

Beer, Wine, Coolers, Spirits: By Any Name They're a Brain Drain

"At least she's not taking drugs." This is what some parents may have thought a generation ago if they caught their daughter using alcohol. Back then, their attention was more likely focused on the dramatic increases in drug use. Those days are gone.

Keep in mind that alcohol is used more than any illegal drug or cigarettes among adolescents.

We now know that many parts of a young person's body continue to develop until age 21. Once you know how alcohol affects your son's thinking, behavior, and learning skills in ways that can lead to lifelong problems, you will understand why it is essential to prevent your children and teenagers from using alcohol.

Think about it. From the time your daughter was born, her brain kept her alive. It told her lungs to breathe, her heart to beat, her stomach to feel hunger, and to express discomfort when she was cold. Everything else, from feeding herself to skateboarding to making friends, she learned with her brain as she grew into who she is today. Talking occasionally to her when she's in elementary school about not using alcohol can form the foundation for her healthy decision-making.

Pathway to Poor Grades

Alcohol can negatively affect your son's learning process. Using alcohol during his teen years damages the part of his brain that is responsible for memory, learning, ability, decision-making, and reasoning. It can reduce his ability to remember what is taught in class or what he reads by as much as 10 percent, compared with his schoolmates who do not use alcohol. In time, he will have lower grades compared with his schoolmates who do not use alcohol. In fact, a study showed that kids with the higher frequency of alcohol use (during the past month) were associated with lower academic achievements. By contrast, lower alcohol use is associated with increased likelihood of school attendance.

REPORT CARD				
GRADING PERIOD	1	2	3	4
READING	A			
WRITTEN COMMUNICATION	A			
MATHEMATICS	C			
SCIENCE	B			
SOCIAL STUDIES	B			
ART	A			
MUSIC	A			
PHYSICAL EDUCATION	C			
Grade Average	B			
Attendance	Period	Absent	Tardy	

Depressing Truth

In addition to learning, alcohol affects the part of your daughter's brain that causes social problems, depression, and suicidal thoughts. For example, if she begins using alcohol before the age of 13, she is more likely to think about and attempt suicide than her friends who do not use alcohol. All teens experience normal behavioral changes. Some changes may indicate your child is using alcohol. The most common changes include loss of positive friendships with peers and family, as well as consistently arguing and breaking rules.



Alcohol use interacts with conditions such as depression and stress to contribute to suicide, the third leading cause of death among people between the ages of 14 and 25. In one study, 37 percent of eighth-grade females who drank heavily reported attempting suicide.

Trail to Truancy

Alcohol use often leads to violence and other delinquent behaviors. In one survey, the percentage of youth reporting delinquent behaviors increased significantly with the level of alcohol use in the past 12 months. For example, boys who begin drinking before the age of 14 are 11 times more likely to report being in a fight while drinking or after drinking than those who do not use alcohol until they are 21. Other delinquent behaviors associated with alcohol use include stealing, carrying a weapon and selling drugs.

Alley to Addiction

Alcohol, at least in small quantities, often acts on the part of the brain that makes your daughter feel good and less nervous. This may make her more likely to drink again when she wants to avoid feeling nervous. When alcohol leaves her body, it can cause feelings of stress that can be lessened by drinking more alcohol. This roller coaster of effects caused by alcohol use and withdrawal can contribute to your daughter continuing to drink, even when she knows that it is not good for her. Whereas, delaying alcohol use until after they turn 21 reduces their lifetime risk of serious alcohol problems by 70 percent. The same amount of alcohol can affect females faster than males. That is, if your daughter uses alcohol in her early teens, she is at greater risk of alcohol dependence at some point in her life. She is also at risk of becoming dependent more quickly and at a younger age.



Helping your child to protect his brain from alcohol is one of the most important ways you can help him live a healthy, happy life. Be sure he knows how important it is to you-and to him-that he does not use alcohol.

- Help him learn ways to refuse alcohol if it is offered.
- Make rules about alcohol use and enforce the consequences of breaking them.
- Monitor his friends and meet their families.

The material found in this document has been adapted from the article "Beer, Wine, Coolers, Spirits: By Any Name They're a Brain Drain", available at <http://family.samhsa.gov>.

A Family Guide To Keeping Youth Mentally Healthy & Drug Free is a public education Web site developed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to communicate to parents and other caring adults about how they can help promote their child's mental health and reduce his or her risk for becoming involved with alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs.