

Booze clues

How to tell if your teen is headed for trouble with alcohol

by GABRIELLE BAUER

THE BOOZE WAS FLOWING FREELY, in keeping with the wedding reception's lavish tone, and a boy of about 13 had just downed his first whisky sour. He was seated at the table next to mine and, as the evening wore on, his voice got progressively louder, his giggles more random. Perhaps he got hold of a second drink. Later, he had to leave the table and (apparently) barely made it to the bathroom. His parents were mildly annoyed, but friends and relatives told them not to worry — it was an isolated incident and certainly didn't portend a regular drinking habit. It hadn't caused any harm and would make a funny, if slightly embarrassing, family story.

If any substance has “mixed message” flashing on it, it's alcohol. The media tout it both as a reliable social lubricant and an addictive drug. About 80 percent of Canadians aged 15 and up drink at least on occasion, and many drink to relax. Yet parents naturally want to keep their

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kids away from the stuff. And not without good reason: A study released by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration in the US found a strong link between alcohol use in 12- to 17-year-olds and fighting, stealing, impaired driving, skipping school and self-harm. Unplanned sex also goes with the territory.

If you were planning to shelve the whole issue until the high school years, take a sober second thought. The earlier kids start drinking, the worse they are likely to fare. And, as the research shows, most kids do start drinking early — at about age 12½, on average. But take heart. Not all kids are at risk, and there are ways to detect whether your teen is headed for trouble. And, as Stanley Kutcher, an expert in teen mental health at Halifax's Dalhousie University, says, "the earlier you hear and heed the warning bells, the more influence you have."

Not my kid, you say? That's what Charlene Montague,* a Calgary mother of two teenage girls, thought. Montague provided all the right ingredients — love by the bucketful, guidance, a stable home, comfortable lifestyle — yet her oldest daughter, Kate, still turned to alcohol at age 14. "I noticed the bottles in our liquor cabinet getting ever so gradually emptier," she recalls. One day, Kate "left the house with something bulky rolled up in her jacket, which I suspected was a bottle." The drinking and sneaking picked up from there.

●●● The lowdown on teen drinking

●●● While most kids Kate's age stick with a sip here and a swig there until they get to high school, a Public Health Agency of Canada study found that, in 2002, 16 percent of grade-eight students were getting drunk at least twice a year. In grade nine, the number jumped to one-third of students and by grade 10, it was up to 44 percent. The escalation may creep up imperceptibly.

The most important pattern to watch for is binge drinking. Defined as five or more standard drinks in one sitting, it's bingeing that's most liable to land kids in car accidents, in the hospital or in bed with unwanted part-



Some sobering stats

- Early drinking, before age 13 or 14, increases the odds of habitual use and future dependence.
- More than a third of students in grades seven to nine have binged on alcohol.
- 40% of 12- to 15-year-olds with poor grades have drunk to intoxication, compared with 15% with good grades.

ners, says Heather Clark, of the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) in Ottawa. And while it's not the norm, binge drinking among young teens isn't rare, either (see "Some Sobering Stats"). In addition to shutting down gag reflexes, breathing and heart rates, "binge drinking boosts the odds of alcohol dependence and illicit drug use," says Clark.

●●● Red flags

●●● So what is it that makes some kids more likely to get hooked? For starters, there's your own relationship with alcohol. While Montague never crossed over into outright dependence, her drinking crept up over the years. By the time Kate was 13, Montague

was drinking a couple of glasses of wine at dinner every night, sipping from a wine glass when getting ready to go out for the evening, and sneaking in a few sips when her husband would go out to walk the dog. "My kids were seeing me with that wine glass a little too often," she says. "I realized I couldn't talk to Kate about alcohol without confronting my own behaviour." Some studies have found that children of problem drinkers tend to drink when alone, and not just to relax but also to forget their problems.

Some of us simply have DNA that doesn't mix well with booze. "Genes explain about half of the propensity to develop an alcohol problem," says Kutcher. "If there's a history of alcoholism in your family, you need to keep it in mind." On the psychological front, severe shyness and attention deficit disorder might drive young people to drink.

And as a social activity, drinking behaves much like a virus, spreading from teen to teen. The CCSA has identified peer alcohol use as one of the strongest predictors of personal alcohol use — even stronger than parental drinking. Peer drinking was certainly a factor for Kate. "One of her good friends started drinking at 12," says Montague. "Another friend from synchronized swimming class got sick in our house after she'd been drinking. Kate was the wild type, someone who wanted to try everything, so I think she was vulnerable to these influences."



If you suspect there's a problem...

Don't wait, says Joyce Castanza, a public health nurse in London, Ont. "Deal with the problem as early as possible in a non-judgmental, supportive manner." Just saying no won't get you very far, though. Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse senior research analyst Florence Kellner notes: "It's counterproductive to absolutely forbid further drinking without discussion, as this will only encourage the teen to sneak."

Here's how Kellner and Castanza suggest you approach the problem:

- Restate your family rules or guidelines on drinking.
- Listen to your child's point of view: Does she wish to change? If so, what is she ready to do about it?
- Read online about the effects of alcohol on the body and mind (see "Resources," below).
- Discuss some next steps with your child and seek help together if appropriate.
- Assess whether your child's drinking is affecting his studies, friendships, mood or physical health.
- Find out what programs are available for at-risk teens; if the child is drinking alone (other than experimental sips), seek professional help.

Prevention tool kit

But you need not watch helplessly as such scenarios unfold. Gloria Chaim, of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto, says a positive adult influence is the sturdiest safeguard against drinking problems. "Just having a strong relationship with your child goes a long way," she says.

At home, parents can control the supply of alcohol (by locking the liquor cabinet, for example) or "supply the control" by modelling responsible use. That's what Andrea Gradwell* has in mind when she lets her 14- and nine-year-old girls have the occasional drink with dinner. "I'm talking about half a glass of wine, maybe a couple of times a month," says Gradwell, who lives in a small community in the Interior of BC. "I don't want my kids to use alcohol as a tool for rebellion." Cautions Avrum Nadigel, who works with Chaim at CAMH: "Many factors, such as self-esteem and peer pressure, feed into a young person's drinking patterns, so what works for Andrea's family might not work for others."

Marie Stoddart,* also from BC, has taken a different tack with her two teenage boys. "I've made a point of modelling an alternative to celebrating with alcohol," she says. She helped arrange an after-grad boat cruise

with a DJ, and security personnel to check all backpacks for booze or drugs. She says her son and his classmates saw how much fun can be had without alcohol. Even at home, Stoddart rarely drinks around her boys.

Such role modelling is key, says Chaim. If you dive for the liquor cabinet after coming home from work, pleading frazzled nerves, "you're sending the message that alcohol is a normal and necessary way to self-soothe," she says. On the flip side, "drinking sparingly as part of a meal or a ritual, such as the Jewish Sabbath, establishes alcohol as part of a larger experience."

If alcoholism runs in your family, "the best thing you can do is to talk about it with your child," says Florence Kellner, senior research analyst with the CCSA. "Parents may fear such discussions give the child permission to indulge, but if anything it's the opposite — knowledge is power, and power is control."

What about discussing your own lapses in judgment? That's a tough one, as many of today's parents were teens before the "don't drink and drive" message came of age. "When asked directly, it's usually best to tell the truth," Kellner advises, "perhaps with some details edited out. Be sure to explain what you did was stupid and dangerous, and that you have confidence your child can do better."

Charlene Montague talked the talk, but what finally did the trick was cutting back on her own drinking. She starting by abstaining from alcohol for 30 days, a move that piqued her daughter's interest and inspired her to follow suit for 15 days. "We now talk about my ongoing moderation project, and I can see she's learning by watching how my husband and I lead our lives." ♥

*Names changed by request.

Resources

thecoolspot.gov Billed as "the young teen's place for info on alcohol," this US site provides both facts and thoughtful discussion on "the right to resist."

maddyyouth.ca Aims to help kids make driving safer for themselves and others.

media-awareness.ca Have your preteen or young teen take this site's "alcohol advertising quiz," geared to kids in grades six to eight.

Teens Under the Influence: The Truth About Kids, Alcohol and Other Drugs by Katherine Ketcham and Nicholas A. Pace. This book discusses the immediate dangers for substance-using kids and gives parents practical tools to address the problem.

Young, Sober and Free: Teen-to-Teen Stories of Hope and Recovery by Shelly Marshall. Teens talk about getting and staying sober. Includes discussions of 12-step recovery principles.

Today's Parent
com

Check out these strategies for keeping the lines of communication open with your teen.
Todaysparent.com/teenconnection