

Facts & Conversations



Talking to Teens: Peer Pressure



White Plains
Hospital Center

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Morgan Stanley
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Introduction



Navigating the transition from childhood to adulthood can be a major challenge for teens and their families. The teenage years are often marked by conflicts with parents, as teens try to assert their independence and test traditional boundaries. Establishing a moral identity and developing close peer relationships are important parts of being a teenager. In the process of bonding with peers and developing a set of personal beliefs, teens may experiment with alcohol or participate in other high-risk activities. As teens try to separate from their parents, they are increasingly influenced by what their peers are doing. Teens want desperately to “fit in” and to be part of a group. Thus, they are highly vulnerable to “peer pressure.”

1) What exactly is peer pressure?

“Peer pressure” is a term used to describe how an adolescent’s behavior is influenced by other adolescents. While most parents think of peer pressure as negative, not all peer pressure is bad. Teens may be influenced by their peers to study, to compete in athletics or to attend a religious function. However, when fellow teens are drinking or engaging in other risky activities, peer pressure can lead to problems.

2) Are there different types of peer pressure?

There are several different types of peer pressure affecting teens. First, peer pressure can be divided into active and passive peer pressure. Studies have shown that both active and passive pressures strongly influence teen drinking.¹⁻³

Active Pressure may be in the form of an explicit offer to drink alcohol or a verbal criticism for refusing to drink. For example, a teen at a party may be offered a beer. Another example of active peer pressure is when a teen at a party is chastised for not holding a beer. An adolescent in these situations is forced to immediately respond to such offers or criticisms. Other forms of direct pressure include invitations to participate in drinking games or ordering of rounds of drinks while at a bar. In the past, many school-based alcohol prevention

Types of Peer Pressure

Active Pressure may be in the form of an explicit offer to drink alcohol or a verbal criticism for refusing to drink.

Passive Pressure does not involve a teen being explicitly offered alcohol but rather is based on a teen’s desire to fit in and adopt the values and practices of fellow teens.

Social Modeling is a fancy term for the “everyone’s doing it” phenomenon.

programs focused on teaching teens to resist these pressures to drink (remember “Just Say No”). However, these programs can only be part of the solution as they can not always address the strong passive pressures influencing teens to drink.

Passive Pressure does not involve a teen being explicitly offered alcohol, but rather is based on a teen’s desire to fit in and adopt the values and practices of fellow teens. Passive social pressures can be further divided into social modeling of alcohol use and perceptions regarding peers’ alcohol use. Social modeling is a fancy term for the “everyone’s doing it” phenomenon. Social modeling may follow a teen observing other teens drinking or hearing about other teens drinking. A teen who hears about other teens drinking at a party may respond to this passive pressure by choosing to drink. For older teens, social modeling may reflect a teen’s desire to join a specific social group (such as a sports team, club, fraternity or particular clique) or to attract another teen romantically. In such situations, even the most well-intentioned kids may have a difficult time resisting participation in drinking games or other forms of heavy drinking.

By eighth grade, nearly half of adolescents report having had at least one drink and one in five report having been “drunk”.

Perceptions regarding peer alcohol use are also a form of passive peer pressure influencing teens to drink. Although many teens often do drink alcohol to an alarming degree, teens invariably overestimate the rates at which their friends drink. This false sense that all teens drink can lead teens to feel that they have to drink to fit in. By eighth grade, nearly half of adolescents report having had at least one drink and one in five report having been “drunk”. Especially for younger teenagers, who may tend to worry more about being different from their peers, it may be helpful to emphasize that four out of five eighth graders have never been drunk, and even those who have, do not drink regularly. Re-establishing norms — reminding adolescents that “most teens your age are not doing it” — has been shown to be an effective method to counter passive peer pressure and thus reduce underage drinking.⁴

The Facts



1) Are all teens affected by peer pressure in the same way?

No. While all teens are exposed to peer pressure, they are not all negatively affected by these pressures. An adolescent with a healthy self-esteem and strong sense of self will be better able to resist both active and passive pressures to drink. In contrast, teens who are depressed or insecure are more likely to succumb to pressures to engage in risky activities. A second thing to note is that parents play an important role in how their adolescent children respond to peer pressure — studies have shown that parental factors can mediate the impact of peer pressure on adolescent drinking.^{5,6} In simpler language — by staying involved, parents can help their teenage children resist the pressures to drink.

2) Does peer pressure change as teens get older?

Yes. The ways that adolescents influence one another does change as teens get older. Development of close friendships and peer connectedness are a normal part of adolescent emotional development. Friendships formed during the teen years can last a lifetime. Adolescence is a time of striking emotional and cognitive changes. Parents are usually quick to recognize their child's progression through puberty, marked by increases in height and weight, the growth of facial hair or onset of acne. Parents may be less aware of the emotional and cognitive growth their child undergoes during the teen years. While rates of adolescent emotional development vary and transitions are not necessarily smooth, adolescents usually progress through three distinct stages. The role of peers and peer pressure during these stages is described below.

Early adolescence — is marked by self-absorption and the early struggle for independence. During early adolescence, teens start to become less interested in what their parents are doing and become increasingly concerned about their changing bodies and their outward appearance. Young adolescents tend to develop strong solitary, same-sex friendships. They are highly emotional at this stage, especially regarding their friends. Peer acceptance is important among early adolescents; the desire is to look and act like their close friends. Difficulties with impulse control, along with the desire to be like other teens, can lead young teens to participate in risky behaviors.

Development Stages

Early adolescence — ages 11–14

Middle adolescence — ages 15–17

Late adolescence — ages 18–21

Middle adolescence — is marked by increased importance of peer relationships and further distancing from parental influences. During middle adolescence, teens seek to adopt the values and practices of their peers, often leading to conflicts with their parents. Middle adolescents still desire conformity, although they do seek some individuality during this period. Feelings of omnipotence and immortality, along with the need to “fit in,” can lead to high-risk activities among middle adolescents.

Late adolescence — is the last phase in the struggle to develop independence. As late adolescents are more confident in their own identities, they are better able to make decisions independent of their peers. Late adolescents may once again seek and accept parental advice as they develop their own moral codes. While friendships are still strong during this phase, romantic relationships often predominate. Ability to delay gratification, along with increased sense of self can help late adolescents avoid participation in risky activities.

3) Is peer pressure the only factor leading to underage drinking?

No. Influences other than peer pressure are also important. As we discussed above, underage drinking is one of many high-risk activities that can occur among adolescents who are trying to “fit in.” Many studies have demonstrated that peer pressure is a risk factor for adolescent alcohol use.^{1-3, 5, 6-8} However, peer pressure is not the only factor causing teens to drink. Other important influences on teen drinking include relationships with parents, parental drinking, sibling drinking, participation in religious activities and the media. So, teaching kids to be aware of peer pressure and to resist peer pressure is just one of many ways that parents can help keep their children healthy.

4) Why should parents be concerned about peer pressure and underage drinking?

Peer pressure can influence children to participate in high-risk activities, including underage drinking. Alcohol use among teens is both common and potentially dangerous. In fact, underage drinking is so common that it is often viewed as an adolescent rite of passage. By the end of high school, 77% of adolescents report drinking alcohol and 60% report having been “drunk”.⁹

Even teens who do not drink put themselves in danger when they ride in a car with other teens who have been drinking.

Despite the high rates of alcohol use among teens, most adolescents survive this period without major social or physical repercussions. However, for some teenagers, drinking can lead to severe problems. Teen drinking can be dangerous due to the direct physical and psychological effects of alcohol. This danger is real for all teens who drink but is

especially a risk among adolescents who are heavy drinkers. Binge drinking can directly damage the liver, stomach, pancreas and brain. Heavy drinking can also exacerbate underlying depression or anxiety. In the two weeks prior to being surveyed, nearly one third of high school seniors reported binge drinking or consuming five or more drinks in a short period of time.

Along with the direct physical and psychological adverse effects of alcohol, underage drinking is of concern because it is associated with increased rates of accidents and injuries. In the month prior to being surveyed, 30% of teens reported riding with a driver who had been drinking alcohol and one in eight reported driving after drinking alcohol.¹⁰ Heavy alcohol consumption is a risk for motor vehicle fatality, the leading cause of death among adolescents. Even teens who do not drink put themselves in danger when they ride in a car with other teens who have been drinking; parents should remind their children of this. Alcohol also plays a role in teen drowning and other accidents. Alcohol use among adolescents is also associated with increased rates of sexual assault.

Teen drinking is also worrisome because it is associated with participation in other risky or delinquent behaviors. Teens who drink are more likely to carry a weapon and get into fights, as well as steal and be involved in selling illegal drugs.¹¹ They are also more likely to smoke cigarettes and experiment with illicit drugs. Alcohol use has also been associated with high-risk sexual behaviors such as having multiple partners and/or not using protection against pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted diseases.¹² Early alcohol use has been associated with later alcohol reliance.¹³ Almost 40% of teens who drink report having at least one serious alcohol-related problem in the previous year.¹⁴ It is impossible to know at the outset whether your child will suffer problems related to drinking. However, teens who are heavy drinkers and teens who come from families with alcoholism are at higher risk for problems related to their drinking.

Now that we have discussed the facts on peer pressure and teen drinking, here is some practical advice for parents to help your teen children resist peer pressure and thus reduce risks of underage drinking.

Conversations



Sample conversations to help adolescents recognize and resist pressures to drink:

First, here are some general guidelines in discussing drinking with your teenage children:

- Start talking about alcohol when your child is young. It is useful to discuss alcohol with your child many times. While she may not seem interested during the conversation, she may be absorbing more than you realize. Many studies demonstrate that increased parental involvement is associated with reduced teen drinking.
- Be consistent in your behaviors and your message to your children. Adolescents are quick to pick up on mixed messages. Your child may not listen to you if you tell them not to drink but they see that you are heavily drinking. Also, just as adolescents model their behaviors on those of their peers, they will model your behaviors too.
- Try to avoid lectures and being judgmental. Your child may become defensive and not tell you the truth if he hears an immediate reprimand.
- Choose to discuss alcohol and other risky behaviors when you and your child are relaxed and in a good mood. Try to plan fun activities with your child on the evenings and/or weekends. The more time that you spend with your child, the more opportunities that you will have to start the discussion.

Now, let's start with some sample conversations, by developmental stage.

Early adolescence — ages 11–14:

When watching a television show or movie in which teens are depicted drinking alcohol, ask your child...

“What do you think of the characters in the television show?” This is a chance to find out if they have established any personal beliefs regarding underage drinking. Young adolescents are likely to say they know drinking is wrong — it is dangerous and illegal. This is also a chance to remind them that most kids their age do not drink and that drinking can be dangerous. (If 20% of eighth graders say that they have been “drunk” in the past, that also means that 80% have never been “drunk”.)

“Do you think that the kids on the television show got into any trouble because of their drinking?” Try to help your child make the connection between drinking and getting into trouble. These connections will be much stronger if your child figures out on his own (rather than hearing from you) that alcohol can lead to trouble.

“Have you been to parties where kids were drinking, like the party on this television show?” If no, praise your child. Remind your child, again, that most kids his age do not drink alcohol. If yes, you need to probe deeper.

“Have you been to a party where you were offered alcohol?” Try to find out how your child handled active pressure to drink. If your child resisted pressure to drink, praise her. Remind her that most teens her age do not drink alcohol. Make a plan for the future, stating that if she is again at a party where she is offered alcohol, she can call you, and you will pick her up, no questions asked. Remind her how dangerous it is to ride in a car with a driver who has been drinking. You may also suggest that your child can hold on to a cup of soda or water while at a party, so as not to feel so different.

If your child admits to trying alcohol, or actually getting drunk at a party, you may need to, in a non-threatening manner, dig further to find out more. One strategy is to let your child know that you appreciate his honesty, and then discuss what happened and how you feel about it. You may want to make a plan to help your child avoid drinking alcohol in the future. If your early adolescent child admits to frequent episodes of drinking or binge drinking, he probably needs a more formal evaluation. The best place to start is by arranging an appointment with your child’s health care provider.

“Do you know any kids who drink like the kids on this television show?” Try to find out more about your child’s friends. As we know, young teens are greatly affected by their peer group. You may want to encourage friendships with kids who do not drink or participate in other risky activities.

Middle adolescence — ages 15–17:

Preparing for a dance or party...

“What are your plans for the party or dance?” Find out more about the group of friends that your child will be with before, during, and after the dance or party. Ask whether an adult will be present to supervise. If you do not know your child’s friends, you may ask your child to invite them over before the event so that you can meet them. Teens at this age are highly affected by the behaviors of their peers. Discuss whether your child thinks there will be alcohol at the party; you may want to reinforce your expectations about avoiding alcohol. You may also want to contact other parents of your child’s friends. In one recent survey of teens

conducted by the American Medical Association, one in four teens reported attending parties where teens were drinking in front of parents and two in five teens reported obtaining alcohol from their friends' parents.¹⁵ Find out if anyone will be driving and again, discuss how dangerous drinking and driving is. If your child feels pressured to drink at a party, you can suggest he hold a cup with soda or water. You can also offer to pick up your child from any party or event where he feels uncomfortable, and remind him never to ride in a car with a driver who has been drinking. Be consistent in your message. Remind your child and his friends that they can have a great time without drinking.

Preparing to get a driver's license...

"Do you think that you are ready to get your driver's license?" Again, discuss with your child the dangers of drinking and driving, and make sure he knows the law. Remind him that alcohol is implicated in 40% of adolescent motor vehicle fatalities. There may be a Zero Tolerance Rule in your state (making it illegal for anyone under age 21 to have any alcohol in his/her bloodstream while driving), and, if not, you can certainly make a Zero Tolerance Rule in your household. Remind your child about the legal and social repercussions of drinking and driving; in many states, a teen can have his license suspended if he is caught with any amount of alcohol in his bloodstream while driving.

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Responding to an article about alcohol in the newspaper or on the evening news...

"What do you think about the story on the news?" Drunkenness and its consequences are often discussed in the news media. This provides a great opportunity to bring up the topic of drinking with your child. Whether it is a report of an alcohol-related motor vehicle accident or of a celebrity with public drunkenness and bad behavior, these stories are a chance to discuss the negative sides of drinking. Although it may seem that celebrities often "get away with" outrageous and even illegal behavior associated with alcohol and drug use, there usually are serious repercussions. Discuss with your child how being drunk in public can be socially damaging and can lead to legal troubles too.

Preparing for spring break...

“What are your plans for spring break?” Spring break can be an especially risky time for teens. Movies and television shows glamorize this as a week of nonstop partying. Many teens travel to exotic locales where they may be under strong active and passive pressure to participate in heavy drinking. Teens may have a harder time resisting such pressures when they are far from home and in unfamiliar settings. This pressure may also be difficult because your child can not easily call to be picked up or get away from the pressure. In preparing your child for spring break it is important to find out about their plans — where are they going and who will be with them. Ask about supervision, and establish ways that you can reach each other quickly in case of emergencies. Also, if they are leaving the United States, find out about the drinking laws in the countries they will be visiting, and discuss how to access help if problems arise (you may want to give your child the number of the American Embassy or Consulate in the region). Remind your child about the problems that they could run into if involved in heavy drinking (e.g., accidents, unwanted sexual activity, legal difficulties, etc.). You can encourage your child to find activities that are fun and don’t involve alcohol.

Late adolescence — Ages 18–21:

Preparing to go to college...

“Are you excited to be going off to college?” Most teenagers are quite excited but also a bit scared about starting college. This can be especially stressful for teens who are moving far away from home. Just as you may have a plan for dealing with college housing issues or financial problems, you may want to establish a plan for dealing with campus alcohol problems.

“What do you think goes on around campus on Friday nights?” While most teens are aware of the high rates of drinking among college students, for some it may be a surprise. College students are subject to significant active and passive pressures to drink. Talk with your teen about the fact that she will likely be offered alcohol at parties and social events. Help your teen plan for how she will respond to these offers.



Point out that some clubs, sororities or fraternities may encourage drinking, and help strategize with your teen ways to combat the pressure to drink. As binge drinking is especially problematic in college settings, talk about the physical and psychological dangers of heavy drinking. You may suggest that your child avoid drinking games and other social events where drinking is the only activity. Also, young women heading off to college should be reminded to be wary of unwanted sexual advances, especially in the setting of situations involving alcohol.

For the older adolescents who don't go to college...

“What are your plans for the coming year?” Teens who choose not to attend college, whether for personal or financial reasons, may be at risk for problem drinking. They may be working full-time and now have more money available than ever before. They may be sad to see that many of their friends left town. Also, they may be bored; without the pressure of getting up early for school they may have less incentive to stay sober. For these and other reasons, teens who don't go to college may develop problem drinking. While under age 21 it is still illegal to drink, it is difficult to impose strict rules on older teens' activities, especially if they are working and financially supporting themselves. However, older teens have often developed a sense of self and are less influenced by their peers. This is an age when teens may model their behavior more on that of their parents; parents can promote healthy behaviors among older teens by abstaining or drinking responsibly. Parents can also help by encouraging their older teen children to be goal-directed — providing motivation for them to save money, find meaningful employment and keep busy with safe and healthy activities. Older teens may understand more keenly how problem drinking can impact their relationships with family members and friends. Remember, parental involvement is still crucial, even at this later stage in your adolescent's development.

Final thoughts...

Underage drinking is often influenced by peer pressure, both active and passive. By knowing the facts, you can better equip yourself to address peer pressure in conversations with your teen. Remember, these conversations often need to be ongoing, and topics will often need to be revisited as the teen matures both physically and psychologically.

About



Health Alliance on Alcohol

A national education initiative on underage consumption of alcohol through parent/child communications.

NewYork-Presbyterian Healthcare System

The NewYork-Presbyterian Healthcare System, the largest secular not-for-profit non-governmental health care system in the U.S., is committed to providing high-quality, cost-effective and accessible care to communities throughout the greater New York Metropolitan region. The System, made up of 38 acute care hospitals, 100 ambulatory sites, 16 residential health care facilities, three specialty institutions, and more than 15,000 affiliated physicians, serves one in four patients in the greater New York Metropolitan area. The System is also the largest not-for-profit employer in New York City. System members are affiliates of the Joan and Sanford I. Weill Medical College of Cornell University or Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. During 2003, System institutions discharged more than 560,000 inpatient cases and saw more than 5,700,000 cases on an outpatient basis. For additional information, visit www.nyp.org.

White Plains Hospital Center

White Plains Hospital Center is a voluntary, not-for-profit health care organization with the primary mission of offering high-quality, acute health care and preventative medical care in a compassionate manner to all people who live in, work in or visit Westchester County and its surrounding areas. The Hospital has the busiest Emergency Department in Westchester County, treating approximately 42,000 patients in 2004. Its “Centers of Excellence” include cardiology, emergency medicine, endoscopy, minimally invasive surgery, oncology, orthopedics, neonatal and maternity, and radiology. The Hospital has won the National Research Corporation “Consumer Choice Award” for Westchester County four times, most recently in 2004. WPHC is an affiliate of the NewYork-Presbyterian Healthcare System and a member of Stellaris Health Network, Inc. and Voluntary Hospitals of America, Inc. For additional information, visit www.wphospital.org.

Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital of NewYork-Presbyterian

Ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as one of the top five children’s hospitals in the country, Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital of NewYork-

Presbyterian offers the best available care in every area of pediatrics — including the most complex neonatal and critical care, and all areas of pediatric subspecialties — in a family-friendly and technologically advanced setting. Building a reputation for more than a century as one of the nation’s premier children’s hospitals, Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital of NewYork-Presbyterian is affiliated with Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, and is New York City’s only hospital dedicated solely to the care of children and the largest provider of children’s health services in the tristate area with a long-standing commitment to its community. Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital of NewYork-Presbyterian is also a major international referral center, meeting the special needs of children from infancy through adolescence worldwide.

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Heineken USA Inc., the nation’s largest beer importer, is a subsidiary of Heineken International (Netherlands), which is the world’s most international brewer. The Company and its affiliates are firmly committed to promoting responsible consumption of beverage alcohol. Among other distinctions, Heineken was the first brewer in the world to place a responsible consumption message on all of its bottles and cans. Heineken USA was also the first alcohol company to place a responsibility message on all of its television, radio and print advertising. Please visit www.EnjoyHeinekenResponsibly.com.

Authors

Elyse Olshen Kharbanda, MD, MPH
Assistant Clinical Professor of Pediatrics,
Columbia University Medical Center
Department of Pediatrics,
Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital of NewYork-Presbyterian

Karen Soren, MD
Associate Clinical Professor of Pediatrics and Public Health,
Columbia University Medical Center
Director of Adolescent Health Care,
Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital of NewYork-Presbyterian

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Notes
