



Alcohol

**What School Professionals
Need to Know to Help
Protect Young People**

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**Partnership
to End Addiction**

Introduction

Educators want to do all they can to reduce the negative effects of alcohol on students' developing brains, including its effects on their learning and future opportunities.

Whether a child has not yet tried alcohol, has begun to drink or drinks regularly, this guide can help you help your students. We break down the risks of youth drinking, why it appeals to youth and what you can do to protect young people from its harms.

1 in 3

young people aged 12-20 reported drinking alcohol in 2019.¹

21%

Of those reporting were aged 12-17.²

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The facts about youth drinking

Alcohol is the most widely used substance among teens and young adults, and it poses substantial health and safety risks. Although young people tend to drink less often than adults do, when they do drink, they frequently drink more or more intensely compared to the average adult.¹ That's because young people consume more than 90% of their alcohol by binge drinking.

The good news is the number of teens drinking has dropped over the past few decades. However, when we consider the consequences of youth alcohol use — poor judgment, driving under the influence, accidents and alcohol poisoning, as well as damage to the developing brain or addiction — it's important for educators to be informed and involved when it comes to youth drinking.

What constitutes a drink?¹¹



5oz
of wine



12oz
of beer



1.5oz
of liquor

What is binge drinking?¹⁰



For **females**, it's consuming **four or more drinks within two hours**.



For **males**, the quantity jumps to **five or more drinks** in the same time period.

A common view is that youth drinking is the norm, **but most young people actually do not drink**. According to a national survey of nearly 50,000 teens, 41% of high school seniors said they never had a drink, and 70% reported that they had not consumed any alcohol in the month prior to the survey.² In fact, youth drinking has declined steadily over the past decades, as has binge drinking.³

If you find yourself wondering why students don't "get" that alcohol comes with risks, you're not alone. Recent data show that three-quarters of 12th graders report that they don't see great risk in having one or two drinks nearly every day. Another recent national survey found that 9% of teens would not be worried about a friend regardless of how frequently that friend drank alcohol.

11%

of young people
aged 12 through 20
reported binge drinking
in the past 30 days.¹²

5%

were 12 to 17.¹³

6 in 10

12th graders have had an
alcoholic drink in their lifetime.¹⁴

25%

have done so
by 8th grade.¹⁵



Westend61 via Getty Images

Why do young people drink alcohol?

Regardless of whether a young person drinks “to feel good” or “to feel better,” their environment often shapes their beliefs and attitudes toward alcohol.

“Because my friends do.”

“It’s a normal part of being social.”

“It helps me feel less anxious or depressed.”

“My parents are ok with it.”

Peer influence

Sometimes friends urge one another to have a drink, but it is just as common for youth to try drinking because alcohol is readily available. They see their friends or older siblings enjoying it and, to them, alcohol use is part of a normal teenage or young adult experience. Popular media reinforces this idea. Ads often glamorize alcohol use to attract new drinkers and rarely show the downsides of alcohol use.

Mental health and stress

Drinking can be seen as a way to self-medicate unhappy or uncomfortable feelings, thoughts or emotions, including those that accompany depression, anxiety or other mental health problems, especially if they are not adequately treated. If kids are feeling stressed, they may turn to alcohol seeking relief. Alcohol reduces inhibitions, making it tempting for a young person who wants to test limits or feel more confident in social situations.

Parents’ attitudes and behavior

[Numerous studies](#) show that children of parents who are more lenient or permissive about youth drinking — allowing their children to drink on occasion, not monitoring the alcohol in the home or modeling alcohol use as a means of relaxing or having fun — are more likely to drink and to do so heavily than children of more restrictive and cautious parents. When parents allow teens to drink with them (with the exception of small amounts for religious practices or rituals) or host parties for kids in which alcohol is allowed or served, they convey the message that underage drinking is okay and increase the risk that it will happen more frequently or intensely.

Why be concerned about youth alcohol use?

Drinking at a young age can impact the health and safety of young people, now and in the future.



Brain development

The human brain is not fully developed until early adulthood, usually the mid- to late-twenties. There is [rapid brain development in adolescence and young adulthood](#) — especially the parts of the brain responsible for decision making and judgment. Exposure to alcohol interferes with this development.



Mental health

Alcohol slows down the nervous system. Drinking alcohol to soothe anxiety or other mental health problems may seem to help in the short term, but symptoms typically worsen in the long term when alcohol is involved. Alcohol use is a significant risk factor in youth suicide.



Risky behaviors

Young people increase their likelihood of making poor decisions and unhealthy choices, including risky sexual behavior, as alcohol also affects the parts of the brain responsible for self-control.



Physical health

It may be hard to imagine now, as your students are teens and young adults, but youth who drink are at higher risk for developing liver disease. Alcohol use during or before puberty can damage hormones and interfere with healthy physical development. Heavy drinking in adolescence can also lead to chronic health problems.



Impaired driving

This is one of the most common concerns when it comes to youth alcohol use. Motor vehicle crashes are a leading cause of death among young people, who are more likely to be killed in an alcohol-related crash compared to adults. One out of five teen drivers involved in fatal crashes in 2016 were under the influence of alcohol.⁴



Alcohol use can lead to poisoning and other injuries

Sadly, higher levels of car crashes, homicides, alcohol poisoning, falls, burns, drowning and suicide are associated with youth alcohol use. Binge drinking can lead to so much alcohol in the bloodstream that the parts of the brain that control basic life functions such as breathing, heart rate and temperature begin to shut down, resulting in severe symptoms and, in some cases, death.

Know the signs of alcohol poisoning

It's important to know what to do should a young person experience alcohol poisoning and to let them know how to help a friend.

Recognizing the following signs and symptoms can save a life:

M Mental Confusion
U Unresponsive
S Snoring/Gasping for Air
T Throwing Up

H Hypothermia
E Erratic Breathing
L Loss of Consciousness
P Paleness/Blueness of Skin

If you find that a young person is experiencing alcohol poisoning — even if you do not see all of the symptoms — seek medical care immediately. If they are conscious, **call the Poison Control Center at (800) 222-1222**. If unresponsive, call 911 for emergency services. While waiting for help, position them onto their side so they don't choke on their own vomit. Be prepared to administer CPR if needed and never leave the person alone. At its most severe, alcohol poisoning can lead to death.

Make sure you are informed about your state's **Good Samaritan Law**. While different states have different variations of this law, its general purpose is to help protect bystanders from legal consequences when they try to help someone in need who has engaged in illegal substance use. Some Good Samaritan Laws

apply to underage drinking, so that a youth who is drinking will not get in trouble (and neither will the underage victim) for calling 911 to get help for someone who may be experiencing alcohol poisoning and needs medical attention. Not every state's Good Samaritan Law applies to this situation, so it is important to do some research on your home state's law. Whether or not your state's law applies to underage alcohol use, however, make clear to students that the priority in a dangerous situation is to protect their own and others' health and safety, regardless of the legal consequences.

It's not uncommon for teens and young adults to both drink and use marijuana or other drugs. Mixing alcohol with other substances, such as prescription medicine or marijuana, is especially dangerous and potentially deadly. It can cause nausea and vomiting, headaches, drowsiness, fainting, loss of coordination, internal bleeding, heart problems and breathing difficulties.

Using another drug can also make someone lose track of how much alcohol they've had, increasing the risk of alcohol poisoning. Likewise, alcohol use can impair thoughts and memory. It can prevent a teen from keeping track of how much of a drug they've used, increasing the risk of serious consequences, including overdose or death.

Marijuana, specifically, can prevent a person from vomiting. This increases the risk of alcohol poisoning in someone who drank a lot while under the influence of the drug. Many young people do not recognize this danger. They might drink alcohol to counteract or enhance the effects of other drugs, often with devastating consequences.



What you need to know about Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC)

The more one drinks at a time, the higher one's blood alcohol concentration (BAC). This increases the risk of impairment, especially when driving, and the risk of alcohol poisoning. A BAC level represents the percent of one's blood that is concentrated with alcohol. For example, a BAC of 0.10 means that 0.1% of the person's bloodstream is composed of alcohol. The legal intoxication level for adults in most states is a BAC of 0.08. For those who are under age, it is any measurable amount, such as 0.01 or 0.02, above zero.

There are many misconceptions about ways to "sober up" after drinking and reduce one's BAC, such as taking a cold shower, drinking coffee or eating food, but these do not work. The effects of alcohol only wear off over time. Be sure that your child knows this so that they don't falsely think that they can safely drive or do anything else that requires motor coordination or attention after drinking any alcohol.

As BAC Increases, So Does Impairment

Life Threatening

- Loss of consciousness
- Danger of life-threatening alcohol poisoning
- Significant risk of death in most drinkers due to suppression of vital life functions

0.31-0.45%

Severe Impairment

- Speech, memory, coordination, attention, reaction time, balance significantly impaired
- All driving-related skills dangerously impaired
- Blackouts (amnesia)
- Vomiting and other signs of alcohol poisoning common
- Loss of consciousness

0.16-0.30%

Increased Impairment

- Perceived beneficial effects of alcohol, such as relaxation, give way to increasing intoxication
- Increased risk of aggression in some people
- Speech, memory, attention, coordination and balance further impaired
- Significant impairments in all driving skills
- Increased risk of injury to self and others
- Moderate memory impairments

0.06-0.15%

Mild Impairment

- Mild speech, memory, attention, coordination, balance impairments
- Perceived beneficial effects, such as relaxation
- Sleepiness can begin

0.0-0.05%

Source: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism



Substance use disorders

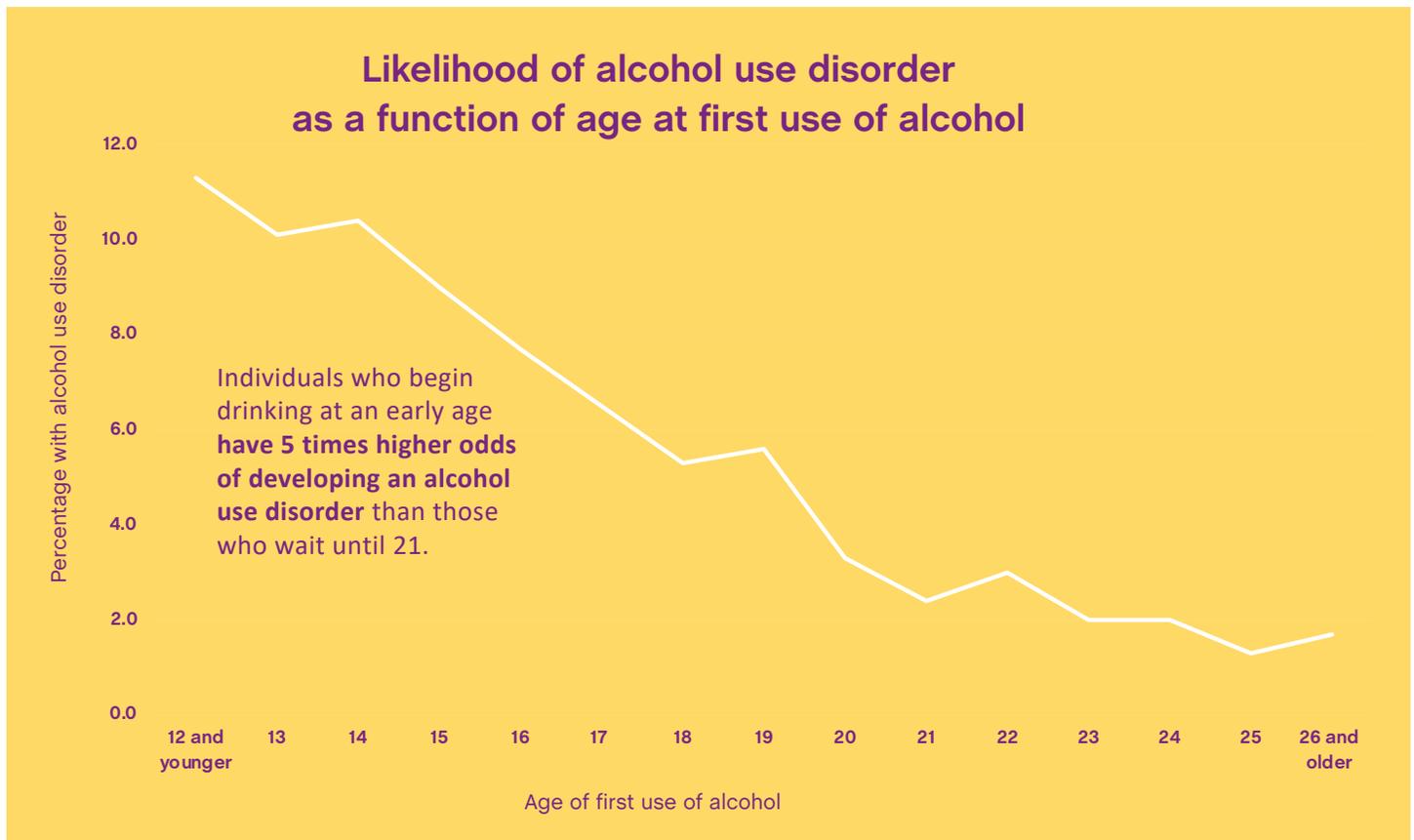
One important reason to understand more about youth alcohol use is to prevent the risk of addiction.

Individuals who begin drinking during adolescence have significantly higher odds of developing an alcohol or other substance use disorder (addiction) than those who begin drinking at age 21 or later. The earlier a person starts drinking, the more likely they are to have a problem with drinking later on.



Genetics and biological vulnerability

Having a family history of an alcohol use disorder puts individuals at approximately four times higher risk of developing an alcohol use disorder themselves.⁵ Genetics play less of a role in a person's decision to use alcohol than environmental factors like peer influence or parents' attitudes about drinking. Still, genetic vulnerability is important to consider when determining the risk that one's alcohol use can lead to addiction.



Source: 2018 data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health

What types of alcohol do young people use?

The reasons young people choose to drink a particular brand or type of alcohol are often influenced by advertising, the cost (the less expensive, the better) and accessibility and flavors, as they tend to prefer sweet flavors that mask the harsh taste of alcohol.

Aside from drinking, some youth consume alcohol in less traditional ways. Some can be more discreet (and therefore easier to hide from adults) compared to traditional alcohol beverages because their packaging resembles non-alcoholic products.

Flavored beverages	Edible alcohol	Alcohol vaping	Powdered alcohol
			
<p>Carbonated or malt-based drinks, which are often sweet, resembling soda or energy drinks. They have a high alcohol content, but don't look or taste like alcohol. Promoted as containing fewer calories than beer.</p>	<p>While the most familiar example may be Jell-O shots, kids find "rummy bears" and alcohol-soaked fruit to be appealing.</p>	<p>Inhaling or smoking the vapors of alcohol is dangerous because alcohol isn't metabolized in the stomach or liver. It increases how quickly someone becomes intoxicated and the risk of alcohol poisoning.</p>	<p>States banned sales due to its risk of overuse and because kids could access and use without being caught.</p>

There are other non-traditional and dangerous ways to use alcohol. For example, some young women have been reported to soak tampons in alcohol before inserting them — mostly to avoid the calories associated with drinking alcohol — which can damage the vagina and increase the risk of blood poisoning. Similarly, alcohol enemas (or "butt chugging") are very dangerous, frequently leading to hospitalization. Alcohol sprays and snorting alcohol are some other reported forms of alcohol consumption. There is a lack of research on how often these nontraditional methods are actually used, with at least one study suggesting that it is relatively rare.

What school professionals should know and do

Adolescents and many young adults spend the majority of their time in school. As a result, you have a significant opportunity to reach students and help protect their health at a time when experimentation or use of alcohol and the risk of addiction are high. Schools that implement comprehensive, age-appropriate and [research-based prevention programming](#), starting at an early age and continuing throughout a child's academic career, can have a real impact on reducing youth alcohol use and its many adverse consequences. Such programming is especially effective if families and other caregivers take part.

How to safeguard against youth drinking

Know and share the facts

If your school is an informed and reliable source of information about marijuana and other substances, students may be less reliant on less credible sources like peers, social media, popular culture or advertisements.

Communicate expectations and focus on student health, not punishment

Clearly communicate to students the school's alcohol-related policies and the consequences of violating these policies. Underage drinking is illegal and educators are well within their rights to discipline students who drink.

However, it is important to address youth drinking as a health rather than a behavior or disciplinary issue. Try talking to the student and understanding their motivation for drinking. An approach that focuses on health, safety and care may be more effective to eliminate risky behaviors and bring about positive behavior change.

Start early and offer prevention interventions consistently throughout a student's academic career

The earlier prevention efforts begin, the more effective they are,⁶ and schools are optimally situated to offer effective prevention programming throughout students' development, from early education through the college years. While most prevention programming is aimed at middle or high school students, consider earlier age-appropriate interventions to target the personal and environmental characteristics and circumstances that contribute to a student's later risk of substance use.

Prevention programming should not be based on fear tactics

Rather, it should incorporate evidence-based practices and principles of prevention. This includes offering credible and accurate information and supporting the development of life skills that decrease risk and help to delay the onset of alcohol use. The National Institute on Drug Abuse details essential [principles of prevention](#) for youth. These include, but are not limited to:

- Enhancing protective factors
- Offering family-based programming
- Intervening early at the sign of risk
- Enhancing social-emotional learning

Engage family and community

Work with families and community partners to encourage healthy behaviors in students. Schools can be the nexus between many different systems that can provide a holistic and comprehensive approach to preventing and mitigating student alcohol use. Schools can work with community organizations to provide healthy, fun activities that are supervised by adults and that allow students to socialize, have fun and take healthy risks without the presence of alcohol. Although educating students about alcohol use and bolstering skills to resist drinking are essential components of effective prevention, what happens in their home and community plays a major role in a student's risk for drinking and in getting needed help should they develop a problem associated with alcohol use.

One widely-touted model for achieving the goal of effective prevention is the [Icelandic Model for Primary Prevention of Substance Use](#), which has demonstrated effectiveness in reducing alcohol and other substance use in Iceland over the past 20 years. The success of this model is due in large part to its comprehensive approach and its integration of family and community into its prevention efforts.

Collect data and adjust programming to be responsive to findings

Collecting data and tracking trends in students' reported alcohol use, risk factors and consequences can help schools address emerging trends and adjust policies and practices to best meet student needs.

Identify and help students showing signs or symptoms of alcohol use

[Through screening of all students, and especially those at risk, identify those in need of help.](#) Offer intervention services and professional counseling. If they need services beyond what's available within the school, have on hand quality referrals to professional counseling and treatment within the community. Research shows that when treatment is integrated into a student's life, including their schooling, it is more effective.⁷ School professionals can serve as a source of positive reinforcement and support for students receiving interventions or treatment for alcohol-related problems.

Resources for parents and other caregivers:

Partnership to End Addiction offers a family version of this alcohol guide. Parents and caregivers can learn the importance of modeling healthy attitudes and behaviors related to drinking and their considerable power to influence their children's decisions regarding alcohol.



SDI Productions/E+ via Getty Images

Signs of student drinking

It is important to identify students who are drinking or experiencing alcohol-related problems, even if that drinking is occurring outside of school property. According to the U.S. [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#), some signs that a student is drinking include:

- Mood changes (e.g., flare-ups of temper, irritability, defensiveness)
- Memory lapses, poor concentration, bloodshot eyes, lack of coordination or slurred speech
- Loss of interest in academics or in extracurricular activities, hobbies or sports
- Poor class attendance, lower grades
- New or more frequent behavior problems
- Disregard for school rules

Additional resources for schools

There are numerous resources available to help you prevent their students from using alcohol and assist those students who need help.

[Youth Prevention Education Resource Guide – Prevention First](#)

is a nonprofit resource center committed to building and supporting healthy, drug-free communities through public education, professional training and by providing effective tools for those working to prevent substance use and related issues such as violence, teen pregnancy and academic failure.

[SAMHSA Materials for Schools](#) help schools educate parents about underage drinking and other substance use, and provides resources associated with its “Talk. They Hear You” campaign.

[The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Reduce Drinking: A Guide to Action for Educators.](#)

[Stop Underage Drinking](#) resources, from the Interagency Coordinating Committee on the Prevention of Underage Drinking (ICCPUD), coordinated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, offer tools and other services to address youth alcohol use.

[Classroom Resources from the National Institute on Drug Abuse for Teens](#)

offer lessons, activities and information to help schools educate students about the consequences of alcohol and other substance use.

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