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## Video Short

### Teens and Drinking – What Parents Don’t Know

*“Faithfully I stayed up ever Friday and Saturday night, to check to see if [my son] was sober, to make sure that he got home. And he always appeared fine to me... I was clueless.”*

*Hedwig O’Brien, mother*

The statistics are sobering. In a recent national survey of more than 2,500 eleventh and twelfth graders, 90 percent of teens believe their counterparts are more likely to drink and drive on prom night and 79 percent believe the same is true for graduation night.

Would most parents know if their children were drinking or using drugs? Would you know?

Even parents who consider themselves aware of their kids’ behavior know they have been proven wrong.

“Faithfully I stayed up ever Friday and Saturday night, to check to see if [my son] was sober, to make sure that he got home,” says Hedwig O’Brien. And he always appeared fine to me. I really didn’t.... I was clueless.”

“We had no idea truly, though,” says Carol Gorgonne, “and I thought I was a pretty sharp mom, how much, how many drugs and how much she was abusing.”

But experts say it’s not all the parents’ fault.

“It’s not like these parents are bad or are missing something,” says Dr. Vincent Ho, a psychiatrist. “The kids are just really good at tricking people.”

And it doesn’t help that the behavior of a kid drinking or on drugs is a lot like the behavior of an ordinary, rebellious teenager.

“What the parents will report to us,” says clinical psychologist Robert Margolis, “is a whole variety of behaviors that accompany drug use: declining grades, sneaking out at night, changing peer group, change in dress, change in behavior, attitude, isolating more, maybe money being missing from the house. All those ancillary behaviors, which they don’t associate in their mind with drug use.”

Experts say one way to protect kids is to know their friends – and their friends’ parents.

“We assume, or at least I assume sometimes, that all parents think like I do,” says Tim Jordan, a behavioral pediatrician. “There’s some parents that allow kids to drink alcohol, there’s some parents who allow some of those kind of behaviors; so it’s our job as parents to make sure we know where our kids are and who they’re with - and that there’s supervision.”

### What Parents Need to Know

Despite the tragic tales of reckless driving on prom and graduation nights, teens have a pervasive “it won’t happen to me” attitude. Add to the alcohol factor distractions like texting or talking on the cell phone while driving, or the greater likelihood of multiple people in the car, and the crash potential is very real.

A recent AAA/Seventeen magazine survey reports an increasing number of teens multitasking and engaging in other distracting behavior while behind the wheel. According to the survey of 1,000 teens, 46 percent text

messaging while driving, 51 percent talked on the phone while driving, 58 percent drove with friends in the car and 40 percent have exceeded the speed limit by 10 miles per hour.

When it comes to teens, alcohol and driving, parents may be unwitting enablers of teen drinking and driving. The Liberty Mutual Research Institute survey determined more than one in three teens (36 percent) say their parents have allowed them to attend parties where it is known that alcohol will be served, and 14 percent say their parents have, in fact, hosted such teen gatherings.

Graduation and prom celebrations can be risky for youth because, in American culture, students are sometimes expected by parents, community and peers to celebrate with all night parties, co-ed sleepovers and drinking. In fact, some parents and communities condone this behavior and even encourage it. The National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information suggests these strategies for parents to help keep their teens safe:

- **Communicate, Communicate**  
Ask where your children are going, with whom they will be and what they will be doing. Ask who and how they will be supervised at a party. Be wary of sleepovers and all night parties. For some teens, sleepovers are opportunities to use drugs, alcohol and/or have sex, and can put them under too much peer pressure. Teen use of alcohol can lead to unprotected sex or dating violence. If your teen is at a home party, be sure you and the supervising adults share the same values and expectations for behavior at the party. Check in by phone or drive over to make sure a responsible parent is supervising the event and your child is still there. Make sure your teen has a safe ride home at the end of the party.
- **Get involved.** Volunteer to supervise school or neighborhood parties. Offer to chauffeur kids to and from graduation celebrations. Host an alcohol free party at your home.
- **Discuss Safety with Your Child**  
Even if your child resists alcohol and drugs, he or she is still at risk for becoming victimized by them. Emphasize the importance of watching out for careless, and possibly drunken, drivers and using the "buddy system" so that he or she is with at least one friend at all times. Encourage your child to call you at any time if he or she needs a safe ride home or for any other reason.
- **Be clear about what you expect and be firm.** Around age 17 and 18 is a time when youth are expected to seek more independence and are often eager to separate from parental controls. The combination of more independence along with pressures to party and fears about what the future holds can make graduating students vulnerable. Talk with your teen about what is a reasonable curfew and stick to it. Have your teen check in often. Discuss in advance the consequence for breaking the rules.
- **Encourage graduating teens to take healthy risks.** It is normal and healthy for teens to take appropriate risks that help them to learn, develop independence, conquer fears and build confidence. Rather than celebrating the graduation rite of passage with drinking and sex, encourage your teens to celebrate with their friends and family in some creative and healthy ways.

## Resources

[Parenting Resources](#)  
[Underage Drinking SAMSHA](#)  
[Student Against Destructive Destructions](#)

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