

Underage drinking is one of the most common trends in teenage behavior. Some even view it as a “rite of passage”. We face a difficult challenge trying to inform youth of the realities of drinking. Most youth believe that they’ve heard it all and are familiar with the effects alcohol has on their bodies. The truth is that most young drinkers have little knowledge of how this behavior can jeopardize their safety, their future and even their lives.

In an article titled, *Teen Drinking, Thinking Don’t Mix*, Kathleen Fackelman insists that alcohol can do serious and immediate harm to a teen’s brain. Adolescent’s who drink face an even higher risk of brain impairment than their adult counterparts. Since their brains are still developing, teens that drink heavily are more likely to significantly lower their mental abilities than adults who drink heavily. The effects on the brain can include loss of motor skills, a lessened ability to perform on tests, and a greater difficulty in learning new things. Early drinking also causes the brain to become vulnerable to addiction, and not just alcohol addiction but drug addiction as well. Young people who drink alcohol prior to the age of 15 are 4 x’s greater to develop alcohol dependence than those who drink at 21 or older. Every year 5 x’s as many teens die from alcohol overdose than any other drug. More than 10,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 24 die from alcohol related auto accidents. Alcohol can also cause emotional changes during a time when the brain is learning to deal with new and powerful feelings. This can lead to problems with friends, cause low self-esteem and cause higher stress levels.

The most common reason teens drink alcohol is simple- to get drunk fast- or binge drinking-high amounts in a short time. This destructive way of consumption has become common place and not just on college campuses but also in high school and even middle school.

Because they are quickly drinking large amounts, more than their bodies can handle. Binge drinking, more times than not, results in alcohol poisoning which can lead to a coma and then possibly death. A 1998 Harvard School of Public Health study showed that : alcohol is involved in 2/3rds of college suicides, 90 % of all campus rapes, and 95% of violent crimes committed on campuses. Frequent binge drinkers are 7 x's more likely to get behind in school work, 11.5 x's more likely to get injured and 16 x's more likely to get in a car with a drunk driver.

Every family, community, and neighborhood should be concerned about the use of alcohol by minors and should be involved in actions to reduce underage drinking. There is no doubt that underage drinking is an extremely serious problem. I believe that there are many effective strategies that can be adopted to combat or even prevent underage drinking and all related problems.

Strategies that limit access to alcohol by youth are the most powerful approaches to reducing underage drinking. Enforcement of the minimum purchase age law should be the cornerstone of any underage drinking prevention effort. The most effective strategy is aimed at retailers who are licensed and should obey the age requirement law and yet some disregard such laws and sell to minors anyway. Communities and caring parents should place primary emphasis on the vigorous enforcement of such law. The

community can come together as one and ban such stores, publicly “out” such stores or even attempt to create civil liabilities for stores that sell to minors who later cause injury.

But even if such laws are followed young people can still get alcohol, HOW?

From parents (the refrigerator, liquor cabinets, or fully stocked house bars), older siblings or friends, parties and even theft. And parents get rid of those false ID’s! We all must limit the social availability of alcohol.

We must also expand strategies to express community norms against underage drinking. The general availability of alcohol in a community can affect the level of consumption among all age groups. As a community we can prohibit or control alcohol use at events or in public areas. We can prohibit alcohol sponsorship at public events. We should be increasing alcohol-free activities and programs for youth and developing parent coalitions to reduce alcohol abuse. And lastly, school policies regarding alcohol use on school property or at school-sponsored events must be fully supported and strictly enforced.

Although there are strict underage drinking laws that are being enforced, including illegal purchase, illegal possession, DWI, manslaughter, and the use of false ID and charges for violating any such law results in real jail time, most teens rarely think of the serious consequences.

Allowing teens to drink at home is not ok, it sends the message that underage drinking is ok and acceptable if you control it. The truth is that no one can control the consequences of underage drinking. Even when driving is

not involved there are other risks, some we've discussed and some you may not be aware of.

LIABLE ? The text book definition- legally responsible for an act or omission. Someone who is found liable may be required to pay damages for incidents, injuries or deaths that can occur.

How does this apply? When young people are in possession of or consume alcohol, whether in the home or on private property, they place their parents or guardians at risk for damages, injuries or death that might occur.

In closing, parents you are the number 1 influence on your children's lives, spend time with them and talk to them about the risks of drinking and using drugs. What you do and say really does matter.