

## Facing the Facts of Underage Drinking

Here are some common questions that parents have about underage drinking. The answers may change the way you think and feel about alcohol use and your children.

### Q) Doesn't cracking down against alcohol just make kids want it more?

A) According to research, most children respond to clear rules and consequences. Studies have also shown that underage youths choose not to drink if they fear the police may catch them. Many children seek the approval of their parents and choose not to drink if they feel their parents would consider it "very wrong."

Research shows that when the drinking age is 21, those younger than 21 drink less and continue to drink less through their early twenties. The lower rates of drinking before 21 doesn't mean there are higher rates of drinking after 21.<sup>i</sup> In fact, it's just the opposite—the amount of drinking is lower.<sup>ii</sup>

### Q) If the drinking age is changed to 18, are we likely to have more problems or fewer?

A) Since the minimum drinking age was changed to 21 in the 1980s, deaths from drinking and driving have decreased by thousands, saving an estimated 20,000 lives. The raising of the drinking age is often considered one of the most successful policies in U.S. history.

A 2004 joint report by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine looked at a number of studies and found that people who start drinking at age 18 are at least twice as likely to be accidentally injured, involved in motor vehicle crashes and engaged in physical fights while under the influence of alcohol compared to those who start drinking at age 21.

### Q) If the drinking age is lowered, are we likely to have more or fewer drunk driving problems?

A) There is strong evidence from other countries that lowering the minimum drinking age increases the number of alcohol-related traffic accidents. In New Zealand, when the minimum drinking age was lowered from 20 to 18 years old, a study found that there was a significant rise in traffic crashes among youth affected by the law change.<sup>iii</sup> The study found that the rate of traffic crashes and injuries to 18- and 19- year-old males increased 12 percent while the rate for males aged 15 to 17 increased 14 percent compared to the four years before the drinking age was lowered. For females, the effect was even greater—rates increased 51 percent for 18- to 19- year-olds and 24 percent for 15- to 17-year-olds.

The study estimated that 400 serious injuries and 12 deaths could be prevented each year among 15- to 19-year-olds if the nation raises the minimum drinking age back to 21.

Q) Do Europeans drink more responsibly?

A) In 2006, a study by the European Union found that levels of alcohol use and binge drinking by European teens were much higher than in the United States. The only country that had a lower level of binge drinking was Turkey—where alcohol is forbidden.

Q) My parents gave me my first drink. Why can't I do the same for my child?

A) We now know a lot more now about the negative effects of underage drinking. Since underage drinking is illegal in Vermont, it also sends a confusing message to your child about obeying the law.

Q) I drank in high school. Why is it such a big deal?

A) Are you able to say that nothing negative ever happened at a party that involved underage drinking, or that you don't know someone who developed an addiction problem that started when you were teenagers? High school is a stressful environment, and adding drinking to the mix can be dangerous.

Q) If everything seems okay, can't I just assume that my child doesn't drink?

A) Only three out of ten parents of 15- to 16-year-olds think their children drink, compared to the six out of ten teens who reported drinking.<sup>iv</sup>

Q) My child knows everything about drinking. Why do I still need to talk about it?

A) Your child may have some dangerous ideas about alcohol and may not know how to separate fact from fiction. Teens may not know that different beverages can have different alcohol content levels and may believe fresh air or coffee can sober them up.

Q) Will my child listen to me?

A) Don't assume that nothing you say will get through. Children listen to their parents more than you think. Studies have shown that children who have parents that supervise their friendships and activities are less likely to engage in underage drinking and other risky behaviors.

Q) Is alcohol safer than illegal drugs?

A) Alcohol abuse kills 6.5 times more youth than all other illegal drugs combined.

Q) Does underage drinking help children learn how to responsibly use alcohol?

A) Rather than helping teens cope with alcohol use later in life, early drinking may actually add to the danger. Adolescents who drink before age 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than those who begin drinking at age 21. Research has shown that 40 percent of kids who begin drinking before age 15 will develop alcohol dependence at some point in their lives. That proportion drops to below 10 percent for those who begin drinking after age 21.<sup>v</sup>

Q) Is drunk driving the only danger for underage drinkers?

A) Only one-third of underage drinking deaths involve drunk driving. The rest involve alcohol poisoning, homicides, suicides and accidents.

Q) Is hosting a drinking party at my house safer for teens?

A) The effects of underage and binge drinking are just as dangerous at home. Your child may have friends that are taking medications or have a history of addiction—details you will not know in advance. Not only are you liable and criminally responsible for underage drinking at your home, you also have a responsibility keep children safe—even if doing that goes against what they want

Want more information? We can help. Visit [www.parentupvt.org](http://www.parentupvt.org) or dial 211 for tools and resources.

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<sup>i</sup> O'Malley PM, Wagenaar AC. *Effects of minimum drinking age laws on alcohol use, related behaviors and traffic crash involvement among American youth: 1976-1987*. J Stud Alcohol. 1991;52(5):478-491.

<sup>ii</sup> Wagenaar AC. Minimum drinking age and alcohol availability to youth: Issues and research needs. In: Hilton ME, Bloss G, eds. *Economics and the prevention of alcohol related problems*. Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism; 1993:175-200.

<sup>iii</sup> Kypri K, Voas RB, Langley JD, et al. *Minimum purchasing age for alcohol and traffic crash injuries among 15- to 19- year-olds in New Zealand*. American Journal of Public Health. 2006;96(1):126-131.

<sup>iv</sup> *The Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth Fact Sheet*.

<sup>v</sup> Hingson, R. W., Heeren, T., & Winter, M. R. (2006). *Age at drinking onset and alcohol dependence*. Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, 160, 739-846.