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By Dr. Edward Bailey
Chief of Pediatrics,
NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital



Remain vigilant about underage drinking

Prom season has arrived and, with it, concern about adolescent alcohol abuse. For many parents and professionals, however, teenage drinking is a year-round problem.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism reports that alcohol is the number one drug of choice among adolescents, affecting 3 million regular and problem drinkers between the ages of 14 and 17. Even though the minimum drinking age for all 50 states is 21, 40 percent of teens report consuming alcohol before age 13; some having started by age 9.

Children lack the body mass and intellectual maturity required to metabolize and pace alcohol consumption, and those who start to drink early are at particularly high risk for developing alcohol dependence within the first 10 years. Dependency leads to social isolation, psychological problems, and deterioration in academic performance.

Adolescent alcohol use is frequently associated with increased unsafe sexual activity, putting teens at risk for contracting sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. Pregnant teens often deny their pregnancies and continue to drink, increasing the threat of the fetus developing Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Alcohol is also involved in 1 in 3 teen deaths due to accident, suicide, and homicide.

Parents must take an active role in preventing underage drinking. Avoid either very permissive or extremely authoritarian parenting styles. And watch for the signs of alcohol use and abuse, including:

- Antisocial or delinquent behavior
- Poor or deteriorating school performance
- Friends who drink, smoke, or use other drugs
- Depression, ADHD, low self-esteem
- Sibling use of alcohol or other drugs

Parents are extremely powerful influencers on their teens' attitudes toward alcohol. If they abuse alcohol, it sends a strong signal encouraging similar behavior in their children. Conversely, parents can reduce the chances of underage drinking by consistently modeling positive standards and expectations, talking to their children about the potential risks of alcohol and other drugs, gaining their trust, and asking questions.

Some parents have banded together with their towns to provide education and support services on this issue, such as TeamUp Marblehead, the Revere CARES Coalition, and Communities that Care in Lynn.

Debate continues about how to reduce teenage drinking and prevent dependency. Many believe that alcohol consumption must be actively prevented until age 21, when drinking is legally permitted. Others are committed to responsible alcohol exposure under family supervision in closely monitored situations. While, surprisingly, there is little evidence to support either side of the debate, the law clearly states that alcohol consumption is illegal before age 21.

If concerns arise, seek guidance from a community professional you trust--your child's pediatrician, a school administrator, or a counselor. Alcohol use is frequently associated with mental health or behavioral issues, requiring evaluation to ensure proper treatment. Adequate evaluation and early intervention through counseling, behavioral therapy, residential care, and hospitalization, if warranted, increase the chances of successful treatment.

Dr. Edward Bailey is chairman of pediatrics at NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital, on staff at Massachusetts General Hospital for Children, and a father of three. He can be contacted at NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital, 57 Highland Ave., Salem, MA 01907 or at ebailey@aap.org