

TIPS FROM TRAINING

Persuading Permissive Parents

By Jim Paoni, CSADP

What can preventionists say to parents who allow underage drinking?

Some parents consider giving their underage children alcohol to be “home schooling” – training them to drink. Home schooling can be a difficult topic for preventionists, as it crosses two of the most highly held personal and privacy matters dear to Americans: 1) how parents choose to raise their children, and 2) the privacy of what goes on inside one’s home. And in fact, it is perfectly legal in Illinois for parents to provide alcohol to their own children in private residences. Fortunately, the balance of evidence is on the side of preventionists.

What Experts Say

One study claims that parents who provided alcohol to their adolescent children or drank with them were more likely to have children who neither regularly used nor abused alcohol. This research also claims there is some evidence that by providing alcohol to one’s own underage child within the context of a meal, the excitement of drinking can be minimized.¹

According to George Hacker, director of the alcohol policies project at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, “Training kids to drink in the home will probably not have that much effect on the kid’s drinking outside the house, which is where most of it occurs. When you adopt the thinking that teaching people to drink is important, that’s already, I think, down a slippery slope that suggests drinking is important, everybody does it. It’s a pro-drinking message in and of itself.”²

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) publication, *Make a Difference: Talk to Your Child About Alcohol*, parents’ disapproval of youthful alcohol use is the key reason children choose not to drink. The NIAAA also reminds us that the dangers of teen drinking are tied to poor school performance, being the victim of violent crime (including rape, aggravated assault and robbery), and developing alcohol dependence. The message from NIAAA is clear: don’t support teen drinking. Further, NIAAA research shows that kids whose parents or friends’ parents provide alcohol for teen get-togethers are more likely to engage in heavy drinking, to drink more often, and to get into traffic crashes.



Tackling the Issue

Preventionists can help parents defend the minimum drinking age of 21 while not feeling hypocritical. Instead of having children practice drinking under the excuse that they will do so as adults, help parents realize the hope that their children will only spend a small percentage of their time drinking when they grow up. It would be better to practice NOT drinking, since they should spend much more of their adult time doing that.

Parents may claim that mistakes are part of the learning process, and that it is best if these mistakes are made at home. In the perspective of the preventionist, parental provision of alcohol to their child is a mistake, too. If a parent has done this in the past, encourage the parent to see it as a mistake and not make the same mistake again.

Here are a few arguments and suggestions for how to respond to parents who believe that teens can be taught to drink responsibly.³

Myths

• *Europeans teach their kids to drink responsibly.* While European countries typically have legal drinking ages from 16 to 18, the rate of teen binge drinking in Europe far exceeds that in America. In America, teen binge drinking in the past month stands at about 22 percent. This number is over 50 percent in several European countries.



• *If you're old enough to serve in the military, you should be able to drink.* The drinking age of 21 is based on physiology as well as responsibility. The developing brain, which does not fully finish its development until a person's early 20s, remains vulnerable to alcohol. When a young person joins the military, they are provided very high levels of supervision and many decisions affecting their life, safety, and even mental behavior are made by their direct superior or other, more experienced people higher in the chain of command.

• *I drank as a teen, and I turned out fine.* While we are still learning how much alcohol it takes and how long drinking must occur before damage or problems begin, researchers are beginning to be able to measure diminished brain capacity and memory loss in teen drinkers. There are probably many things that we may have done that we would prefer our kids didn't do. Until they are 21, drinking should be one of them.

Facts

• *You could be charged with child endangerment.* According to criteria for children in need of protective services, one category includes children who are harmed by exposure to substance abuse. This category covers situations where a parent permits a child's use of alcohol that results in physical, psychological, emotional or cognitive injury or substantial risk of such injury.⁴ Providing alcohol to children at certain ages results in a substantial risk of injury. This fact begs for specification of allowable amounts for different age groups, to provide guidance to parents so they will not be found guilty of endangering their children. The best advice until specifications are set should be: "Don't provide alcohol to your kids."

• *Science doesn't support underage drinking.* The NIAAA provides strict guidelines for ethyl alcohol administration in human experimentation. According to these guidelines, alcohol should only be administered to children in late adolescence. These guidelines remind that providing alcohol to underage drinkers for the purpose of experimenting

reaches into areas of specific harm which include: 1.) implicit legitimization (i.e., sanctioning) of a behavior that is both illegal outside of the research setting and potentially harmful; 2.) the increasing number of findings suggesting that adolescent brains may be particularly vulnerable to alcohol-related injuries; and 3.) yet-to-be-established dose/response parameters relating to various aspects of acute and long-term harm from alcohol in this population.

• *Underage drinking puts teens at increased risk for unprotected sex.* Parents who allow underage drinking are risking unintended pregnancies, and worse, grandchildren with fetal alcohol effects.

Additional Talking Points⁵

There is no "safe" level of alcohol use when it comes to teenagers. To keep your kids safe, adopt a "no use" policy. Make sure your kids know they are not allowed to drink at other people's homes as well.

Providing alcohol to kids is one way that parents enable their children's drug use.

Don't send mixed messages by trying to "bargain" with your teen about drinking and other risky behaviors. Trying to limit use to a parent's house or restrict driving tells your teen that drinking is okay under some circumstances, and puts him at risk.

Forget about being the "cool" parent. Parents who are permissive have kids who are more likely to get into trouble, including traffic crashes and engaging in violence, sex and substance use.

Instead of teaching kids how to drink, teach them about the repulsive behaviors of drunks.

Instead of drinking with your kids, talk about the issue with them and model appropriate behavior.

Paoni is a Professional Development Resource Specialist for Prevention First.

References

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2. *Los Angeles Times* article December 31, 2005
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4. www.law.capital.edu/adoption/amicus/sumcom_documents/Goldilocks.nj.ppt
5. From the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign's Web site, "Parents. The Anti-Drug," www.theantidrug.com.