Have the Time of Your Life

Celebrate Responsibly!
Do you remember when the most difficult decision you had to make was whether to get a hamburger or Chicken McNuggets™ at McDonald’s™?

Those were the days, weren’t they?

Now that you’re older, the choices are rarely so simple. And even though you’re not yet an adult, you’re expected to make each decision as if you were.

That’s especially true when it comes to observing the special times in your life. Whether it’s prom, graduation, or your team’s big victory, chances are you will be asked to celebrate with alcohol.

Regardless of the occasion, the temptation to drink is powerful at your age. But it’s also illegal — and dangerous — if you’re under the age of 21. Learning about the risks of underage drinking and how to resist the temptation may be the only defense you have.

That’s what this special publication is all about — helping you confront the temptation head on and providing the information you need to make the right choices. We won’t tell you it will be easy to choose NOT to drink. But it will be worth it.

Resources
The Campaign for Alcohol Free Kids, http://www.alcoholfreekids.com
The National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information http://www.health.org
Growing Up Drug Free, U.S. Department of Education
Intervention Instruction, Inc., http://www.whatsdrivingyou.org
Learn About Drinking and Driving, Hazelden Learning Series
Indiana Prevention Resource Center at Indiana University

Credits
Written by: Terri Darr McLean
Designed by: Minna Y. Jenkins
Special thanks to: MBE Corp. and Commonwealth of Kentucky
© 2000-2006 KRP, Inc. All rights reserved.
When it comes to underage drinking, there’s good news and bad news.

First, the bad news. By some estimates, nearly half of U.S. students in grades 7 through 12 drink alcohol — many of them more than once a week.

Now, the good news. Studies show that the more we talk about the problems of underage drinking — its causes, its effects, and its consequences — the better the chances that you can avoid becoming the worst statistic of all: a fatal one.

Why do young people drink?
Regardless of the fact that it’s illegal to drink before the age of 21, many teen-agers do. And they do so for a variety of reasons.

Some young people drink because their friends drink or they have the mistaken idea that if they drink they will fit in with their peers. Others drink because they think it makes them more fun to be around or it will make them feel good. Still others drink under the false notion that they can escape their problems or relieve feelings of fear, loneliness, and self-doubt. Sometimes, young people drink simply because they are bored.

The problem is, there are no good reasons for a young person to drink. Instead of solving problems and helping you feel better about yourself, drinking can make things worse. And, when you abuse alcohol, the harder it is to stop.

What happens when you drink?
Alcohol is considered a depressant. Almost as soon as it is used, alcohol enters the bloodstream and affects the brain. It slows your heart rate, lowers your blood pressure and respiration rate, and decreases reflex responses.

Alcohol remains in the bloodstream until the liver has time to break it down. Since it takes an hour for the liver to break down one ounce of alcohol, a person feels the effects for a long time. Young people, whose body weight is lower than that of an adult’s, reach a higher blood alcohol concentration level and show greater effects for longer periods of time.

Misuse of alcohol can interfere with a person’s judgment, vision, and coordination. It can also impair higher mental functions, such as the ability to learn and remember things, and may increase aggressive behavior. Excessive use can lead to long-term problems, including alcohol dependence, liver damage, and psychotic behavior. And very high doses of alcohol can cause respiratory depression and even death.

When it comes to drinking, what’s so magic about the age of 21?
Drinking alcohol is one of those things that takes the full experience and judgment of an adult. It requires the ability to make responsible choices — choices you are still learning to make. It’s that simple.

What are the consequences of drinking before you are 21?
At the very least, the inability to make responsible choices about drinking can cause you to make a fool of yourself in front of the people you so desperately want to impress — your friends. Underage drinking is also associated with family problems, poor performance in school and athletics, truancy, fights, and assaults, not to mention the risk of stiff penalties if you’re caught.

At worst, underage drinking can lead to death. Alcohol-related traffic crashes, drownings, fires, suicides, and homicides claim the lives of young people every day.
Imagine that it’s Friday night and you’re heading home after catching a movie with friends. Traffic is sparse, so you sit back and relax as you wend your way through the streets that lead home.

Up ahead, you see the lights of another car. The brights are on, so you look away for a second to give your eyes a break. But you can’t shake the feeling that the car is heading right at you.

As you glance toward the glaring lights, it becomes apparent that the car in front of you is, indeed, in front of you — weaving in and out of your lane. If you swerve, you’ll hit one of the giant trees lining the roadway. If you don’t, you’ll smash head-on with a killer.

What would you do?

Scenarios such as this are played out every day — and night — when someone drinks and drives. Driving under the influence of alcohol not only puts the culprit at risk; it threatens anyone who gets in his or her way. That’s the really frightening part.

Nationally, alcohol-related traffic deaths among young people between the ages of 15 and 20 decreased from 1997 to 1998. Still, one death at the hands of a drunken driver — no matter the age — is one too many.

Arresting drunk drivers is one solution to the problem. Another is educating the public, including our nation’s youth and young adults, about the dangers of drinking and driving.

Alcohol affects your driving by:
- Slowing your reflexes
- Causing you to lose concentration
- Messing up your coordination
- Blurring your vision
- Causing poor judgment

Anatomy of a Good Decision

Every day, you are faced with an overwhelming array of decisions — some routine, some life-threatening. The more you know about how to make a good decision, the better off you will be.

What is a “good” decision?

According to Carolyn Wesson, author of Teen Troubles, a good, or right, decision is one that:
- fulfills your needs or wants, not someone else’s. Remember, only you know what’s best for you.
- won’t harm anyone. First, think about whether your decision will harm you, then think about whether it will hurt someone else.
- is realistic and based on facts. Don’t base any decisions on hope, assumptions, or wishful thinking.
- has acceptable short- and long-term consequences.
The ABCs of the BAC

To determine if someone is driving under the influence of alcohol, a law enforcement officer may measure that person’s BAC — blood alcohol concentration. BAC is determined primarily by how much alcohol a person drinks and his or her weight. But other factors can affect the BAC, such as age, gender, and medication.

Most states prohibit driving while impaired, regardless of the BAC level. And some states impose lower BAC limits for underage drivers.

Generally, though, most states have BAC limits of 0.08 to 0.10. At the 0.08 level, judgment and self-control are reduced and caution, reason, and memory are impaired. There is also slight impairment of vision, hearing and reaction time.

At the 0.10 level, there is significant impairment of motor coordination and loss of good judgment. Balance, vision, reaction time, and hearing are also impaired.

Drinking and Bad Grades

Poor grades are correlated with increased use of alcohol. Alcohol is implicated in more than 40 percent of all academic problems and 28 percent of all dropouts.

ACTIVITIES

• Look through the newspaper for examples of activities — such as driving — that would be dangerous for a person who is under the influence of alcohol. For each example, make a list of other people who might also be affected by a person who misuses alcohol in that situation. What conclusions can you draw?

• In small groups, create a newspaper ad promoting the alcohol-free lifestyle for young people. Before you get started, look through your newspaper to see how ads target different groups of people. Then determine how best to target your audience.

• Boredom is often cited as a reason teens turn to alcohol. Look through your newspaper for information about activities and events in your community. Make a list of all the things you could do the next time you think, “I’m bored.” In small groups, talk about how alcohol would mess up each of the activities on your list.

• Some say the problems associated with underage drinking in United States cost society as much as $58 billion annually, or $577.91 per year per household. That’s a lot of money — especially when you consider other ways our country could use that money. Brainstorm a list of local, state, and community needs that could be met with additional funding. (Use your newspaper and other resources.) Then decide how much of the $58 billion you would allocate to each need. Share your thoughts with the class.

• Pick a partner for this activity. One of you will assume the role of a newspaper advice columnist, such as Ann Landers or Dear Abby, and the other will be a young person in need of advice about drinking. Write your letters, then switch roles.

• Young people sometimes start drinking when they are unable to cope with situations in their lives and the resulting stress. Work with a partner to define stress and identify ways your body responds to it. Look in the newspaper for pictures and stories that illustrate healthy ways to combat stress. Talk about the fact that, instead of helping solve problems, alcohol makes them worse.
Debunking the Myths

It's not easy being you. On top of the everyday pressures and life changes you're experiencing, you have to be an expert in sorting out good information from bad information.

Take drinking. On one hand, you've got adults telling you it's bad to drink before you're 21. On the other, some of your friends say drinking is your ticket to the good times.

What's a teen-ager to do?

First, you need to know the facts. Drinking won't bring you fun and happiness — unless, of course, you enjoy giving up control of your mind and body, suffering from hangovers, losing the respect of your loved ones, wrecking the car, and other potentially harmful effects of underage drinking. And, above all else, drinking when you're younger than 21 is illegal. Remember that.

Sure, there's a lot of mixed messages out there. It's not easy to differentiate between what's true and what's not. But if you arm yourself with a little knowledge, you'll know just what to say and do next time you're confronted with a choice about drinking.

Myth No. 1 — Drinking will make you popular.
Right! Young people who drink are prone to having bad breath, bloating and puffiness, and zits, not to mention a lack of control over the way they act. Does that fit your idea of popularity?

Myth No. 2 — Alcohol makes you more sexy.
Alcohol may “loosen” you up a bit, but there's nothing sexy about becoming pregnant, contracting AIDS, being assaulted sexually, and all the other things that can happen when you can't think straight.

How Do I Tell If My Friend Has a Drinking Problem?

Although it's not always easy to tell if a friend has a drinking problem, there are warning signs. They include:

- Gets drunk on a regular basis
- Lies frequently, including about how much alcohol he or she drinks
- Avoids you in order to get drunk
- Gives up activities he or she used to participate in
- Does poorly in school
- Believes he or she needs to drink to have fun
- Has frequent hangovers
- Pressures others to drink
- Takes more risks, including sexual risks
- Has blackouts — forgets what he or she did while drinking
- Feels rundown, hopeless, depressed, or even suicidal

• Sounds selfish and uncaring about others
• Talks frequently about drinking
• Gets into trouble
• Drinks and drives

Because it's difficult for most people to admit that they have a drinking problem, it's often up to others to try to help them. You can't force a friend to get help, but you can encourage and support him or her. The first step in that process is getting your friend to admit that he or she has a problem and needs help.

If you decide to talk to a friend, make sure the timing is right and be prepared for denial and even anger. Never accuse your friend of having a drinking problem but express your concerns. Talk about your feelings. Be caring and understanding, and offer to go with your friend to get help.

— Adapted from National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information
Myth No. 3 — Alcohol gives you energy.
Alcohol is a depressant. That means it slows everything down, including your level of energy.

Myth No. 4 — Everybody reacts the same to alcohol.
This couldn’t be further from the truth. Many factors determine how you will react to alcohol — body weight, time of day, how you feel about yourself, body chemistry. The truth is, no two people will be affected the same way when they drink.

Myth No. 5 — A cold shower or cup of coffee will help sober someone up.
Nothing — we repeat — nothing sobers a person up except time. Go ahead and have a cup of coffee or take a cold shower, though, if you want to be a wide-awake drunk!

Myth No. 6 — Drinking won’t have any long-term effects.
If you drink large amounts of alcohol over long periods of time, you can suffer major damage to your digestive system, your heart, liver, stomach, and other critical organs.

Myth No. 7 — The worst thing that can happen is a hangover.
Think again! If you drink enough alcohol, fast enough, it can kill you in only a few hours.

Myth No. 8 — People who drink too much only hurt themselves.
Every problem drinker affects at least four other people — mothers, fathers, siblings, best friends, boyfriends or girlfriends. And that doesn’t count those who drink and drive. They put everyone in danger.

Myth No. 9 — It’s none of your business if a friend drinks.
It is your business, if you’re a real friend. When a friend has a drinking problem, someone has to step in and try to help. Who better than you? (See “How Do I Tell if My Friend Has a Drinking Problem?” on the opposite page.)

From Mothers Against Drunk Drivers

Answers to the activity on page 7: ALL THE STATEMENTS ARE TRUE.
Have the Time of Your Life

Celebrate Responsibly!