

EPIDEMIC...

No. 7

Straight talk about kids, drugs and families from Straight

ALCOHOL

... is a Drug, too!

Fermented beverages containing alcohol have been consumed as far back in history as records exist. Today alcohol is still the most widely used drug in the world, with every major society using alcohol in some form or other. Use in America is such that the legal alcoholic beverage industry grosses over \$12 billion in sales each year.

Alcohol misuse also presents the greatest drug problem in the U.S. today. Between 6 and 10 million Americans are considered alcoholics — and 3 million of them are teenagers. "A great many more people are heavy drinkers — that is, they drink daily and become drunk several times a week. A few of the problems that alcoholism presents to society are the deaths and injuries which result from drunken driving; the millions of person-hours of absenteeism from work; loss of jobs by alcoholics; crimes and child-abuse associated with problem drinking; death and disability from cirrhosis of the liver (the 6th major cause of death in America); and chronic psychosis due to alcoholic brain damage which accounts for some 20% of the patients in state mental hospitals."

What is alcohol?

Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant — it slows down the body's functions and its effects are similar to those of a general anesthetic. Ethyl alcohol (ethanol) is the active ingredient in all alcoholic

...an Illegal Drug for Teenagers

"It seems like every kid drinks now — nobody thinks it's a big deal to want to go out and get drunk. I think it's really sad."

Girl, 16

drinks. If you take any alcoholic beverage (whiskey, vodka, beer, etc.) and remove the ingredients that give it taste and color, you get ethyl alcohol. Remove the water from ethyl alcohol and you get ether. Ether is an anesthetic that works on the brain and puts it to sleep. The same symptoms a surgical patient experiences under ether — dryness in the mouth, euphoria, excitement, nausea — are those experienced by a person drinking alcohol. To get drunk is to overdose on the drug alcohol.

There is a common misunderstanding about the different forms of alcohol and their effects. Parents who feel less concerned about their children drinking beer or wine need to be aware of the following —

Each of these "social drinks" contain roughly the same amounts of alcohol:

- 4 ounce glass of table wine (12% alcohol)
- 12 ounce can of light beer (4% alcohol)
- 1 ounce vodka, on ice (100 proof or 50% alcohol)
- 4 ounce glass of champagne (24 proof or 12% alcohol)
- 1¼ ounce "shot" of whiskey (80 proof or 40% alcohol)
- 1½ ounce glass of aperitif liquor (25% alcohol)

(cont. on pg. 4)

Alcohol & Teenagers: An Interview

The following interview is with
**Dr. Donald Ian Macdonald, Administrator,
Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration,
Washington, D.C.**

Alcohol is America's drug of choice. How serious is America's alcohol problem?

It is serious in a number of ways. It is serious in terms of deaths — mainly highway deaths. It is estimated that 2 years ago 25,000 Americans died on our roads — with 8,000 young people involved in those accidents. It's a major concern related to its dollar costs — a recent survey estimated \$69 billion per year in alcohol costs. These costs were related to treatment, lost time, etc. Not included in that figure are costs related to family suffering ranging from poor relationships and neglect to child and spouse abuse.

What's happening with young people? We hear that drug use is on the decline with teenagers. What about alcohol use?

We have some indications that over the last few years alcohol use among kids is declining. The improvement has happened with an increasing national awareness of teenage drug and alcohol problems. In the class of 1984, high school seniors, 4.8% admitted to daily drinking. That's a considerable improvement from the high point of 6.9% in 1979. One of the problems we're most concerned about is binge drinking — having 5 or more drinks on one occasion. The survey question asked 'How many of you have had 5 or more drinks on one occasion within the last 2 weeks?' The response in the 1984 survey falls under 40% for the first time.

"I started drinking when I was 12. I used to take alcohol from my Mom and sit in my house and drink till I passed out."

Girl, 16

When asked how many of you have had 5 or more drinks, 3 or more times in the last 2 weeks — high school boys admitted to 26% — a shockingly high number. Not so shocking to young people when you ask them what's going on — they say that's the way it is.

Does alcohol affect young people differently than it does adults?

Yes. It affects them in a way related to reduced body size, so that a 12 year old who is drinking distributes an ounce of alcohol over a smaller body area, and tends to have more trouble with intoxication. It affects them in a developmental way in that the euphoria that comes with psychoactive

compounds is more frequently used by young people to deal with problems of life. One part of adolescence is learning about yourself through experimentation. So the young person who may begin what seems to him a normal experiment is frequently trapped in a cycle of chemical dependency that can lead to death. So, we're concerned about young people drinking because of body size, immature endocrine systems and developmental immaturity.

One of the public policy issues that has come before the state legislatures, this year and next year, is the legal drinking age. Why is there a legal drinking age?

The reason for the legal drinking age is protection of citizens, particularly people who travel the highways. The nation wide effort to raise the drinking age is due to the high rate of accidents involving intoxicated young people. One reason often given in defense of a lower drinking age is that if young people can go to war they should have rights to do other adult things. As a pediatrician, I have to say that there are developmental norms that have to be passed before people reach full maturity. A 3-year old should not cross the street and a 7-year old should not drive. And the age you give people full permission to engage in adult behavior should depend on their level of maturity. By waiting until age 21 many seem to do better.

The urge to try the "gateway" drugs — alcohol, marijuana and tobacco — may be very strong in young children. The age that most people begin their lifelong addiction to tobacco is in middle school. In looking at the numbers it's very clear that if you could hold off any use of these substances until age 21, long term involvement becomes less likely.

The issue of alcohol and drugs — particularly alcohol — seems to affect us at all levels of government — federal, state, local communities, parents and families. What is the hierarchy in dealing with the issue of kids and alcohol?

The child himself makes the decision whether to experiment or not. Those people closest to him influence him most. The main support systems in adolescence continue to be parents and peer group. Support, or non-support, is also received from his school and government. Major changes have been seen when parents movements address the issues of what is normal for kids — do we have to accept drunkenness and drug use as a normal phase of adolescence? Parents who mobilized and enlisted legal and school authorities in their efforts did very well.

A student once said to me "You're missing the point. Most of us don't want to be stoned or drunk, but we're not given a lot of options." What kids have asked for, and we haven't paid enough attention to them, is support in their efforts to stay drug free. Alcohol-free graduation nights have been appreciated by kids. We all need to work together, but I would put the focus on the kids and the parents.

"I think that alcohol is something you do when you feel lonely or you are going through problems and you think that getting drunk or just drinking a little will help you escape the way you feel."

Boy, 15

How about prevention?

I organize my thinking around what I call the 4 A's of Prevention. The first A is Age — we need to give special consideration to children because of their growth and developmental immaturity. The 2nd A is Acceptance or Attitude. If we as adults accept drunkenness as funny and intoxication as a part of life, we can expect kids to be involved. The 3rd A is Awareness — the awareness of risks. The more kids know about the risks of chemicals, both legal and medical, the less they are likely to use. The 4th A is Availability. The regular drinker or the social drinker can find alcohol easily — it's not hard to get. But the non-drinker, the one we can do the most for, is put in a difficult position if alcohol is available at every party he or she attends. We can have keg-free parties and grad nights without alcohol — situations where young people can grow to full maturity without having to make dangerous decisions. Very few of these non-using kids will go out of their way to look for alcohol.

As a doctor and a father, what would you recommend to a parent who said my teenage daughter came home drunk. How should they react? What should they do?

I think the first reaction might be relief that she came home drunk and not dead. I would hug her and love her and tell her you're glad she's home and make sure that she gets safely to bed. When she is in bed, parents need to discuss the problem and how they are going to deal with it in the morning. In the morning, when the child is sober, it must be made clear that drunkenness is unacceptable behavior and that as

concerned parents they have to re-examine their attitudes toward the child. The child has accepted parental permission to engage in certain social activities and obviously she's not handled them very well. It is a firm but loving statement to the child about her parent's concern for her and her future; that it is their responsibility to curtail unacceptable behavior.

Should they teach her to drink responsibly within the home? I've heard people say that they let their children drink at home so they can learn how to handle it.

I don't go along with that. The concept of responsible drinking, to most people, means teaching kids how to drink by giving them a little sip now and then. I would put that in the same class as teaching kids responsible sex by having them experiment at home under parental supervision. Responsible drinking, and responsible sex, are taught by the parents by example. In the case of both these important decisions, responsibility implies being old enough to make a decision in the light of, not only the law, but your own developmental maturity.

What is your reaction to the parent who says "My son or daughter is only drinking a couple of beers." What is acceptable for an adolescent, a 16 or 17 year old?

None is the acceptable level for a 16 or 17 year old. Obviously 17 is better than 13, but most 17 year olds are still not functionally mature. The 17 year old who is acceptably mature to drink — there are obviously some 17 year olds with their heads on better than others — should consider the 'my brother's keeper' angle. The mature 17 year old has a responsibility, not only because of the law, to remain abstinent as an example. To the parents I'd say that the child who admits to 2 drinks is usually involved with more. It is often the tip of the iceberg effect — what you see is not always what is there, and I'd treat it as a very serious sign.

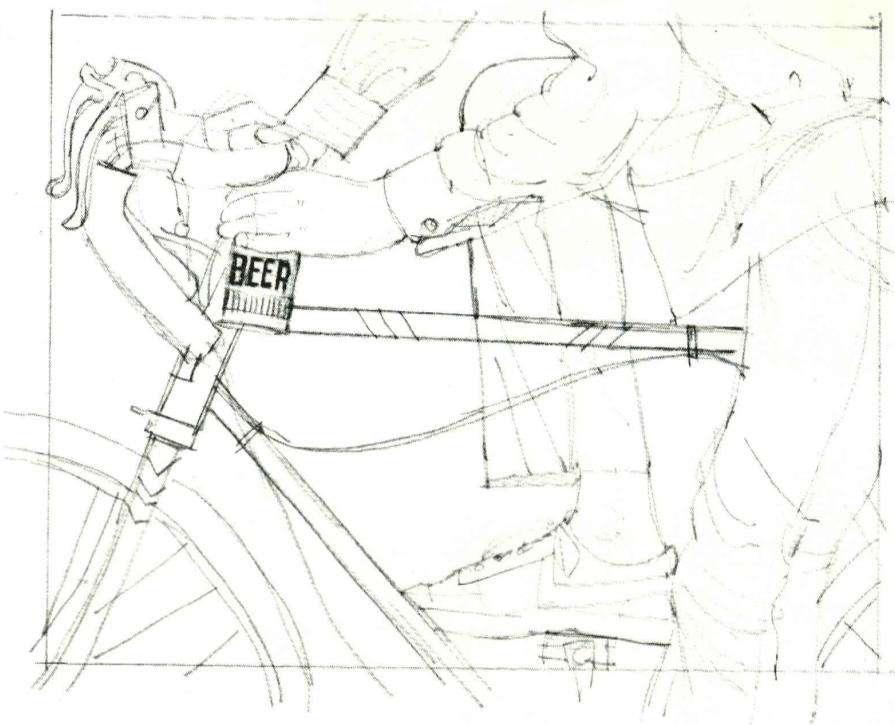
Let's take the family that's been through the whole cycle. They have had the incidence of their child's coming home drunk, of a DWI or auto accident. The child has survived, but obviously there's a problem. What should they do?

They should do whatever they have to do to save the child. You've described some pretty serious offenses, and I guess the bottom line is that the child has to get off alcohol. What we're trying to do is not only raise kids who are alcohol-free, but children

I started drinking at 7 years old. I was drinking at all times of the day and have really damaged my life, physically, mentally and spiritually."

Boy, 18

who feel good about themselves and can live up to their potentials. That is not likely to happen if they continue to use drugs and alcohol. You have to use whatever method works. Maybe having a talk and expressing your concern will be enough. You may have to organize or join a parent group that gives



the child peer support and parental support. Educational programs and counselling are available. The most mistakes are made in waiting too long.

I've heard Dr. Robert DuPont, and others, propose 4 drug-free zones in our society: car, school, workplace and home. What is your reaction to this? Is it a possibility that we can provide some sort of safe passage through the teenage years by focusing on these 4 areas?

Yes, I think those are well stated and doable. The car is the one I hope we can do the quickest. Very few states today have a rule, that I always believed was the law when I was growing up, that you can't have an open container of alcohol in the car. And I can really see no excuse for any state not to have such a restriction. The school should be the same. Obviously we should not tolerate alcohol in or around school. We're making efforts in the workplace also, with great help from companies like General Motors, who understand that employee assistance programs are cost beneficial. Not just in terms of lost days and broken equipment, but in employee loyalty. In the home, again, the parents have a responsibility by their own lifestyle to convey the message to their kids. Parents who drink moderately and show no intoxication give entirely different messages than those parents who do become intoxicated on a regular or irregular basis. Children watch what their parents do.

If alcohol were invented today, would it be legal? Or would it fall in the category of heroin, cocaine, etc.?

I think it would fall into that category. It would be very hard to justify it. And the more you read about it — even the casual drinker should be worried — we know that there is memory loss in the intoxicated alcoholic, but we're starting to show some of that in the casual drinker too.

Thank you, Dr. Macdonald.

"I would like to see the legal drinking age raised to 21 or possibly 25, and higher stipulations placed on the breaking of this law."

Boy, 19

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Did You Know?

- **The average age when most children start drinking is 12½!**
- **30% of high school seniors get drunk once a week!**
- **More than 3 million (3,000,000) teenagers are classified as alcoholics!**
- **There is a teenage alcohol or drug related traffic accident every FIVE seconds!**
- **The 2nd biggest source of income for the federal government, after income taxes, is alcohol!**
- **Enough alcoholic beverages were consumed in 1983 to give every man, woman and child over 14 years 2.69 gallons each!**

Alcohol (cont. from pg. 1)

Alcohol and the Body

Metabolism of alcohol varies with time of day, previous drinking history, body weight, food present in the system, and whether the person drinks quickly or slowly. "Food tends to slow down the absorption of alcohol by slowing down the emptying time of the stomach. Carbonated beverages tend to speed the absorption by helping transport it more rapidly to the upper intestine. Either way, once alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream, it is rapidly distributed throughout the body. It affects almost every cell, every organ, and every level of human functioning. It has been called the most active drug that affects the human body. Once alcohol is drunk its most profound early effect is on the central nervous system, where it acts as a sedative, producing relaxation and a sense of well-being. At the same time, it impairs the intellect, physical abilities and metabolism."²

"When alcohol is taken regularly and in large amounts over many years, permanent physical damage is certain to occur. This damage is often aggravated by the lack of vitamins and food because most alcoholics have very poor eating habits. In addition, alcohol can damage the liver, brain and other parts of the nervous system. In the final stages of alcoholism, certain parts of the brain are permanently damaged and confusion, disorientation and psychosis inevitably result. The potential dangers of alcohol abuse are so great that many scientists believe that, if the drug had been discovered today, it would probably not be approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration."³

Alcoholism

Alcohol consumption is a learned behavior — no one likes the taste of alcohol at first, you learn to like it. People drink out of curiosity, because of custom (let's "toast" the bride and groom), and for escape — to replace an unpleasant feeling with a sense

of well-being and euphoria. Alcoholics are perceived as being weak people, having a bad habit, as being evil or even psychotic — crazy. They are none of these things.

"I have a Dad that's an alcoholic, and because of alcohol my Dad beats and mistreats my Mom and his girlfriends. Because of that I can no longer see him because he's a bad influence on me and I cannot have a father-son relationship."

Boy, 17

"Alcoholism is the disease condition produced by the repeated misuse of ethyl alcohol. It is a Primary disease: it is not caused by some underlying psychological or moral flaw. It is a Chronic disease: it does not go away with time. It is a Progressive disease: it does not improve as long as one continues to drink. It is a potentially Fatal disease, if the drinking is not interrupted. A primary characteristic of an alcoholic is loss of control. Loss of control means in effect that once an alcoholic starts to drink, he or she is not able to predict how, when, or if he or she will be able to stop drinking. There are at least 10 million alcoholics in the U.S. today, and one person in ten who drinks at all will become an alcoholic. Approximately 25% of all people who drink will have problems because of alcohol sometime during their drinking career.

Alcoholism is one of the most treatable illnesses. For most people, recovery is not easy at first, but it is always worth the effort. As a common saying among A.A. members has it: for an alcoholic, the best day drinking is not as good as the hardest day sober."⁴

¹ Our Chemical Culture: Drug Use and Misuse (Madison, Wisconsin: Stash Press, 1975), pg. 14.

² Premer, Robert, F., M.D., Medical Consequences of Alcoholism (Minneapolis, MN, Johnson Institute, Inc., 1982) pg. 6

³ Our Chemical Culture, pg. 16

⁴ Premer, pg. 14

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