

## PREVENTING UNDERAGE DRINKING

According to a recent student survey, 38% of Upper Merion teens believe that getting alcohol is as easy as getting a pizza. According to the same student survey, 43% of the teens reported that it would be hard, but they thought that they would be able to get alcohol, and 19% thought that it would be hard to get.

### So where do teens get alcohol?

Most teens report getting alcohol from their **friends**, which raises the question, ***“Where do their friends get alcohol?”*** Sometimes, it’s as easy as opening the refrigerator or the family liquor cabinet and helping themselves to their parents’ supply, without the parents noticing. Sometimes, the alcohol is provided for them by older friends, either at a party or by the older friend purchasing it for them. In some cases, the alcohol is actually provided by parents.

### Why would parents provide alcohol to minors?

**Some parents believe that all teens drink**, so they might as well allow them to drink under their supervision, where they can keep an eye on them and keep them safe. What does the research say about this?

- **First, all teens do *not* drink!** According to the 2015 [2015 Monitoring the Future Study](#), only 9.7% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders, 21.5% of 10<sup>th</sup> graders, and 35.3% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders reported drinking alcohol in the last month.
- **Second, alcohol is *not* safe for teens.** The teen brain is still developing and is very vulnerable to the effects of alcohol. Alcohol can cause subtle learning impairments, particularly concerning memory and recall of information, which can affect the teen’s academic and occupational achievement. In addition, sophisticated brain imaging techniques have revealed structural differences in the brains of adolescents who drink compared to the brains of those who don’t. Furthermore, according to the [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism](#), teens who drink before age 15 are four times more likely to develop an alcohol dependence at some point in their life than those who wait until at least age 20 to have their first drink. Alcohol has immediate and long-term consequences and is associated with all of the leading causes of death for teens.

**Some parents think, “It’s just alcohol. It’s better than drugs.”** It needs to be kept in mind that **alcohol is a drug**, which damages the developing teen brain and is not safe.

**Some parents think they should let their teen drink in high school so that they'll be prepared for college.** However, research studies show the opposite. Teens tend to continue the habits they started in high school. A [study](#) reported in the journal *Addictive Behaviors* showed that parents who disapproved completely of underage alcohol use tended to have students who engaged in less drinking in college, and conversely, the parents who were more accepting of teen drinking in high school were more likely to have students who engaged in binge drinking in college.

**Some parents think that they should teach their teen child to drink responsibly, the way European families do. This idea that European youth drink more responsibly is a myth.** A recent report from the [PIRE Prevention Research Center](#) shows that European youth drink more often, drink more heavily, and get drunk more often than American teens. The teen binge-drinking rate in the U.S. is about 22 percent, compared to 60 percent in Denmark, 57 percent in Germany, 54 percent in Great Britain, 34 percent in Italy, and 28 percent in France, according to the PIRE Report. Furthermore, studies show that teens whose parents allow them to drink at home drink more in other settings as well. According to [MADD](#), when teens feel they have their parents' approval to drink, they do it more and more often when they are not with their parents. When parents have concrete, enforced rules about alcohol, young people binge drink less.

## **WHAT IS THE PENNSYLVANIA LAW ON PROVIDING ALCOHOL TO ANYONE UNDER 21?**

According to PA law, adults who furnish alcohol to anyone under 21 – even their own child – could be fined or served time in jail. Penalties can range between \$1,000 and \$2,500 dollars, and furthermore, adults can be held accountable for anything that minor does while intoxicated. For more information on Pennsylvania laws on serving alcohol to minors, click [here](#).

## **SO WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO KEEP THEIR KIDS SAFE AND PREVENT UNDERAGE DRINKING?**

- Talk regularly with your child about alcohol. One conversation before a big event such as prom is not enough. Don't wait for your child to start the conversation. You should bring up the subject, even if your child seems uncomfortable. Need help starting the conversation? A great resource to get you started is "Talk, They Hear You" at <http://www.samhsa.gov/underage-drinking>.

- Be sure to communicate your values, expectations, and consequences regarding alcohol use. Be prepared to follow through with your consequences.
- Lock your liquor cabinet, and keep a close watch on alcohol that you keep in your refrigerator.
- Establish a code word that your child can use when they text or call you. If they use the code, it means they need a quick exit from a party or situation, and you will pick them up immediately, no questions asked.
- When discussing alcohol with your child, make sure your child understands that your love and concern for them is the number one reason for the conversation, and that you are not simply trying to punish them.
- Arm your child with refusal skills. At some point, your child will be pressured by peers, and it helps to be prepared to face this pressure. Usually, the best response is a simple but firm, “No thanks,” or “No, I’m good.” Role-playing is very helpful, so that your child is comfortable and prepared when the real situation occurs. An excellent resource for peer pressure and refusal skills is <http://www.thecoolspot.gov/>.
- Always know where your child is going, whom they will be with, and what time they will arrive back home.
- Wait up for your child to return home from a party or night out with friends. As you give them a hug, you should be able to smell signs of drug or alcohol use. Breath mints or a fresh spray of perfume may indicate that your child is trying to cover the scent of alcohol.
- If your child is attending a party, call the host’s parents and make sure they will be home. Specifically ask if alcohol will be served or if the children will be supervised throughout the party.
- Make sure your child knows to call 911 immediately if they are drinking and a friend loses consciousness. This is a sign of alcohol poisoning and can lead to death. Stress that the friend’s safety is much more important than the fear of being caught drinking. Medical amnesty laws protect good Samaritans who seek medical help for a friend in trouble.
- Stay connected with your teen.

- Set aside one-on-one time to spend with them doing something enjoyable.
- Show interest in their schoolwork and activities.
- Encourage involvement in school and community activities.
- Know their friends and their friends' parents.