

Parents' Guide to Underage Drinking Concerns

Frequently Asked Questions

Linn County Underage Drinking Coalition

Question #1 - What do I do when my son or daughter attends a party where adults are providing and/or allowing alcohol?

- As much as possible, talk with your child before they go out. Establish, or re-establish, family values, rules, and expectations.
- Communicate with your child to develop a plan of action. Let them know that it's OK to call home in that situation. Reiterate the importance of not driving or riding with anyone who has been drinking.
- Communicate with that adult; express your own concerns based on your values and the things that are important to you. Make them aware of legal consequences and liabilities when an adult provides alcohol to minors, and explain the potential health hazards for minors who drink.
- If necessary, communicate with local law enforcement. See [Laws Concerning Adults Providing Alcoholic Beverages to Minors](#) for more information.
- Communicate with the parents of your child's friends. Make them aware of the situation, and encourage them to speak with their own children.

Question #2 - How can I tell when my child has crossed the line from casual, social, experimental, "rites of passage" drug use into a possible addiction?

- Seek an assessment for your child. Professionals are trained to make appropriate recommendations for action based on your child's use patterns. Assessments can be done at any local substance abuse agency. Contact the [Iowa Substance Abuse Information Center](#) (ISAIC) toll free at 866-242-4111 for information about where to seek an assessment in your area.
- Understand definitions and talk about them with your children:
 - Drug Use – Making the choice to use a substance to alter the state of your mind or body. Moderate use of any drug or alcohol can affect a person's thinking, physical behavior or performance and reaction time. User can function and maintain control of how much and how often they choose to use. The use of the specific substance is legal, and carries little to no risk of harmful effects.
 - Drug Abuse – The use of any substance when it is either illegal or carries a high risk of problems, such as drinking underage, drinking often or in large quantities or using any illegal drug.
 - Drug Addiction - Loss of choice. Someone feels like they "need" a drug in order to maintain daily function.
 - Binge Drinking – Consuming 5 or more drinks in one sitting – varies incredibly by individual.
 - Tolerance – Someone needs more of a drug to get the same effect they used to feel with a smaller amount.
- Get physically close enough to smell or detect use. Hug them and smell for alcohol. Look in their eyes. Wait up for them to come home when they've gone out. Ask them whom they are with, where they are going, when they will return. If you suspects that your child is using, remember you as a parent have the right to search their bags, cars, or rooms. Check pockets when doing laundry. Ask them open-ended questions about their friends and social life, and create opportunities for conversation, rather than simple yes/no answers. Remember to remain calm – blowing up may push them further away. Assure your child that you love them, and that it's important that you talk with them.
- Use correct terminology when making reference to things you're concerned about. Talk about dependence/tolerance/addiction (see key terms above). Understand and use key terms in conversations with your kids.

Question #3 - How can I get my child to be honest with me about where s/he goes, who s/he hangs out with, etc?

- Stay as non-threatening as you can. Avoid accusations, yelling or overreacting. Stay in the present moment when having a conversation with your child (don't get into "you always ..." or "every time ...").
- Ask where they are going, whom they are with, and who is driving. Let them know you expect to be notified if the plan or location changes. Get acquainted with their friends and their friends' parents.

Call and ask if your child is where they said they'd be. Wait for them to come home so you can observe their appearance and behavior. Invite your child's friends in to say hello if they come to pick your child up. Be sure to provide guidance for your child. Remember that you have the right as a parent to set guidelines for your child.

- Get involved in every aspect of your child's life. Volunteer at school, or be a driver when necessary. Invite and host friend gatherings. Talk with your kids daily – first thing in the morning, at meals, before bed, etc. Adjust your meal times to make it a family affair as often as possible. Be creative with the time you have together. Be willing, as a parent, to adjust your schedule to make time to meet your kids' needs. Do all you can to set them up for success. When they are away from you, they will have to make choices. Empower them, and work ahead of time to help them make good choices when the need arises. When they exercise poor judgment, turn it into a learning opportunity.

Question #4 – How do I talk to my kids about substance related issues?

- Understand the potential physical/emotional effects of alcohol, and share this information with your kids:
 - Alcohol use can affect a young person's education by changing the way they feel about schoolwork, friendships and grades. Other behavior changes may occur, including skipping school to drink, or treating people differently at school.
 - Alcohol use can affect a young person personally through mood changes as the drug enters and exits their system, or as they move toward dependence on it.
 - Alcohol use can affect a young person's future, causing an increase in "giving up" or "giving in" attitudes that take away the focus on long term goals such as professional athletics, college, or career.
 - Alcohol use makes it easier to let go of your values: cheating in school, stealing things, sex at a younger age or unprotected sex, disrespect of family and friends.
 - Alcohol use can cause death. Drinking too much or too fast can cause a dramatic increase in blood alcohol content, which can lead to passing out, slow and shallow breathing, blue or pale skin, clammy skin, and eventually death as the major organs like heart and lungs shut down.
- Contact local hospitals, treatment agencies and other social service providers for literature and information to use and share with your children. Visit www.asac.us for additional website resources.
- Have discussions with your kids about their goals and dreams – academic, athletic, career, social - and how substance use might affect the ability to accomplish them.
- The most effective time and place to share information with kids is any opportunity for conversation – in the car, at dinner, when they ask questions. Use "teachable moments" when something has happened at school or in the news that can serve as a catalyst for discussion.
- Ask your kids what the "word on the street" is. What do they know or what have they heard about particular drugs? Use this as an opportunity to give them correct information.
- Self-disclosure: How much should your kids know about your own experiences with substances? Give them information that will help, not harm. Be honest, but brief, and redirect back to their issue. Focus on your child and his or her experiences. Example: "I made some choices that were not good ones. Everyone makes mistakes, and when I did, I had consequences to face. We have so much more knowledge now than when I was younger, and I can help you avoid making the same mistakes I did." Use it as a teachable moment. If you are uncomfortable with talking about it, assure your child that you will talk with them about it later, and follow through. Seek resources to become more prepared for this conversation. Contact a local substance abuse agency or the [Iowa Substance Abuse Information Center](http://www.owa.gov) toll free at 866-242-4111 for substance abuse information and resources.

Question #5 - What should I do if my child comes home intoxicated?

Seek medical attention if needed – overdosing on alcohol can be deadly. Signs to watch for include unconsciousness, vomiting while sleeping, seizures, no response to pinching the skin, slow or irregular breathing, paleness or low body temperature. If any of these signs are present, seek emergency medical attention immediately. The following link has more information on alcohol poisoning: www.nhtsa.gov/people/outreach/SafeSobr/15qp/web/idalc.html

- Find out what has been taken – how much, what type, mixed drugs, etc.
- It is important to send the message that you still love and accept them, just not their behavior. This may include assisting friends with a safe environment in which they can get help if needed – a safe way home, access to phones, or receiving assistance from law enforcement.
- If there is a behavior concern (youth is aggressive, explosive, violent, etc):
 - Get help from law enforcement to create a plan of action together
 - Wait for any discussion until your child is not longer intoxicated.
 - Wait for you to gain control and composure, and go into a discussion with a calm plan for what you will say and what you want to happen.

Question #6 – How can I tell if my child has been drinking/using?

Here is a brief list of common signs and symptoms of substance use, both physiological and behavioral. This list is not conclusive; the focus should be on an overall change in pattern, not simply the presence of one or two listed concerns.

- Look for a change in attitude, friends and overall behavioral patterns
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Significant weight loss or weight gain in a brief period of time
- Significant changes in relational patterns at home, or if the child no longer spends time at home
- School truancy
- Significant withdrawal from family or friends
- Track internet activity. You can check the history of your internet use to see what sites have been viewed on your computer.

** Internet Explorer on Windows: View → Explorer Bar → History.

** Explorer on a Macintosh: the Go menu shows the history.

** Netscape for both Mac and Windows: click on the Go menu to view history.

**AOL: preferences → internet options

Most internet service providers offer a block for certain websites. Technical support staff for these companies may be able to tap into your system and track what sites have been viewed from your computer. Instant messenger programs can also be logged. If you suspect that your child is viewing sites that you do not approve of, talk with them and take the necessary steps to ensure they can not continue to access these sites from your home.

Question #7 – Who can I contact if I suspect my child is drinking?

Here is a list of options and what each may be able to provide.

- Family physician - check for changes in physical conditions, provide factual information about signs/symptoms, connect physical conditions to family health history
- School counselors/teachers – conferences, conversations with family or peers, relay information about behavioral patterns at school
- Clergy – provide family support/guidance, referrals to area treatment or counseling options
- Friends / friends' families – observations about social behavioral patterns
- Local treatment agencies or area hospitals – treatment or assessment information, can provide information on signs and symptoms of use
- Iowa Substance Abuse Information Center (ISAIC) – located in the Cedar Rapids Public Library – brochures, booklets, videos, and other information about substances
- Law enforcement – offer suggestions for parents on how to look for signs or use, paraphernalia, referrals to treatment or counseling options

Question #8 – How can I differentiate between alcohol and other drug use?

- Contact the Drug Recognition Expert (DRE) from local law enforcement for information. They can also provide information about various paraphernalia associated with different substances.
- Alcohol is generally a teen's first substance. If you have been concerned for an extended period of time about your child's alcohol use, consider the possibility that other drugs may have been used.
- Refer to attitudes/behaviors mentioned in the question, "How can I tell if my child has been drinking/using?"
- Hangovers/odor associated with alcohol

- Lethargic behavior may be a sign of alcohol or another depressant substance.

Question #9 - Should alcohol use be addressed differently than other drug use?

- Alcohol is a drug, and needs to be addressed as such, with accurate information about the substance.
- Take note of risks and potential harm associated with the use of alcohol in general, and particularly to an underdeveloped body. (see [Health Effects of Alcohol on Teens.](#))
- Highlight the nature of illegal alcohol use by anyone under 21 years of age.
- If alcohol use is not treated as a serious matter, then young people are more likely to engage in use because they may view it as a low-risk choice.

Question #10: How should I react or respond to my child's alcohol use?

- Respond in a loving, calm manner, but do not pretend to approve of the use of alcohol
- TALK TO YOUR CHILD – ask questions, establish an open line of communication
- Investigate the circumstance – the setting, friends involved, patterns of use vs. one-time incident, etc.
- What are my personal/family's values and beliefs about underage drinking? What example am I setting as a parent?
- Seek assistance if needed
 - Don't deny there's a potential problem.
 - Take an active stand – call on community resources.
 - Seek support from other adults in the child's life – teacher, counselor, coach, minister, etc.
- Make a commitment to offer the child an appropriate level of support
 - Follow through with whatever is best suited as a course of action. Remember that any alcohol use by a minor is an illegal offense, and should be treated as such. Seek assistance from a substance abuse treatment agency in determining how to best go about handling the situation, whether it is a first-time use or a pattern of use. A professional assessment is always an appropriate option, and the assessment counselor can make recommendations when a parent is unsure of what might be the best course of action.
- Do not make excuses such as "boys will be boys," it's a high school student's "rite of passage" to get drunk at least one time, etc.
- Seek out more education/information in order to approach your child from a knowledgeable standpoint. Visit "Related Links" at www.asac.us for additional educational resources.

Question #11: How can I prevent or discourage my child from drinking in the future?

- Parents can only "control" what takes place in their own home – you influence your child best by the example you set in your own life. Therefore, if you want them to act responsibly, then so must you.
- Set clear guidelines and expectations for you child, and be prepared to enforce the rules that you have set for your home.
- Encourage children to take an active stand against substance use, and to get involved in anti-use groups in their school (SADD, SODA, etc), extra curricular activities, other community activities (church involvement, community service projects, etc.)
- Be aware of and provide your child factual information about the risks involved in alcohol use.
- Let young people be young people. Many teens get involved in substance use because of stress at home. Teens are not qualified to make adult decisions, and need to have limited responsibilities for younger siblings, maintaining the home. Be sure your teen has opportunities to be him or herself and enjoy young adulthood in healthy ways.
- Surround yourself with positive peers who will support the values and decisions you've set for yourself and your family.
- Seek ongoing parenting support as needed – parenting classes, community resources, articles in magazines, books, online, etc.
- Strengthen family relationships – make time for your children through regular family meal times, family meetings to address concerns, and shared recreational activities.

*****FOR MORE INFORMATION, QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS REGARDING THIS PUBLICATION, PLEASE CONTACT PREVENTION SERVICES AT THE AREA SUBSTANCE ABUSE COUNCIL, (319)390-4611.**