

Summer fun that is bad for your teens

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June 15th officially starts the summer season for increased teen drinking. According to statistics published by the Maine Office of Substance Abuse, the number of teenagers using alcohol for the first time is the second highest during the summer months. These “first-timers” are usually 8th & 9th graders. However, even the non-first-timers drinking increases during the summer months. Having so much free unscheduled time due to the long summer vacation serves as a catalyst for kids getting together, hanging out, and drinking.

Once a teen has tried drinking, they are more likely to do so again, especially if no negative side effects were experienced during their first try. Similarly, people are creatures of habit; this is no different for teens. If they create a summer lifestyle revolving around alcohol, it will continue unless caught and corrected.

Unfortunately the statistics also tell us that parents are often unaware of when their teen is using alcohol. In 2002, 65% of teens reported using alcohol in their lifetime but only 17% of their parents thought their teens had ever engaged in that type of behavior. Furthermore, when asked about their recent use, 38% of teens said they drank in the past month while only 2% of their parents thought that they did.

So now that you know your teens are at greater risk for drinking in the next few months, how do you discourage it from starting and/or how do you know if they have begun? Here are a few tips:

- Stay involved in your kids’ lives. Know what your children are doing – their activities and how they spend their time. If possible, limit the amount of your teens’ free time. Encourage them to get involved in activities such as summer camp, volunteer work, or a summer job.
- Know who your teen’s friends are and who their parents are. When they go out, ask your children where they are going, who they will be with, and what their plans are. Most importantly, don’t be afraid to check up on what they tell you and compare notes with their friends’ parents.
- Set rules. Even though your teens are getting older and spending more time without you, it’s more important than ever to set rules and expectations and to enforce the rules consistently and fairly. In addition, be sure to praise and reward good behavior when rules are adhered to.
- Be suspicious of subtle changes in behavior such as sleeping, eating, change of friends, and/or elaborating on details of their activities that seem insignificant.
- Be suspicious of changes in attitude such as hostility or lack of cooperation, lack of interest in activities, loss of interest in personal appearances, or heightened secrecy about actions or possessions.
- Be suspicious of unusual odors on their clothes or breath, physical changes such as red eyes or runny nose, or borrowing money often or suddenly needing extra cash.
- If you suspect your son or daughter has been drinking, **ask them**. Surprisingly, many kids will tell the truth when asked directly. If you suspect your teen is lying about their alcohol consumption, it may mean that they are simply avoiding a lecture/being grounded from you but it could also mean that they are trying to hide a very real problem.

Trust your parental instincts and know that there are therapists specializing in alcohol/drug counseling that can help you and your family with this issue.

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