

Preventing Underage Drinking: A Guide for Parents & Guardians

Alcohol is the most common drug used by people under the legal drinking age of 21. Children and teens who drink alcohol have a higher risk of developing alcohol use disorder in adulthood. Parents and guardians can help their children make healthy choices by having honest and ongoing conversations about alcohol and modeling healthy behaviors.

How is underage drinking harmful?

The human brain continues to develop and mature into the mid-twenties. Alcohol is especially harmful for developing brains. Youth who drink alcohol are more likely to experience:

Academic, Legal, and Social Issues

- School absences
- Lower grades
- Disciplinary issues
- Drinking and driving
- Impaired judgement
- Misusing other drugs (There is an increased risk of serious health effects when mixing alcohol with other drugs)

Health Conditions and Other Risks

- Depression and anxiety disorders
- Violence, including homicide, suicide, and sexual violence
- Injuries, including burns, falls, and drownings
- Sexually transmitted infections
- Unplanned pregnancy

Need help with alcohol use? Call SAMHSA at 1-800-662-4357.

Having suicidal, substance use, or a mental health crises? Call or text 988 or visit [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org).

Adolescents are **4x** more likely to drink alcohol if their parents binge drink (4 or more drinks on an occasion for females & 5 or more drinks for males). Check your drinking and get personalized feedback: [check your drinking](#).

How can I help my child avoid alcohol-related problems?









Build trust with your child on the topic of alcohol and have ongoing conversations. It's normal to feel nervous about discussing substance use with your child, but the more you empower yourself with information, the better equipped you'll be to support your child to make positive choices.

- 1 Talk early and often** about alcohol, its health impacts, and why it's only for adults aged 21 and over.
- 2 Set a good example** by not binge drinking, if you choose to drink.
- 3 Send a clear message** that underage drinking is not allowed. Never provide alcohol to anyone under 21.
- 4 Be approachable** so your child can come to you with questions.

- 5 **Be judgement-free** if your child tells you about using substances.
- 6 **Keep conversations light** by avoiding scare tactics and lectures.
- 7 **Provide tools** so your child can learn how to refuse alcohol, avoid peer pressure, and develop healthy coping mechanisms.
- 8 **Make sure there's no alcohol** at your child's social gatherings.
- 9 **Get to know your child's friends** and their parents or guardians.
- 10 **Get involved** using CDC's [proven community strategies to reduce underage drinking](#).

What are potential signs my child may be drinking?

Some of these signs may be due to other challenges or struggles that require conversation and support, and some may reflect normal youth behavior. Keep an eye out for these signs, especially if you notice several at the same time, if they occur suddenly, or if some of them are extreme.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Flare-ups of temper, irritability, or defensiveness  Bloodshot eyes, lack of coordination, sudden weight loss, unexplained injuries  Memory lapses, poor concentration, or slurred speech  "Careless" appearance, a lack of involvement in former interests, or low energy | <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Poor school attendance, low grades, or disciplinary issues  Switching friends and a reluctance to let you get to know new friends  Finding alcohol in your child's room or backpack, smelling alcohol on their breath  Breaking family rules |
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 If you believe your child is drinking alcohol or using other substances, it's important to address the matter promptly and with care and honesty. It's never too early or too late to start talking with your child about not drinking alcohol.
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