

# Get Help If You Need It

Sometimes even the best efforts of parents are not enough to prevent alcohol abuse by young people. If that's the case, the best thing to do is seek professional advice immediately.

Your family physician or pediatrician is an excellent source of help. Another might be your minister, priest or rabbi, school guidance counselor or social worker. Treatment for alcohol abuse is available in virtually every community, sometimes through corporate employee assistance programs. Other groups that may be helpful include the American Council on Alcoholism (800-527-5344), the Betty Ford Center (800-854-9211), or Alcoholics Anonymous, which welcomes teens into its meetings, and Al-Anon.

Finding out that your teen has illegally consumed alcohol or gotten drunk once doesn't mean your child is an alcoholic. However, you should focus strongly on this issue to eliminate future episodes.

But if repeated episodes occur, or if you are concerned about the possibility of alcohol abuse by a preteen or teen, experts have identified a number of signs that may indicate trouble:

- A significant decrease in school performance, such as low grades, failed exams or increased absenteeism.
- Withdrawal from family activities, secretiveness, lying, unwillingness to communicate.
- Depression, loss of interest in usual hobbies or activities, excessive mood swings.
- A new set of friends who you feel may be inclined to drink alcohol beverages.
- Financial problems or unexplained accidents or injuries.

Remember that children are constantly changing, and there may be other explanations for a sudden change in behavior. But don't wait to take action. For the sake of your child, seek professional help immediately.

## **Parent strategies**

In addition to talking to your kids about drinking, here are some simple strategies that parents may follow, especially during the teen years:

- If your child is going out for the evening, know exactly where he or she will be, and clearly explain the consequences of being late.
- Stay up and greet your teen when he or she comes home. That action says you care and are paying attention to what's happening.
- Before you go out of town and leave a teen in charge for the weekend, consider very carefully whether he or she can handle the responsibility. Make it clear that throwing a party while you're gone is not an option.

- Teen parties should have adult chaperones, definite time limits, invitation lists, and no gate-crashers. Do not let your teen attend a party that doesn't meet these standards. Many schools host alcohol-free parties after events such as homecoming, prom and graduation to provide teens with fun activities.
- The majority of teen auto accidents are caused by inexperience and immaturity. When your teen gets a driver's license, consider letting him or her drive initially only during daylight hours for short distances or to specific places. Then, as he or she becomes more experienced, gradually increase the range and hours to include nighttime driving and, eventually, full driving privileges.

### **What happens if a teen is arrested for drunk driving?**

Every state imposes severe consequences for being caught driving while intoxicated (DWI) or driving under the influence (DUI). While states have blood-alcohol-content (BAC) limits of .10 or .08 for adults, driving erratically after any drinking can result in a DWI in many states — and an increasing number of states have strict "zero tolerance" laws for teens. These laws prohibit youth from driving after consuming any or a very small amount of alcohol, and youths convicted of alcohol violations may have their licenses revoked.

Here's an example of what can happen when a teen is stopped for drinking and driving:

- The officer who stops the teen will administer field sobriety tests before the teen is taken to the police station for a Breathalyzer test to measure his BAC.
- The teen's car will be towed and stored, with fees assessed for towing and daily storage costs.
- The teen will be fingerprinted, and his parents will be called to take him home. A bail-bond fee may be required for release.
- If a guilty plea is entered, the fine for a first offense is usually a few hundred dollars, in addition to court costs, and in some states, a payment to the state Crime Victim's Compensation Fund. Many people hire an attorney whose fee will usually be several hundred dollars.
- In some states, a teen's driver's license is taken away upon conviction for a period ranging from at least 90 days to a year. An additional cost comes from the license reinstatement fee if the driver's license is revoked. Some states require a jail sentence on the first offense, with community service as an alternative permissible in several states.
- Many states require offenders to attend special alcohol education courses, and those taking them must pay the tuition.
- Many insurance companies automatically revoke auto insurance after a conviction, and families must then buy "high-risk" insurance that typically costs two-to-three times more.

In short, drinking and driving adds up to embarrassment, frequently a loss of driving privileges, a criminal record, financial penalties, and inconvenience.

*This article was derived from the Family Talk guide for parents, developed by an advisory panel of authorities in the fields of education, family therapy, and alcohol treatment, and through conversations with parents and teens. The full guide may be read online or downloaded by clicking on Document Library on [www.familytalkonline.com](http://www.familytalkonline.com).*

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