

A Parent's Guide to  
**TEENS AND  
ALCOHOL**

**axis**

*"I wanted to turn the noise down on the chaos in my life. I just wanted to feel okay for once."*

**— Kennedy, 15**

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### **This guide will help you discuss the following questions:**

- ✔ Why do teens drink?
- ✔ How do teens get alcohol?
- ✔ What does the Bible say about teens drinking alcohol?
- ✔ How is alcohol depicted in the media, and what impact it might have on my child?
- ✔ What key conversations do I need to have with my teens about drinking?
- ✔ What are the warning signs that my child may have a drinking problem?
- ✔ What should I do if my child has a drinking problem?

# A Shifting Landscape

Underage drinking is always dangerous, but maybe not only for the reasons we were warned of growing up. While underage drinking is often primarily associated with car accidents, drug use, partying, and/or legal trouble, Gen Z is susceptible to additional dangers that we as parents might not be thinking of. As an unprecedented number of teens are struggling with anxiety, depression, and loneliness, more and more of them are using alcohol not to have fun, but to cope with and escape from those feelings. Because these emotions are something we all face throughout our lives, developing a habit of dealing with them by drinking can have longer lasting consequences than social drinking.

The Center of Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality's [2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#) revealed adults ages 26 and older who began drinking before age 15 are 3.5 times more likely to develop alcohol use disorder (AUD) than those who waited until 21 or later to start drinking. While concerns about drunk driving, getting in trouble with the law, or doing regrettable things while drunk should be of utmost importance for a parent or caring adult, we want to put the potential for your child to develop AUD due to underage drinking on your radar as well. Especially since a growing number of teens [like Kennedy](#) are struggling with mental health challenges.

Kennedy's mom described her as a bubbly star athlete. Within a matter of months, though, Kennedy's mom observed her daughter's personality and mood drastically shift. Unbeknownst to her, Kennedy was drinking alcohol daily to cope with stress. While the idea of a fifteen-year-old struggling with debilitating stress may be hard to believe, we must remember a pandemic drastically disrupted this generation's formative years—and that their at-your-fingertips-access to the world's definition of happiness, beauty, success, and what's popular has put them at more significant risks for mental health issues than any other generation. They are growing up in a world that is, in many ways, much more stressful than anything we could have imagined as teenagers, and on top of that they still have to deal with all the things that have made life difficult for teens in every generation. School, friends, and puberty, plus social media, a pandemic, and a massive spike in mental health issues, have created a landscape where teens are itching for the kind of escape alcohol offers.

# What are underage drinking trends today?

A teen who may hesitate to reach for a joint, a pill, or even a cigarette may feel much more comfortable reaching for a beer or a red cup filled with vodka and their favorite juice. According to the [National Institution of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism \(NIAAA\)](#), “[alcohol is the most widely used substance among American youth.](#)” In 2021, nearly six million youth between twelve and twenty reported drinking alcohol in the past month, and according to a [Gallup poll](#), of those teens who said they drink alcohol, a third reported having had an alcoholic drink in the last 24 hours. But this isn't the most concerning trend.

The NIAAA's research reveals that though youth drink less often than adults, they tend to binge drink when they do. Binge drinking involves consuming anywhere from three to five drinks within two hours. While, for some, this may not seem like a lot of alcohol within that time frame, consider the impact four drinks would have on a fourteen-year-old girl weighing 110 lbs. Her [blood alcohol content \(BAC\)](#) would likely register at [0.168](#). In this state, her reaction time is slower, her speech becomes slurred, her capacity to make good decisions is significantly impaired, and she is one drink away from becoming ill, vomiting, and possibly blacking out. This is dangerous anytime it happens, but according to the NIAAA, [90% of alcoholic drinks](#) consumed by young people are consumed while binge drinking.

We use the example of a fourteen-year-old girl because binge drinking is often stereotypically associated with young men, but the research reveals a different story.

While previous statistics reported that teen boys were more likely to drink than teen girls, [most recent findings show](#) that teenage girls between the ages of twelve and fifteen are drinking twice as much as teenage boys of the same age.

Finally, according to the Federal Trade Commission, “[almost 72% of teens who drink get alcohol without having to pay for it.](#)” reporting that they get it from either a family member, a friend old enough to buy it for them, or from their parent's liquor closet. Those who have paid for it have paid an of-age friend, family member, or stranger to purchase alcohol on their behalf.

**Reflection questions:** How was drinking viewed when you were a teenager? Do any of the above statistics surprise you, or seem different than how people drank when you were younger?

# Why do teens drink?

Let's say first of all: not all teens drink. It is not inevitable. For those who do, there may be a variety of reasons, some more serious than others. Before we jump into the data, we want to remind you that your child has unique personality traits, strengths, and struggles that could lead them to want to drink for any number of reasons. If you discover that your child is or has been drinking, we encourage you to start by calmly asking one or all of the following questions:

- ✔ What made you want to try it?
- ✔ Where did you get the alcohol?
- ✔ What happened after you drank?

Now, to the research. According to [KidsHealth](#), teens typically drink for these four reasons:

**Curiosity.** When references to or the presence of alcohol is everywhere, a child's interest in alcohol grows. This normative exposure could be from seeing other adults in their lives drink, or from watching TV shows and movies or listening to music with content about alcohol. Some of the most popular songs in our culture often include subtle or strong themes of alcohol use, connected to emotional well-being, romantic relationships, and sex. These themes can be found across genres, from country singer Morgan Wallen's whiskey-heavy album [One Thing at a Time](#) to folk artist Noah Kahan's song [Dial Drunk](#), which racked up almost 75 million Spotify streams and made the rounds on TikTok. Popular shows like [The Summer I Turned Pretty](#) and [Euphoria](#) present drinking to excess as a normal—and maybe even required—part of being a teenager. Exposure may also happen through ads for alcohol that play before YouTube videos or photos of celebrities and friends drinking on social media. According to a study conducted by Columbia University, youth ages 12-17 who spend time on social media are [three times](#) more likely to use alcohol compared to teens their age who don't spend time on social media. It's important to note that through these mediums, it's not just alcohol being marketed to teens but a lifestyle. In an attempt to be like the people they listen to and watch, they may dress, talk, and even drink like them.

**To feel good, reduce stress, and relax.** Like Kennedy, many teens use alcohol to cope with anxiety, depression, and loneliness. A National Institute of Health report on [alcohol use and depression during adolescence](#) reveals that mood disturbances and alcohol use "often co-occur in this population." Though researchers are split as to whether or not alcohol use precedes mood disorders

or mood disorders precede alcohol use, the comorbidity is evident. After discovering either the calming or freeing effects of alcohol, teens often return to it to escape feelings of sadness or stress.

**To fit in.** In an interview with [Dr. Kara Powell](#), she shared research that demonstrates Generation Z is asking three questions which reveal some of the deepest struggles they face: “Who am I?”, a question about identity; “Where do I fit?”, a question about belonging; and “What difference can I make in the world?”, a question about purpose. Powell explains that though these are questions people are seeking to answer at every stage of life, by the time we reach thirty these questions are at a “low simmer,” but for those under thirty, they’re closer to a “rolling boil.” To make friends and find acceptance, teens often shape-shift their personalities and behaviors, experimenting with different ways of being, even if that seems to compromise their beliefs or even put them in danger.

**To feel older.** While there are many other things teens can do to feel older—like getting a job and paying a utility bill or two—for some reason, alcohol has a greater appeal. Go figure! The association with alcohol making someone seem more grown-up goes back to the ways it’s depicted in media. Dr. James Sargent, MD, Professor of Pediatrics and Community and Family Medicine at the Geisel School of Medicine, [points out](#):

*Children and young people look to movie stars as role models. For alcohol companies, when a favorite star uses a certain brand of alcohol, that brand gets linked to all the characteristics young admirers see in their movie idols. That’s why it’s no surprise that the brands commonly shown in movies are the most highly advertised brands, and [are] the same brands underage drinkers tend to drink.*

But these movie stars and celebrities aren’t the only people teens are taking their cues from on what it means to be an adult. They are also taking their cues from you. Children who grow up in an environment where their parents drink a lot or just view drinking favorably are [more likely](#) to drink themselves.

**Reflection questions:** Have you ever found yourself drinking for any of the reasons above? Did you drink when you were a teenager, or see or hear about your friends drinking? What were the reasons?

# What does the Bible say about drinking alcohol?

Christians have a variety of convictions about alcohol. Some say it's better to avoid altogether. Others say moderation is key. The Apostle Paul includes "[drunkards](#)" in the list of those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. But Jesus, of course, [drank wine](#) with his disciples, and even [turned water into wine](#) to keep a party going.

The Bible encourages adults to follow their consciences on the matter of drinking. But what about teens?

One of the most common scriptural principles that people cite is that of "[obeying the governing authorities](#)." Specifically, whatever the legal drinking age is in someone's particular country, Christians are encouraged not to drink until they reach that age. Some states in the U.S. have [exception clauses](#), like if a teen is at home with their parents, but this is the general principle.

We do know some parents who decided to let their teen drink as much as they wanted one night while they were at home together, to try to help them "get it out of their system." Sometimes this demystified the experience; other times it didn't, and even opened a door to overusing alcohol that they might not otherwise have walked through. But even in these cases, scripture clearly discourages drunkenness. On top of that, research has indicated that the more exposure and access a child has to alcohol early on, the greater their risk for having trouble with alcohol later in life. Depending on how often a child drinks, it could interfere with their brain development. They may have trouble with school, authority, and the law, which can lead them to behavior that scripture clearly identifies as sinful.

In addition, we have to be aware of the ways scripture tells us—adults and teens alike—to live out the gospel before others. [Ephesians 4:29](#) tells us, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." [Matthew 5:16](#) says "In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." This can be hard to do when we're drinking and have less impulse control over what we say and do. As the old adage goes: "Sober thoughts are drunk words." Our first priority must be to let Jesus' love and truth fill every aspect of our lives, and we have to be thoughtful and discerning about whether alcohol is impeding our ability to do that. If it is, it might be better not to drink at all than to compromise our witness.

**Reflection questions:** How does scripture encourage us to behave and show ourselves as a good witness to the gospel? How could alcohol affect our ability to do that?



# Five key conversations to have with your child about drinking

**The effects of alcohol.** Because curiosity is one of the primary reasons teens drink, we encourage you to have a detailed conversation with your child about what kind of substance alcohol is and how it affects the body. This kind of conversation, just like conversations about sex, money, and other things in life that have to be approached with wisdom and discernment, will help remove the mystery and help your child make a more informed decision when someone offers them alcohol. Explain to your child that [alcohol is a depressant](#) that slows the function of one's central nervous system, blocking some of the messages trying to get to the brain and altering one's perceptions, emotions, movement, vision, and hearing. Be honest with them, letting them know that while alcohol can initially have a calming effect, the more you drink, the more out of control you become and that if you drink too much, you can become violently sick and be at risk for alcohol poisoning.

**The short- and long-term risks of drinking.** Make sure your kids know the risks of drinking alcohol as a teen, such as the consequences of poor decisions while inebriated, injury from dangerous activities, or even death from accidents or alcohol poisoning, as we mentioned above. Also share how beginning to use alcohol early in life can create long-term consequences, and how it could derail them from creating the life they desire as adults. It might be hard to imagine, but we are all just one poor decision away from significantly altering the trajectory of our lives, and alcohol can increase the chances of making that decision. Remember that your conversations with the child in your care don't just need to be filled with what not to do. They must also be filled with what they should do and what kind of future they want to create. Kids who have goals and understand that alcohol can cause them to [not perform well in school or athletics](#) or could cause them to have health problems in the future are less likely to drink.

**History of substance abuse in the family.** This step may be uncomfortable or even feel embarrassing, but your kid needs to know if they are predisposed to alcohol addiction due to family history. Kids who have a history of alcohol or other substance use disorders in their family have an [increased risk](#) of developing alcohol or other drug-related problems themselves. A member of our staff shared that knowing the history of alcoholism in her family was the most significant factor in waiting to drink and sticking to a one-drink limit as an adult.

**How to engage emotions healthily.** Since research reveals that teens use binge drinking as a means to cope with stress, depression, and loneliness, as parents and caring adults we need to provide those in our care with adequate coaching on how to navigate heavy and complex emotions. We also need to give them viable outlets to cope with stress, like prayer journaling, running, or talking to a trusting adult or friend. In some cases, we may even need to seek the professional help of a therapist. To support and coach your children in engaging with their emotions, you first have to know how to engage your own feelings well. You can only give what you have. Make sure you are getting the support you need to navigate your emotional world so that you can help your children navigate theirs. Remember, you are the most significant influence in their life.

**When to ask for help.** Talk your kid through what to do when they or one of their friends finds themselves in trouble. Let them know when they need to call you, an Uber, or 911 because a friend shows [signs of alcohol poisoning](#). Assure them that even when they find themselves in a situation they know you would disapprove of, they can always call on you for help. Stress that under no circumstances are they to drive after drinking or get in the car with someone drinking. For some Christian teens, they may bank on the fact that scripture forbids drunkenness, not drinking, and be less careful when someone insists that they aren't drunk. But a drunk person is less able to identify when another person, or themselves, is drunk, and so they are more likely to engage in risky behavior. This is particularly significant when thinking about drunk driving, because someone who's drunk might believe they're capable of driving. We can't communicate enough how important it is to share this regarding drunk driving. According to the CDC's [2019 Youth Risk Report](#), 5% of high school students reported driving after drinking, and 17% riding in a car with a drinking driver. These statistics might seem negligible, but when a situation is quite literally life and death there's no safe number of people who drive drunk or ride in a car with a drunk driver.

**Reflection questions:** Did your parents or other adults in your life talk to you about drinking when you were younger? How did those conversations affect you? What other things have you learned about alcohol over the course of your life? What do you think is important to pass on to your kids?

# How can I help a teen who has a drinking problem?

Here are the warning signs [the NIAAA](#) encourages parents to look out for to discern if their child is developing a drinking problem:

- ✓ Change in mood
- ✓ Academic or behavioral problems
- ✓ Rebellion
- ✓ Change in friend group
- ✓ Low energy level
- ✓ Decreased interest in previously enjoyed activities
- ✓ Decreased interest in physical appearance
- ✓ Slurred speech
- ✓ Coordination problems

If you observe these symptoms with your children, press in with questions and empathy to discern exactly what's happening and why. Knowing why they are drinking will allow you to help them get the help they need. A young person who's drinking socially will have different needs than one who's self-medicating painful emotions with alcohol. It's also important to nip potential problems in the bud or preempt them entirely rather than waiting until you're already dealing with an issue, so, here are some practical steps that you can take to help set your teens up for success:

- ✓ **Make alcohol less accessible in your home** by keeping alcoholic beverages somewhere your teen can't get to easily and, if you have the financial means, purchasing a liquor fridge with a lock.
- ✓ **Keep an eye on any alcohol in your home** by keeping a count of bottles or cans of beer or seltzers. Because this is harder to do with larger bottles of hard alcohol or wine, consider buying smaller ones and, as stated above, locking them up.
- ✓ **Set clear boundaries** with family members and other adults in your child's life about giving your child alcohol. Don't assume what they will and will not do. State clearly that when your child is under their supervision, they are not allowed to drink alcohol.

- ✔ **Know your child's friends and their parents.** Communicate clear expectations and boundaries around alcohol with their parents and seek to work together to ensure your children have limited access to alcohol.
- ✔ **Be careful and aware about [social hosting](#).** Another primary way teens gain access to alcohol is at a social gathering hosted by an adult in their home. This adult may be the parent of a friend, a family member, or their parent. When your child is invited to a party, know the details. Will there be alcohol? Will there be adult supervision? Who will be there? Anyone over the age of 21? We advise you to do your due diligence to know all the facts by having a conversation with the person hosting the party or coming in to say hello before leaving your child there.

**Reflection questions:** What are some ways you can help make your home safe for your kids in the area of drinking? How can you be proactive about creating a healthy culture surrounding alcohol in your family? How might some of these precautions be helpful for your own relationship with alcohol?

# The Best Defense

In a guide for talking to your kids about drinking, the NIAAA stated that [parents' disapproval](#) is one of the key reasons teens choose not to drink. Your influence is invaluable. Don't give in to the lie that your kids don't listen to you, or that they're going to go along with the herd no matter what you say. Keep striving with all Christ's energy to have one continuous conversation with them about drinking to protect them and prepare them if and when they have the opportunity to drink or face pressure from friends or culture. Continue to do the good work of shepherding them towards wise and healthy living.

[Proverbs 22:6](#) says, "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it." The lessons that we teach our children and the behaviors we model for them have an impact not only on who they are, but who they become. Teaching them to prioritize wisdom, discernment, and confidence when they engage with alcohol and situations where drinking is happening will cross-apply into the way they address other big life issues like their relationships, careers, and parenting their own children. At the end of the day, a conversation with alcohol isn't just about alcohol, but about discipling our children to make firm and God-honoring decisions about what kind of person they want to be. It's an opportunity to step into their lives and encourage them to pursue holiness as it relates to drinking, as well as everything else.

## Questions to start conversations with your teens:

- ✓ How do your friends talk about alcohol?
- ✓ How has media affected the way you think about drinking?
- ✓ Do you know anyone with an unhealthy relationship with alcohol?
- ✓ What are some signs of that unhealthiness?
- ✓ What would you do if another teenager or adult offered you alcohol and I wasn't around?
- ✓ How would you say our family talks and thinks about alcohol?
- ✓ How could we as a family be wiser and more discerning in those conversations?
- ✓ How can you honor God in the way you interact with alcohol, both now and as an adult?

If you like what you learned in this Parent Guide and want to help us continue to make great resources to serve parents like you, consider making a gift at [axis.org/give](https://axis.org/give). Thank you!

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