child's emotional well-being

- Help your children become competent and involved in worthwhile activities.<sup>8</sup> Encourage them to cultivate a positive, optimistic attitude.
- Watch for signs of excess stress or depression. These can lead to teen drinking. Help them cope in healthy ways: music, exercise, talking with a counselor, friend, or doctor, etc.
- Take time to listen with empathy to your kids' concerns. Try to spend at least 15 minutes a day of one-on-one time.<sup>9</sup> Repeating a phrase or two back to a child as they talk lets them know they were heard.

# The Solution: Boundaries

Boundaries are the rules and expectations that define what parents expect their children to do or not to do. Unclear rules and expectations leave kids vulnerable to underage drinking. To set clear boundaries:

## 1. Teach the risks of underage drinking

- Begin talking with your child about not drinking alcohol early in life—preferably before age eight.
- Explain the real risks of underage drinking, asking questions to be sure your child understands.
- Emphasize that alcohol is a dangerous drug for your child's still developing brain. Review the dangers of alcohol often as he or she grows up.

## 2. Set clear rules and expectations

- Set clear rules about not drinking alcohol while underage, and establish firm consequences for drinking. Make your expectations clear about what your child should

do if offered alcohol. For example, "If there is alcohol at a party, call me, and I'll pick you up."

- Emphasize that drinking, possessing or attempting to purchase alcohol is illegal before age 21.
- Discuss with your child situations where he or she might be encouraged to use alcohol. Brainstorm and practice ways to say "no." Reinforce that the best way to prevent underage drinking is to simply avoid places where alcohol is present.
- Ask kids for a personal commitment to live by the rules; then post and review the rules at least monthly.
- Consistently enforce the rules by giving appropriate consequences every time.

### 3. Help kids to choose friends wisely

- If your child's friends drink, your child is much more likely to drink too. Peers who drink are the single greatest risk factor for underage alcohol use.<sup>10</sup> Encourage your kids to choose friends who support your family values and no-alcohol rules.
- Get to know your kids' friends and their parents. Just offering friends a ride to the mall gives you a chance to get to know them.
- Discuss your no-alcohol policy with your kids' friends and their parents. Enlist their support to help keep your kids in an alcohol-free environment.
- If you know your child's friends are drinking, should you talk to their parents? Of course you should. The risks of not saying anything are too high, both to their children and yours.

## The Solution: Monitoring

Monitoring is knowing where your children are, who they are with, and what they are doing. Because the teen brain has not fully developed impulse control, inadequate monitoring can leave kids at risk for alcohol use. To improve parental monitoring:

### 1. Know your child's activities

Some parents may question setting a no-alcohol rule because they drank as a teen and feel they "turned out fine." However, new research shows teens today begin drinking earlier and drink more than adults at a sitting, putting them at far greater risk for addiction and brain damage.<sup>11</sup> All parents today need to set firm no-alcohol boundaries.

- Always know where your children are, who they are with, and what they are doing.
- Ensure that your kids have planned activities and appropriate adult supervision.
- Children need fun. Help provide safe, enjoyable, "no-alcohol" fun for your kids and their friends.

- Setting clear boundaries without parental monitoring is ineffective at preventing teen alcohol use. At some level, most kids appreciate parental monitoring. It's very real proof their parents love them enough to care about their well-being.

## 2. Ensure an alcohol-free environment

- Ensure that alcohol is not available to your children at home or from friends, siblings, etc. If they go to a friend's house, call to make sure parents will be home and there will be no alcohol.
- If alcohol appears at a party, instruct your kids that they need to call you, and you will pick them up. Then reward their good behavior.
- If you, as an adult, choose to drink, always keep your alcohol locked up and away from your kids and their friends.

### **If your child is already drinking:**

Don't despair. Many of these prevention techniques can also help your child quit. For more advice and treatment options, click here.

## 3. Maintain monitoring

- Parents be aware that studies show kids are at higher risk for alcohol, drugs, and sexual behavior between the hours of 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., while many parents are still at work.<sup>12</sup>
- Find ways to check on your kids when you are not around, either with phone calls, text messaging or through a neighbor dropping by.
- Drop in occasionally, unannounced. Though they may roll their eyes and seem embarrassed at your presence, the occasional surprise visit lets your children know you could stop by at anytime. Be sure to explain that you do trust your children, but that you love them and want to be certain they're safe

## The Solution: References

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