

# Teens and Alcohol What Parents Need to Know

Mary Atwater, Psy.D.  
Licensed Clinical Psychologist  
November 18, 2008





National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

## Alcohol - A leading public health problem in the United States and the **DRUG** of choice for teenagers

Each year more than 5000 children under the age of 21 die as a result of alcohol related car accidents, homicides, suicides, and fatal injuries.



## Alcohol Effects

Just as with adult brains Alcohol effects us Cognitively

Effects our Body - Motor ability e.g. Reactions

However,

Teens lack the judgment, experience and coping skills to handle alcohol wisely, competently.

Research shows early teen drinking leads to an increase in sexual activity, unprotected sex, and risk of becoming a victim of violent crime.

## Moreover

Teen drinking may lead to Binge drinking (5 or more drinks)

Teens who drink before the age of 15 are four times more likely to become alcohol dependent

Research shows that when children delay drinking alcohol as well as sexual activity, they increase social competency e.g. ability to do well in school, make and keep friends, and succeed into adulthood.

Copyright 2004 by Randy Glasbergen.  
www.glasbergen.com



"IF I DO MY HOMEWORK, I'LL GET GOOD GRADES.  
IF I GET GOOD GRADES, YOU'LL SEND ME TO COLLEGE.  
IF I GO TO COLLEGE, I'LL GRADUATE AND GET A JOB.  
IF I GET A JOB, I MIGHT GET FIRED. IF I GET FIRED,  
I COULD GO BANKRUPT AND LOSE EVERYTHING.  
THAT'S WHY I DIDN'T DO MY HOMEWORK!"

**Our Teens still need us even if they don't know it!**

## Why do teens drink?

### The Magic Pill Myth

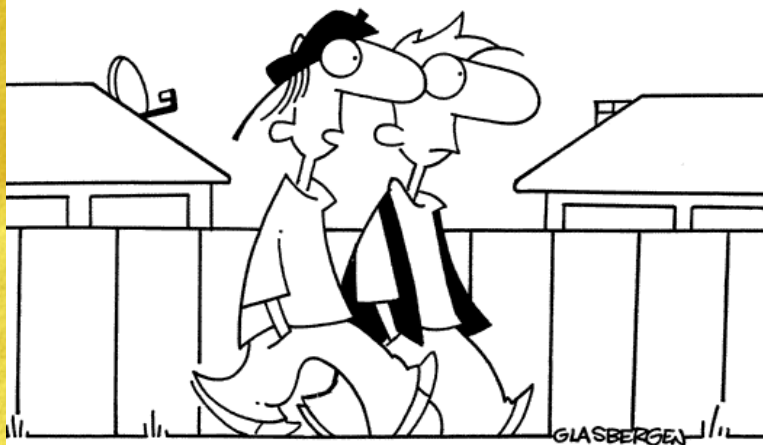
What messages do our Teens get watching TV, in Commercials, and over the Internet?

“If I were different I would be cool, popular, attractive, and happy”. When teens see people drinking they associate drinking with socially competency - having a great time.

Research shows that teens who expect positive effects from alcohol drink earlier and struggle more with alcohol dependence.

## Why Do Teens Drink?

© 2000 Randy Glasbergen. www.glasbergen.com



"I'VE GOTTA BE ME . . . BUT I CAN'T HELP THINKING SOMEONE ELSE WOULD BE MORE QUALIFIED!"

## Why do teens drink?

Adolescence = not a child, not an adult

Their bodies and brains are growing -  
emotionally and cognitively - impatient and unable  
to delay gratification.

Developmentally moving from dependence to  
independence.

Increased risk taking – thrill seeking is actually  
normal part of becoming independent!

## Higher Risk for Dependency on Alcohol

Teens who:

Began drinking before 15

Have parent who models problem drinking

Close friends who abuse alcohol or drugs

Have aggressive, antisocial tendencies

Experienced significant abuse or traumas

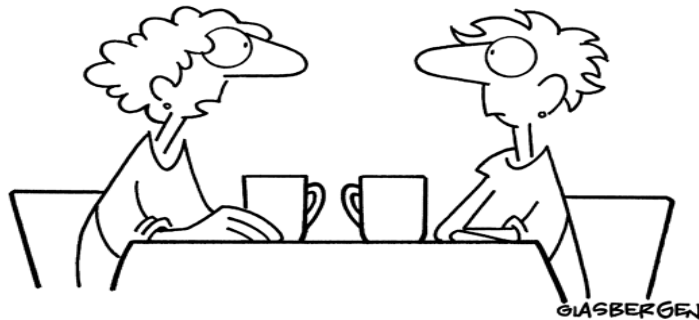
Unresolved and continuous school behavioral  
problems

Lack support and open communication with parents  
and or other significant adults.

## Warning Signs

1. Mood changes: temper, irritability, and defensiveness.
2. School problems: poor attendance, grades, disciplinary.
3. Defiant and oppositional.
4. Switching friends, unwilling to let you know new friends.
5. A “nothing matters” attitude: sloppy appearance, a lack of involvement in old interests, and general low energy.
6. Finding alcohol on your child or smelling alcohol breath.
7. Physical or cognitive problems: poor memory, concentration, bloodshot eyes, lack of coordination, or slurred speech.

Copyright 2005 by Randy Glasbergen.  
[www.glasbergen.com](http://www.glasbergen.com)



**“Discipline and good behavior are the keys to family harmony, so my husband and I do everything our children tell us to.”**

**When we retreat we find ourselves in the  
Danger Zone = Children in Charge**

## Why Communication is so Difficult

### Teen Brains vs.. Adult Brains

FMRI studies demonstrated teens and adults process emotional communication differently.

For many teens they process information from the emotional brain first.

As the brain matures it shifts information processing to the frontal lobe. e.g, executive functioning, reason, planning, organizing, decision making, and impulse control.

## Prevention Requires Willingness

Parents who are willing to:

Establish a loving, honest and trusting relationship

Talk about the tough stuff

Monitor teen's activities and talk with other parents

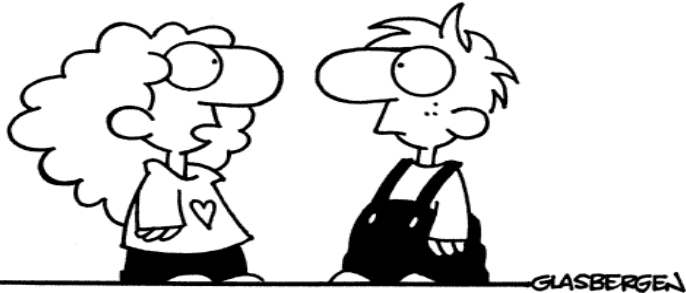
Establish/maintain rules of appropriate behaviors

Set a good example

Know the warning signs

Believe you have the ability to make a difference

Copyright 2002 by Randy Glasbergen.  
www.glasbergen.com



"I'M NOT SURE IF I'M GAY OR STRAIGHT. WHAT'S IT CALLED IF YOU ONLY SLEEP WITH TEDDY BEARS?"

**Remember: Teens are unsure of themselves and we need to accept them, love them.**

## Healthy Communication

### Reciprocal Communication

They say we are "nagging" or "on their case" – we say we love them, are concerned, worried.

As parents we need to speak from our hearts, talk about our fears.

Teens don't want to be told what to do.

You **CANNOT** make them stop.

They control their behavior - you control yours.

Copyright 2002 by Randy Glasbergen.  
www.glasbergen.com



**“Of course I can accept you for who you are.  
You are someone I need to change.”**

**Accepting our children means giving them  
room to grow, to make mistakes, to try again.**

## Talking with our Teens

- Pump up the volume
- Encourage reciprocal communication
- More is right than wrong
- Listen without interrupting - Tell me more!
- Don't judge or react - rather learn to respond

Proving to them that you are the parent and that you know best, that you are “right” is the surest way to sabotage the communication.

## Parenting our teens requires

Accepting our own fears about their independence

Acknowledging their way and shifting our way

Appreciating their unique contributions, efforts to  
pave their own way

Accepting that your new relationship means  
negotiation not capitulation.

Get to Yes

## Relearning Loveliness

The bud  
stands for all things  
even for those things that don't flower  
for everything flowers, from within, of self blessing,  
though sometimes it is necessary to teach  
a thing its loveliness,  
to put a hand on the brow of the flower,  
and retell it in words and in touch  
it is lovely  
until it flowers again from within, of self blessing

Galway Kinnell

# References

<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/>

<http://www.alcoholfreechildren.org/en/pubs/pdf/prevention.pdf>

[http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/MakeADiff\\_HTML/makediff.htm](http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/MakeADiff_HTML/makediff.htm)