

California Youths and Alcohol Use Strategies for Parents and Schools to Take Action

Alcohol is a drug. It is a substance that changes the way the body or mind functions. Alcohol is also the **number one drug of choice for teenagers**. Consider these facts:

- Nearly 11 million youths between the ages of twelve and twenty reported using alcohol in the past 30 days.¹
- Eleven percent of California youths surveyed were **binge drinkers** or those who had five or more drinks in a row within the past two weeks.²
- Over 65 percent of youths classified as **heavy drinkers** (those who drank more than five drinks at once on at least five different days in the past month) concurrently used drugs.²
- As youths get older, there is a notable increase in drinking. Eleventh graders are at particular risk for engaging in excessive drinking and experiencing alcohol-related problems. Thirty percent of eleventh graders were classified as **excessive alcohol users** (those who regularly used alcohol, had been drunk three or more times, or liked to get drunk).²
- Eighty percent of the eleventh graders who used alcohol in the past 30 days were drunk at school at least once.²
- In the transition between middle school and high school, there is an increase in risk behaviors, such as alcohol use. In 2002 the number of California youths who consumed alcohol more than tripled between the seventh grade (21 percent) and the ninth grade (65 percent).²
- On a national level the prevalence of alcohol use increased from 43.9 percent in the eighth grade to 64.2 percent in the tenth grade.³

How Does Alcohol Impact Youths?

Active use of alcohol contributes to academic, social, and health problems in the lives of young students:

Academic Impact

- Alcohol consumption impacts school performance by affecting the area of the brain involved in memory and learning, the hippocampus. This effect contributes to the "worst alcohol-related brain damage in teens."⁴
- Alcohol and other drug use is linked to **lower grades, lower scores** on the Academic Performance Index (API), and **poor attendance**. Sixty-six percent of ninth graders and 68 percent of eleventh graders who used alcohol or other drugs received grades of "C" or lower.²

Social Impact

- Youths who use alcohol are more prone to problems with friendships than are nondrinkers.²
- Excessive alcohol users in the eleventh grade were more likely to skip class and school than were nondrinkers.²
- Excessive alcohol users were also three times more likely to damage school property or engage in a fight.⁵

Health Impact

Short-term effects of alcohol use include impaired judgment and lead to impulsive and risk behaviors, such as:

- Engaging in unprotected or unwanted sex
- Driving after drinking or driving with someone who has been drinking
- Failing to follow laws or use safety precautions, such as wearing seatbelts

Long-term effects of continuous alcohol abuse include cirrhosis, cancer of the liver, nutritional deficiencies, digestive problems, heart and central nervous system damage, memory loss, sexual problems, injury or death from overdosing, violent crime, and accidents.

How Is Adolescent Development Related to Alcohol Prevention?

Although each teenager is unique, certain behavioral patterns reflect the normal physical, emotional, and cognitive changes adolescents experience during puberty. It is important to differentiate among normal adolescent development and behaviors that indicate youths may be at risk for alcohol-related problems.⁶

In the middle school and early high school years, youths experience these ***typical developmental characteristics***:

- Awkwardness and/or poor self-esteem related to the emotional and physical changes experienced during puberty
- Behaviors that may distance youths from their parents and test the boundaries of their limits
- Moodiness or rudeness, assertion of independence, and less expression of affection toward parents
- Experimentation with sex and drugs

By the late teenage years, youths are better able to think things through and delay gratification. They have an increased capacity for emotional stability and an elevated concern for others.⁶

What Are the Warning Signs of Alcohol Abuse?

Although experimentation is a normal response to adolescent development, there are warning signs displayed by youths who have progressed beyond experimentation and may be at risk for alcohol abuse. When several of the following symptoms are apparent, parents and school staff should determine whether a youth has a substance abuse problem:

- Physical:* Fatigue, sleep problems, repeated health complaints, red and glazed eyes, low energy, lack of coordination, slurred speech
- Emotional:* Personality change, sudden mood changes, irritability, irresponsible behavior, low self-esteem, poor judgment, depression, withdrawal, defensiveness, and a general lack of interest
- Family:* Starting arguments, breaking rules, withdrawing from the family, disregarding family rules
- School:* Decreased interest, negative attitude, drop in grades, many absences, disciplinary problems

Preventing Alcohol Use: What Can Parents Do?

Research shows that adolescents who are strongly connected to their families and schools are less likely to use alcohol or drugs.

The number one protective factor against alcohol abuse by adolescents is a strong parent-child relationship.⁷

Positive parent-child relationships:

- Contribute to the self-esteem of youths.
- Strengthen resistance to peer pressure to engage in risk behaviors.
- Compel teens to meet parental expectations.

Teenagers connected to their family feel close to their parents or guardians, perceive caring, and feel valued.

Clearly, parents can play a vital and proactive role in addressing substance abuse. Youths who talk to their parents about the negative consequences of alcohol and other substance use report lower rates of past and current alcohol use.¹ Parents can learn the signs of alcohol and other drug abuse, act to help their children overcome a problem, and teach them that it is all right to get help. Parents can also use some of the following strategies to foster a strong and protective parent-child relationship:

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Specific Actions</i>
Be a role model.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Refrain from using illicit drugs. Drink alcohol responsibly and moderately if at all.
Get involved in your children’s lives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Help your children with their homework. ✓ Learn about their favorite activities.
Encourage participation in meaningful social activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Identify your children’s interests and help them find related activities.
Listen without interjecting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Let your children talk without interrupting them with personal opinions.
Cultivate trust.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Follow through on promises and/or consequences for breaking rules.
Let your children know that you care.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Initiate conversations. ✓ Begin conversations about alcohol use, using open-ended questions, such as, What do you think about alcohol? Why do you think kids drink? ✓ Emphasize the consequences of use because the children may not be thinking about future consequences. ✓ Study your family’s history of alcohol and drug abuse and talk to your children about it.
Help your children feel good about themselves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Recognize and point out your children’s successes.²

Preventing Alcohol Use: What Can Schools and Communities Do?

Student-School Connection

School connectedness is the sense students have of affiliation with their school. It is a key factor that protects youths from involvement in unhealthy behaviors, such as substance use and violence. School connectedness is fostered by the students’ perception that teachers care about them and are fair and by the students’ sense of belonging at school.

Research also shows the school’s **environmental assets** (that is, caring relationships, high expectations of the students, and students’ involvement in meaningful activities) are related to stronger school connectedness, better grades, and low alcohol consumption.²

Parents and Communities Working Together

If a child is having problems at school, parents can contact their child's teachers, counselors, social workers, school psychologists, principal, or parent advocates to address concerns about their child and seek help. School officials can also make referrals to community-based prevention and/or treatment programs. Other community members, such as doctors, sports coaches, and clergy, can collaborate with parents and school officials by helping to recognize and get help for teenagers who are using alcohol or other drugs.

School Programs for Preventing the Use of Alcohol and Other Drugs

Prevention of alcohol use requires more than positive and meaningful relationships with youths. The following list displays effective school-based strategies for alcohol prevention:

- Coordinated school health programs
- Comprehensive integrated services (e.g., Healthy Start)
- Service-learning
- Environmental strategies to reduce availability of alcohol
- Home/school/family partnerships
- Early intervention (e.g., student assistance programs)
- Positive alternative activities (after-school programs, sober dances)
- Approaches built on social-influences model
- Sustained mentoring relationships

Note that only prevention curricula based on research and evaluated to be effective should be used. See the following section on resources for a link to model programs.

Strategies not deemed effective by research include information-only programs about the negative effects of drugs; affective-only programs focusing on self-esteem; scare tactics; testimonies of ex-addicts; denial of promotion to a higher grade; and "one-shot" programs (e.g., an assembly).⁸

Resources for Alcohol Prevention

California Department of Education, Getting Results Project.

Research-based information about alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and violence prevention.

California Department of Education, California Healthy Kids Resource Center.

Research-validated curricula and other resources available for loan at no charge to California teachers, administrators, and other professionals as well as parents and community personnel.

California Department of Education, California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS).

<http://www.wested.org/> Administered by WestEd and offering publications on health risks to students, resilience assets, and academic performance.

Medline Plus. <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/teendevlopment.html>. Information on teen development sponsored by the U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health.

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov>. Free informational materials on many aspects of alcohol use, alcohol abuse, and alcoholism.

Search Institute. <http://www.search-institute.org>. A nonprofit organization publishing research on protective developmental assets.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices. <http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov>. A searchable database of interventions for the prevention and treatment of mental and substance use disorders

Endnotes

¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (2005). *Overview of findings from the 2004 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*. Office of Applied Studies, NSDUH Series H-27, DHHS Publication No. SMA 05-4061. Rockville, Md.: SAMHSA.

² Austin, G. A., and R. S. Skager (2004). *Tenth biennial California student survey: Drug, alcohol, and tobacco use*. Sacramento: California Attorney General's Office.

³ Johnston, L., and others (2004). *Monitoring the future: National results on adolescent drug use*. Bethesda, Md.: National Institute on Drug Abuse.

⁴ American Medical Association (2004). *Harmful consequences of alcohol use on the brains of children, adolescents, and college students*.

⁵ Hansen, T. L., and G. A. Austin (2003). Are student health risks and low resilience assets an impediment to the academic progress of schools? *California Healthy Kids Survey Fact Sheet 3*. Los Alamitos, Calif.: WestEd.

⁶ American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2005). *Normal adolescent development: Late high school years and beyond*.

⁷ National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (2004). *Make a difference: Talk to your child about alcohol*. NIH Publication No. 00-4314. Rockville, Md.: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

⁸ California Department of Education (1998). *Getting results: California action guide to creating safe and drug-free schools and communities*. Sacramento: California Department of Education.