

The Role of Parents in Preventing and Addressing Underage Drinking

During adolescence, young people begin to take risks and test limits. They do so because they are moving from a family-centered world to the larger community, within which they will begin to define their own identity. It is also during this time that parents have an especially important role in preventing and addressing underage drinking.

PARENTING SKILLS

- Parents who communicated and were involved with their children at ages 10 and 11, set clear expectations for their children's behavior, practiced good supervision and consistent discipline, and minimized conflict in the family had children who, at ages 11 and 12, were more likely to see alcohol use as harmful and less likely to initiate alcohol use early. They were also less likely to misuse alcohol at ages 17 to 18.¹
- Lack of parental support, monitoring, and communication and lack of feeling close to their parents have been significantly related to frequency of drinking, heavy drinking, and drunkenness among adolescents.²
- Harsh, inconsistent discipline and hostility or rejection toward children have also been found to significantly predict adolescent drinking and alcohol-related problems.³
- Some research suggests that poor parenting practices are associated with early childhood deficits in social skills and self-regulation, particularly with regard to aggressive behavior, which result in early minor delinquency and rejection from mainstream peer groups. Children who feel rejected then affiliate with deviant peers; in turn, participation in deviant peer networks increases the risk for drinking and other forms of substance use.⁴

DID YOU KNOW?

There were an estimated 28.6 million children of alcoholics in the United States in 1991; nearly 11 million of them were under age 18. Of these, almost 3 million will develop alcohol abuse or dependence disorders, other drug problems, and/or other serious coping problems.¹⁸

Children of Alcoholics:

- Are at high risk for developing alcohol and other drug problems.
- Often live with pervasive tension and stress.
- Have higher levels of anxiety and depression.
- May do poorly in school or may be an overachiever.
- May experience problems with coping.¹⁹



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SOCIAL INFLUENCES

- Family and peers can influence drinking behavior actively, by explicitly discouraging alcohol use, or passively, by providing models of drinking behavior.⁵
- A Columbia University study reports that adolescents whose fathers have more than two drinks a day have a 71 percent greater risk of substance abuse.⁶
- As adolescents develop, drinking behavior becomes less influenced by parents and more influenced by peers.⁷
- Perceptions of how much peers drink may exert a stronger influence on an individual's drinking behavior than the actual level of peer drinking.⁸
- Parents can exert a moderating influence on the drinking behavior of their adolescent children by actively monitoring their alcohol use.⁹
- Studies have shown that a positive relationship between parents and adolescents can serve as a protective factor, offsetting the risk of alcohol use associated with peer alcohol use.¹⁰

SOME PROTECTIVE FACTORS AGAINST ADOLESCENT ALCOHOL USE¹⁷

- Strong bonds with the family
- Parental monitoring with clear rules of conduct within the family unit and involvement of parents in the lives of their children
- Success in school performance
- Strong bonds with pro-social institutions such as the family, school, and religious organizations
- Adoption of conventional norms about alcohol and drug use

FAMILY STRUCTURES

- Among youth, ages 12 to 17, the highest risk of alcohol dependence is found among boys and among white non-Hispanic youth living with no other parent figure other than their father.¹¹
- Older siblings' alcohol use can influence the alcohol use of younger siblings in the family, particularly for same sex siblings.¹²

- An estimated 11 million children under the age of 18 live in households with at least one alcoholic parent.¹³

PARENTAL ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS TOWARD DRINKING

- Parents' drinking behavior and favorable attitudes about drinking have been positively associated with adolescents' initiating and continuing drinking.¹⁴
- Children of drinking parents were less likely to see drinking as harmful and more likely to start drinking earlier. Both these attitudes and behaviors, in turn, predicted greater alcohol misuse at ages 17 to 18.¹⁵
- Children of drinking parents are more likely to associate with peers who have tried alcohol at ages 10 to 11, which increases the risk for alcohol use and misuse by the child.¹⁶

SOURCES

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SAMHSA, a public health agency in the Department of Health and Human Services, is the Federal Government's lead agency for improving the quality and availability of substance abuse prevention, addiction treatment, and mental health services in the United States. Further information about SAMHSA is available on the Internet at www.samhsa.gov.