

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Teens & Alcohol

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Alcohol in a Pro-Bingeing Culture

It's not really news to point out that our culture glamorizes drinking, usually in the context of partying. Ads for alcohol show us beautiful, fashionable people having a good time. Numerous movies, TV shows, and songs depict alcohol use as "cool," desirable, and a normal part of growing up. Media often portrays experimenting with alcohol as a way of living without fear or even as a means of self-discovery.

The appeal of alcohol is clearly concerning to parents because of the risks involved when *anyone* drinks and because of the greater dangers of teenage drinking. One reason why it can be difficult to navigate this issue with your kids is that the church as a whole is not unified in its position on alcohol. Some denominations say that drinking alcohol is ok as long as you don't get drunk. Others would take the position that any alcohol use is wrong. This can be a controversial topic in Christian circles and in Christian schools.

Even if you as parents have no question about your own position on drinking, it's still challenging to figure out how to best address the issue with your kids. Some parents believe that it's safest for them to introduce their kids to alcohol before anyone else does, so they allow their children to drink at home. Some parents take a hard and fast stance against ever allowing alcohol in their homes at all. They fear their children will develop a taste for alcohol and pursue drinking outside of the home. Other parents might wonder if they should drink in front of their kids because doing so might seem hypocritical.

But the most pressing question is: How do we help our kids not view drunkenness as a necessary aspect of social engagement or, more importantly, of "the good life"? More than just stopping them from drinking underage, the goal is for them to desire on their own not to participate in dangerous and risky behavior, no matter how normal culture makes it. We will look at all aspects of alcohol in this Guide in order to help you do just that!

— How big of a problem is alcohol use among teens?

Not all parents see alcohol consumption in teens as a huge problem. Everyone knows it's against federal law for anyone under 21 to drink in the U.S., but laws in at least 37 states permit minors to drink alcohol in their homes or in the company of family members. A [confusing legal situation in Arkansas](#) prohibits minors from possessing alcohol even as the same law allows parents to provide it to their underage children.

The vast majority of adults in the U.S. drink at least occasionally, and alcohol use does not translate to a disorder in every case. Parents might not really know where to draw the use/abuse line without sounding like hypocrites, especially if they themselves "experimented" with drugs or alcohol as teens. Some parents even allow their kids to drink alcohol in their homes with their children's friends, regardless of the legal ramifications. In their book, [Ten Talks Parents Must Have with Their Children about Sex and Character](#), Pepper Schwartz and Dominic Cappello say that such parents believe it gives them some level of control if their teen "is going to drink anyway."

A few parents will confess they see teen alcohol use as "harmless" or even as a necessary rite of passage to adulthood. And then there's those who lead their households with their own untreated, unacknowledged substance abuse disorders but

do not see themselves as addicts—even if their kids do. After all, less than a generation ago, addiction was not considered a legitimate medical condition. (Read on for more specific information on parent rationale.)

The fact is, [current research](#) of more than 50,000 students nationwide shows underage alcohol use declining overall, but remaining “a consistent problem.” One in three teens between ages 12 and 20 (that’s more than seven million of them) self-report that they drank alcohol within the past 30 days. And this stat only counts the teens willing to admit that they drink. Worse, one in five teens say they’ve been fully drunk within the past 30 days, and one in six say they binge-drink (more than five drinks within a two-hour period). Alcohol is a factor in more than 4,600 deaths of teens every year.

If this information isn’t enough, adolescent health specialists now know that young people’s brains continue to develop into their 20s. The result is that the damage to a teen’s development and the potential for addiction in underage alcohol use increases exponentially as the age of first “experimentation” declines.

Imagine we’re standing right now in an average eighth-grade classroom of 25 students. Two of the students in the room today drank alcohol recently. Say we’re in a 10th grade classroom; five of those kids drink. In a 12th grade class, we would be talking about eight or nine of them. How many of those kids do we know? How many are friends with our kids? How many **are** our kids?

—— Is all alcohol bad for everyone?

Clinically speaking, the alcohol we drink is part of a large family of chemicals we use every day. Some are poisonous, some are in cleaning products, and some take off our nail polish. The only member of this class of chemicals produced specifically for human consumption is ethanol—we refer to it simply as “alcohol.” It is clear at room temperature, less dense than water (allowing for the invention of the “still”), dissolves easily in water, and is so flammable [we can use it as fuel](#).

Most alcoholic beverages do not contain pure alcohol or anything close to it. That’s good because just a few ounces of pure alcohol can be deadly. Once consumed and absorbed, the alcohol dissolves in the water contained in the blood, which carries it throughout the body tissues. The water in these tissues then absorbs the alcohol again. At this point, the person begins to display the effects of drinking and we can measure the blood alcohol concentration (the “BAC” that law enforcement uses to determine intoxication).

Here’s a little mythbusting: no one really breaks down alcohol “faster” than anyone else, no matter what we drink or what size we are. Alcohol metabolism is one of the most predictable chemical reactions there is, and pretty much everyone breaks alcohol down at the exact same rate. In general, the body breaks down alcohol at the rate of 0.016% per hour. This sounds technical, but think of it this way: If a person’s BAC is at 0.16 (twice the legal limit of 0.08 to drive a car), it will take 10 hours to bring that person’s BAC back to zero. So when someone with a BAC of 0.16 leaves a party at two in the morning, it will take until noon the next day to bring their BAC to zero, and [it will be illegal for them to drive](#) at any time before 7:00 AM. (If you want to know more about the scientific and biological implications of alcohol on the human body, check out

the BBC documentary [The Truth About Alcohol](#).)

The federal government [defines the size of a standard “drink”](#) as:

- 12 oz. of beer (4–6% alcohol concentration by volume)
- 8 oz. of malt liquor-beer (about 7% alcohol)
- 5 oz. of table wine (about 12% alcohol)
- 1.5 oz. of hard liquor (gin, rum, vodka, tequila, whiskey, etc.—about 40% alcohol but can be as high as 95%)

The effects of alcohol consumption on adults vary from person to person depending on several factors. These include how much people drink, how often they drink, how much food is in their stomach, and their ages, health status, and family history. Physicians agree that most adults can drink alcohol in small to moderate amounts on occasion or even somewhat regularly with no problems. Some physicians even recommend it to their patients to treat cardiovascular ailments. Adults who use alcohol commonly point to its ability to help them “unwind,” “feel better,” “release inhibitions,” and even to “help them forget their troubles.” Other people use it for relief of physical pain. Still others see it as an escape from the stress that plagues their everyday lives. In short, [alcohol is just one of the remedies](#) this world offers for the variety of struggles and hardships we commonly experience.

Though it’s true most agree that a few drinks a couple times per week won’t hurt most adults, we all know about the dangers of the overuse or misuse of alcohol. It can cause a wide range of consequences, including minor difficulties such as slurred speech and motor impairment to severe health risks like violent behavior, breathing problems, alcohol poisoning, comas, or even death. Long-term effects of alcohol use in adults include alcohol use disorders (which used to be lumped into the diagnosis of “alcoholism”), addiction, and serious chronic health problems involving all of the body’s major organ systems. The federal government also clearly warns that no level of alcohol use is safe for teens. We will discuss the reasons why.

— Why do teens use alcohol?

As we’ve seen, the specific reasons why people—both teens and adults—use alcohol vary as widely as the personalities of those who use it. No teen starts drinking with the intention of becoming addicted to alcohol. Some adults blame teen culture, bad peer influence, or media that promotes it, and these factors might indeed influence some teens to drink. However, there other factors than can be more powerful influences.

Many teens start drinking because 1. they can’t stand a certain situation in their lives; 2. they just want to fit in; and 3. they can’t cope with or process the situation in a healthy way. Chris Prentiss is the cofounder of the prestigious Passages Malibu inpatient treatment center in Southern California. In his book, [The Alcoholism and Addiction Cure](#), he says that substance abuse most often happens when a person “can’t cope with life without some sort of support, even if that support is damaging.”

A recent, [large-scale national study](#) gives the top reasons why teens drink (by their own admission):

- Other people they know and respect, such as family and friends, drink;

- TV, movies, ads, and celebrities make it look cool;
- To ease or numb overwhelming physical pain, emotional agony, trauma, grief, or disabling fear;
- To ease loneliness, bond with other kids, “fit in,” or fill some other internal void (we sometimes dismiss it as “boredom,” but really it’s more like a “disconnect”);
- To act out feelings of rebellion, anger, frustration, stress, or helplessness;
- To boost their confidence (some kids say they can do stuff with alcohol they never had the nerve to try before, e.g., dance in public, ask a girl out, etc.);
- Because of misinformation, i.e., kids these days think drinking isn’t a big deal compared to other recreational substances they could use;
- Because it produces results and works quickly (seriously, drinking alcohol wouldn’t be such a problem if it didn’t work so well); and
- It’s easily accessible and affordable compared to illicit drugs.

Alcohol abuse happens [twice as often in people with mood disorders](#) (like clinical depression or anxiety). Prentiss also writes that alcohol is by far the most abused substance in the U.S., showing up in criminal toxicology more than twice as often as illicit drugs (four times more often than marijuana).

The majority of people addicted to alcohol start drinking early in life. Half of problem-drinkers [are diagnosed before age 20](#), and some people have a genetic predisposition to addiction and/or a biological sensitivity to alcohol. These factors, along with what we mentioned about teens and their growing brains, bring an underage drinker to abuse, addiction, and/or serious health problems faster and easier than adults, making it harder to quit drinking once they start.

— Is pop culture really that influential when it comes to alcohol?

Simply consuming media depicting dangerous behavior doesn’t automatically mean we’re going to copy that behavior. But it would be foolish to ignore the fact that media does cast a vision of the good life and that those visions impact our own imaginations and habits. Some teens might turn to alcohol to cope with their personal problems, but some might do so because they are constantly consuming pop culture, which glamorizes drinking and very rarely shows the negative side effects.

The popular Netflix show *Stranger Things*, for example, has given some mixed messages about underage drinking. In its first season, it was depicted as dangerous and relationally divisive. In the second season, teen drinking was portrayed as much more normal and as a way for teens to celebrate and cut loose.

In pop songs, being passionately in love is often positively compared to being drunk or high. “Drunk in Love” by Beyonce and Jay-Z is a great example from a few years ago. More recently, singer Post Malone mentions “liquor” (as well as sex and drug use) in his song “Rockstar” (language), which describes the glamorized rockstar lifestyle.

The important thing is that the more often we hear an idea, the more normalized it becomes and the more likely we are to believe it, whether we realize it or not. So when the songs, movies, shows, friends, celebrities, and influencers a teen pays attention

to all portray alcohol as good, necessary, and desirable, the more likely that teen is to believe that idea.

—— Where do teens get alcohol?

The [2016 National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#) reports the majority of underage drinkers last drank in their own home or a friend's home, usually with two or more other people present. More than half of the surveyed youth reported friends and family—including their parents—as the source for the alcohol they drink. About 1 in 5 get it from another underage person, and about 1 in 10 steal it from their own or someone else's home.

Teens, whether or not they say they drink, almost universally agree they would have no problem getting access to alcohol. More than half of *eighth graders* say it would be “fairly easy” or “very easy” for them to get it, and the [vast majority of high-school seniors](#) say the same.

The newest [trends in underage drinking](#) show how creative (and dangerous) kids' choices can be. Some of these confuse and alarm even the most streetwise parents among us:

- Alcohol extracted from hand sanitizer (which is 120-proof);
- Bingeing on cough syrup (drinking multiple bottles at a time) known as “robotripping,” a reference to a common brand of over-the-counter cough suppressants containing dextromethorphan (DXM) and alcohol in combination;
- “Eyeballing” alcohol (holding a bottle to the eye, allowing the liquid to enter the body through the blood vessels and membranes—it prevents the smell of alcohol on the breath);
- Overdosing on liquid nutritional supplements;
- Dipping tampons into hard liquor for consumption or even inserting them into the rectum to give the alcohol direct access to the bloodstream;
- Misuse of bath salts (which often contain ingredients with hallucinogenic or psychotropic properties);
- Drinking liquids infused with huge quantities of nutmeg (a natural hallucinogenic in large doses); and
- Using the Internet to conceal purchase and delivery of these substances and ingredients.

Note that there are new ideas for abuse showing up on YouTube and Vimeo every day.

—— What does the Bible say about alcohol?

The Bible talks quite a bit about alcohol consumption, but stops short of applying the same specific instruction to all believers, leaving Christians to disagree widely on the subject. When the Bible speaks of alcohol consumption as sin, though, it invariably refers specifically to overuse or misuse of alcohol—or at least a failure to respect the power it can wield over the human body and mind. [Galatians 5](#) and [1 Corinthians 6](#) list “drunkards” among those who will never inherit the kingdom of God. [Proverbs 23:29–](#)

[35 \(NLT\)](#) warns that those who “spend long hours in taverns trying out new drinks” will experience anguish, sorrow, fighting, unhappiness, bruises, bloodshot eyes, hallucinations, slurred and “crazy” speech, and a lack of connection to reality. Most people who struggle with alcohol use disorders will report similar experiences, whether they know God or not.

Other places in the Bible warn believers more generally against being “tempted when lured and enticed by their own desire” ([James 1:14](#)). God knows only too well the human tendency to use just about anything to cope with the hardships and struggles of daily life in this fallen world. We become enslaved to them, He says, and He’s right. We can all relate to something or someone in our lives we use as a substitute for God when situations get rough and He seems absent. **God seems less concerned, in fact, with our specific vehicle of bondage (such as alcohol) and more concerned with avoiding the conditions and decisions that lead to bondage.**

The entire Sermon on the Mount describes these conditions and decisions in detail starting in [Matthew 5](#). God literally promises not to throw us under extraordinary temptations or ones with no way out ([1 Corinthians 10:13](#)). He also warns us against doing the same to others by indirectly leading vulnerable people into temptation ([1 Corinthians 8:9](#), [10:23–33](#); [James 2:8](#); [Philippians 2:3–4](#)). This clearly precludes abusing alcohol in front of kids and offering or praising it to those very susceptible to misuse (such as teens or those in recovery). In every book of the Bible, apostles and prophets echo God when they beg us in one holy voice not to bind ourselves to anything other than the One who gave everything to finally set us free forever ([Galatians 5:1](#), [Galatians 5:13–26](#); [Isaiah 61:1](#); [Luke 4:18](#); [Romans 6:14](#)).

— How do I talk to my teen about drinking and partying?

No matter who gets the alcohol for the kid, all the research agrees that a teen’s parents are “hands down” the greatest influence over their decision to drink—and apparently [that’s always been true](#). Here are some practical suggestions for talking to your kids about drinking.

- 1. Self-assess.** [The Journal of Drug Education published results](#) of an extensive study about parents’ rules on teen drinking. At first, a majority of parents said they were against underage drinking, but when prompted about “special occasions” or other exceptions, they quickly listed instances when they allowed their kids to drink. They justified it during celebrations and vacations, as “training for adulthood” and to “teach them to drink responsibly.” They also allowed drinking in order to “preserve family and cultural traditions” (particularly in families not native to the U.S.), in response to pressure from their teens, because teen drinking is “inevitable,” or out of fear of damaging or limiting communication lines (perhaps a teen wouldn’t call for a ride after a party and instead drive home drunk).

Whatever the justification, the messages parents send to their children about drinking—directly or indirectly—make a huge difference to kids’ decisions to drink. What messages do our own habits send? A harsh, honest assessment is hard, we

agree, but it helps us determine our values and priorities so we can address teens clearly about what's healthy and what's not.

- 2. Pick the time and place carefully.** Choosing the appropriate timing for tough talks is critical. Make sure all parties feel rested, safe, and focused before beginning. Your children will hear nothing you if they feel rushed, exhausted, or maybe even drunk (trying to address a drinking problem at 3:00 AM when your intoxicated child walks in the front door will never go well).

A youth minister passionate about connecting teens with their parents, Jonathan McKee has authored [some very practical books](#) about doing just that. One of them, [Candid Confessions of an Imperfect Parent](#), suggests that parents intentionally create “communication arenas” in their homes and communities. These “arenas” are spaces where teens feel safe to open up and feel “heard.” McKee gives an example from his own upbringing about a jacuzzi his father purchased for their home. He called it “the best purchase he ever made” because, when the family used it together, the kids would talk for hours. McKee urges parents to find or make a few of those places in their worlds. Consider going to the local coffee shop, getting fries at a local fast-food joint, playing on the PS4 together, walking a round of golf, biking, hiking, walking the dog—whatever. Welcome and respond with grace and love to any conversation on any topic from anyone in these spaces.

- 3. Ask questions.** David Smith, Director of Content Development at [The Source for Youth Ministry](#), makes [this important point](#) about talking with teens:

Helping teens discover answers for themselves is far better than simply giving them all the answers. This doesn't mean we bark out questions like a parole officer. Ask questions as someone who cares about their opinion and as someone who really wants to listen. Turn the conversation into them talking 80% of the time and you only talking 20%. Make them feel heard.

He gives some sample questions for parents looking for help getting the alcohol talk started:

- *Do you think the drinking age of 21 is a responsible one?*
- *On a scale of 1 to 10, how tempted are you to drink alcohol on a weekly basis?*
- *On a scale of 1 to 10, how tempted are you to drink alcohol when you're stressed?*
- *What are some consequences of drinking that you've already seen in life?*
- *Is it ever OK for teens to drink?*
- *Is it OK to binge drink?*
- *When it comes to “what you believe about alcohol,” where do you get your beliefs/thoughts?*
- *Do your friends drink?*
- *Do your friends encourage you to drink or not drink or neither?*
- *Must a person try something before they really know if it is right or wrong for them?*
- *How does drinking alcohol affect your relationship with others? With us? With God?*

- 4. Be real.** Not every parent experimented with alcohol when they were young, but most of us—after several decades of living—have seen for ourselves what alcohol use and abuse can do to a young life. Hyped statistics and hyperbolic clichés do more harm than good in dialogues like these. Think about the child's personality: will he/she respond well to personal horror stories from the past, or would they listen better to observations of others' mistakes? Would they respond to stories of hypocrisy (did

your parents ban drinking for you and then down a case of beer every night after work)? Maybe a cheerleader at the teen's school famously got caught partying after the Winter Dance last semester, or maybe you remember back when the captain of the football team at your high school died in an alcohol-related accident. In any case, our personal experiences come out as much more engaging than random stats or taglines from anti-addiction TV commercials.

Still, parents can use simple, short factoids to support what they say. Here are a few ideas:

- Alcohol is a powerful drug that slows down the body and mind. It impairs coordination, slows reaction time, and lowers the ability to see, speak, and think clearly.
- Beer and wine are not “safer” than hard liquor (gin, rum, tequila, vodka, whiskey, etc.). A standard can of beer, glass of wine, and shot of 80-proof liquor all contain the same amount of alcohol.
- It takes at least an hour for a single drink to leave a person's system. Nothing will speed up this process, not even drinking coffee, taking a cold shower, or “walking it off.” The more a person drinks, the longer it takes to wear off.
- Alcohol makes people really bad at judging how it's affecting them. Many people who drink think they can control a car, but they really can't.
- Anyone can develop a serious alcohol problem, including teens. In fact, it can be worse for teens. Because they aren't totally finished growing yet, the alcohol does more damage and [addiction happens more easily](#).

5. Talk often. A single talk session or, worse, chanting “Just say no” or “Make good choices” whenever the kid leaves the house doesn't work. Habitually and casually ask open-ended questions about their lives on a regular basis, using good listening tactics and controlling the first impulse to lock them in their rooms or scream at them. These habits will help to prevent the topic of substance abuse from “getting weird.” Alcohol use is visible, and it's important to teach our kids to approach this topic well, even if doing so is a bit weird at first. The more we talk, the less weird it gets.

— How can I tell if my teen is drinking?

The most common physical signs of teen intoxication are:

- The smell of alcohol on their breath, skin, hair, or clothes.
- Glazed or bloodshot eyes.
- An unusually passive or argumentative demeanor.
- Worsened appearance or hygiene.
- Flushed skin.
- Nausea.
- Vomiting.
- Loss of motor coordination.
- Memory loss.

The behavioral symptoms of alcohol use in teens include dishonesty, making excuses, willfully breaking curfew or other household rules, isolation, and increased anger. They can also include physical or verbal abuse toward others, possessing alcohol-related

paraphernalia, mood swings, stealing, and changes in friends or peer groups.

If a teen exhibits the following symptoms, however, they are at risk for alcohol poisoning and should be taken to the nearest emergency room without delay:

- Unconsciousness
- Continual vomiting or vomiting while unconscious
- Irregular, shallow, or slowed breathing
- Irregular, weak, or slowed heart rate (pulse)
- Cold, clammy, pale, or blue-tinted skin
- Hallucinations or confusion
- Seizures
- Any possibility the child has ingested a “spiked” drink (one of which he/she cannot be 100% sure of its contents).

The teen also needs immediate professional intervention if he/she expresses suicidal thoughts or behaviors, self-harms (cutting skin, pulling hair, etc.), or intends to do harm to others.

— **What should I do if I find out my teen is drinking?**

Dealing with a child who is experimenting with alcohol is very different than dealing with one who is already addicted (see next sections for that). If you find out that your child has consumed alcohol but is not addicted, start by waiting at least 24 hours before talking to him/her about it so that you have time to calm down and ask God to guide you and give you words and wisdom.

Next, let him/her know that you know they have had alcohol and that you want to ask them some questions about it. Ask about the circumstances in which they drank, why they chose to drink, if they enjoyed it, if they plan to drink again, how much they consumed, what happened after they drank, etc. The questions you ask during this time will help you better understand where they are and how to craft a strategy for dealing with it. For example, if a teen says he/she has had alcohol multiple times, really enjoyed it, and wants to continue doing so, your strategy will be really different than with a teen who has only had alcohol once because of peer pressure and feels terrible about it.

From there, think about strategies that will address the root issue rather than the behavior. For the teen who “parties” and gets drunk a lot, the problem probably lies in how they view the “good” life. Showing them how the abundant life found solely through devotion to Christ is much more fulfilling than the temporary pleasure felt when drunk (not to mention the long-term effects of abusing any substance) will be more effective than simply grounding the teen, taking away his/her phone, and promising worse punishment if you ever catch him/her drinking again. If we only address the behavior, teens will learn that the problem is that they got caught, not that they’re settling for less than God’s best for their lives.

For the teen who gave in to peer pressure, the problem probably lies in the desire for acceptance and attention. Find out why he/she felt the need to “look cool” or not say

no to his/her friends. Maybe they desperately wanted their crush to notice them. Maybe they didn't want to look like a prude. Whatever the reason, typically the heart issue is that they don't grasp on a heart level what it means to rest in the unconditional acceptance offered by Christ. Developing a strategy that helps him/her deeply connect with the significance of that will be much more effective than simply telling him/her not to care what others think.

And, just as important, they need to understand that you aren't just trying to keep them from having fun, you're passionate about their safety. Girls especially become targets for sexual assault when inebriated, as [almost half of all sexual assault cases](#) involve alcohol use or abuse. "It's important to remember that, while alcohol use may be correlated to sexual assault, this does not mean that alcohol use in any way causes sexual assault. Instead, alcohol is often used as a tool to target victims, and then used by perpetrators as an [excuse for their actions](#)." It's paramount we discuss the risks and dangers both our sons and daughters put themselves in when they lose control of their emotions, judgment, and mental faculties.

— What if I know my kid drinks but doesn't want to talk about it?

You might have heard that people must hit "rock bottom" or must "want help for themselves" before they will stop drinking. This idea can make us think we can't convince them to stop before they reach that point. Actually, people who abuse substances often *do* want help; they just don't always know how to say so, and we don't always know what it sounds like when they do. There's no need to panic if your child denies needing help, says no outright, or wants to think about it. Any expression of interest in help—however slight—can be all that's needed to get started.

[The Partnership for Drug-Free Kids](#) (PDFK) suggests parents listen for "change talk" in their child, i.e., when he/she "voices concern over the way things are or expresses a desire to improve his/her life." This is how young people often feel safest communicating a need for assistance. Examples are "I'm feeling really depressed that I can't get good grades in math," "I think I upset Kayla last night when she thought I drank too much," or "I want to move out and get my own place." A parent can grab these opportunities, compassionately explaining how the teen is certainly capable of tackling the problem, but alcohol use could hinder him/her from accomplishing it. Avoiding confrontational, judgmental language or behavior might feel difficult at this point, but will increase your chances of success.

A parent might also offer to explore options for treatment with their child instead of demanding a certain help style or program. [The PDFK website](#) offers examples of effective and non-effective conversations with underage substance abusers related to their own life goals. PDFK even offers a [free treatment eBook](#) for parents with information on what treatment is like, how to pay for it, how to encourage teens to start, and how to work the program for the best chance of success.

— If my teen abuses alcohol, does that mean he/she is a bad kid? Does it make me a bad parent?

No. And nope.

It's too common in this country for people to blame a troubled kid for some character flaw or to blame his/her parents for failing to be good parents. Friends and family might even offer ringside diagnoses and generalized advice related to poor ethics, spiritual failure, or a lack of discipline. These advisors probably do want to help, but they often know nothing about the nature of substance abuse or teen behavioral health issues.

Substance-abuse disorders plague our culture, and everyone knows someone struggling with one. Even when they can't deny that an alcohol use disorder or addiction exists, not everyone wants to deal with it. It takes serious courage to begin and dedication to finish. It also can seem easier (and safer) to leave the situation alone than to start the work to change it.

Parents who discover their child has an alcohol problem will likely be tempted to spend a lot of time beating themselves up, reliving past mistakes, wishing it weren't true, trying to hide the problem, or allowing guilt to immobilize them. These reactions will only stall an effective response to the issue. In every case, finding a solution to the problem of substance abuse is more important than the fact that the problem exists. We offer the grace-filled words of Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend in their [Boundaries Workbook](#) as hope for both the parents and their teens:

When you analyze the thinking patterns of great athletes and other high performers, one factor stands out over and over: the lack of self-critical, self-attacking thinking about their failure or mistakes. They do not make themselves “bad,” but learn from it and move on to do better.

— What should I do if I find out my teen is addicted to alcohol?

- 1. Try not to panic.** It's a lot to ask, and parents understandably lose it when they find out their kid has a problem with substance use. However, your initial reaction to this situation will dramatically affect your child's recovery outcome. Acknowledge your feelings (they do matter!), take a deep breath, and move slowly toward a solution.
- 2. Act NOW.** Underage alcohol abuse—like all substance abuse disorders—can begin easily but rarely ends well without intentional focus. Teen alcohol abuse is insidious and will get worse the longer it's allowed to continue. Plus, recovery options for teens look different than those for adults (and, as we've discussed, they should). Even so, no one relishes the idea of beginning the process, and avoidance probably feels more comfortable at first, even safer. But the problem cannot go away on its own. Quick action will minimize your family's trauma, prevent unspeakable pain, and may even save your child's life.
- 3. Talk it out.** Use the discussion prompts in the earlier sections of this guide to

approach the problem together directly, honestly, bravely, effectively, and with love.

- 4. Get help.** Parents will feel frightened, helpless, angry, betrayed, embarrassed, confused, and grieved. They can experience any number of intense emotions, and no wonder. Substance abuse and addiction is certainly more than any one person can handle alone; it's more than an entire family can handle without help.

Find the best professional assistance and support available: Call a family doctor, an adolescent behavioral health specialist, a local recovery center, a trusted leader from a local church, a behavioral health insurance service rep (the number is probably on the back of the teen's medical insurance card), or a community crisis helpline. If the first choice of professional help does not act quickly and well for the entire family, switch to someone else. Demand good care on multiple levels: physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, relationally, professionally, culturally, and socially. Seek it out like you would a "pearl of great price." And don't forget: you, your family, and your friends will need help too.

- 5. Remain teachable.** Find out the most current information on adolescent alcohol use, abuse, addiction, and mental health treatment. Doing so helps when trying to figure out what to do next—and what not to do. For starters, try one of the resources listed at the end of this guide. Most of them will lead to other great resources, as well.
- 6. Pray. A lot.** God cares. He knows. He's there. He protects us and those we love from horrors we'll never know about on this side of heaven ([Psalm 91](#); [1 Peter 1:5](#)). He hears our cries of frustration and weeps with us in our suffering, even when He knows He's going to redeem and resurrect what's been lost ([John 11](#)). Bring Him the reality of it all—the good and bad, the fear and doubt, the angry and ugly, the scores and wins, the struggles and stumbles, the pleas and the praise. Invite Him to show up with the solution.
- 7. Keep hoping.** Because alcohol use disorders so often result from layers of underlying issues (sometimes a lot of them), it takes time to treat them well. The process, although vitally important, can seem like a trip through a tunnel of ever-increasing chaos, fraught with bombshells and blind corners. Patience doesn't come easy in situations like this and certainly not when our kids are at risk.

But know this: great strides have been made in the past 10 years regarding the treatment of adolescent substance abuse. Substance abuse disorders (and even addictions) are no longer death sentences to young people. Recovery is possible, and families move past them all the time to lead productive, peaceful, and well-adjusted lives. Some even say they emerge from the process stronger and tighter with their loved ones than ever before.

After all, God has been known to "bless the latter part of life more than the former part" ([Job 42:12](#)), and He runs to us with love and compassion when we are "still a long way off" from our home ([Luke 15](#)). Let hope fuel patience and faith, and watch for Him to show up. He will. He's already there.

— Resources and helps

[The National Institute on Drug Abuse \(NIDA\) for Teens](#), an online resource from the National Institutes of Health.

[The Alcohol Policy Information System \(APIS\)](#), provides detailed information on a wide variety of alcohol-related policies in the United States at both state and federal levels.

[The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism \(NIAAA\)](#), the largest funder of alcohol-related research in the world with the intent to reduce alcohol-related problems.

[Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#) offers information, resources, publications, articles, and referrals to parents, including referrals for crisis management and treatment.

Partnership for Drug-Free Kids has a [great parent blog](#).

“[Make a Difference: Talk to Your Child About Alcohol](#).” A publication created in conjunction with the National Institutes of Health and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Written for parents, it explains the facts about underage drinking and offers practical ideas for effective talks.

“[Alcohol Screening and Brief Intervention for Youth: A Practical Guide](#).” A more clinical resource designed to help medical specialists assess and direct teen patients. It contains instructions on “motivational interviewing” and offers information on patient rights, risk assessment, sample questions, and referral suggestions.

[Prevention First](#), dedicated to preventing teen substance abuse before it begins, offers a wide assortment of printed materials for parents on underage drinking.

Jonathan McKee, a respected leader in Christian youth ministry, [offers many books and publications](#) designed to help parents connect with their kids and teens.

[Celebrate Recovery Ministries](#), an organization from Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church offering a balanced program to overcome “hurts, habits, and hang-ups” based on the actual words of Jesus. Teen-oriented resources are available.

We’re creating more content every day! If you found this guide helpful and valuable, check out [axis.org/guides](#) each month for new Guides covering all-new topics and for other resources.