



Childhood Drinking:

How do we prevent and reduce the number of children drinking alcohol?

ISSUE AT A GLANCE

Alcohol is the drug of choice for America's youth. By age 15, half of the nation's children and adolescents will have had a whole drink. Among 15 year olds who do drink, one study shows that on average they binge drink (five drinks or more per session) twice a month.

How many children are drinking that way? According to a federally funded survey conducted by the University of Michigan, 8 percent of eighth graders (13 years old) have binged in the past two weeks, and 18 percent of tenth graders (15 years old) have done so.

Childhood drinking is a problem for the entire community. It does not have a single solution. It must be addressed by many different kinds of people, because solutions will depend on actions by everyday people, community organizations, and government.

To make decisions, we need to look at our main concerns and examine possible solutions. Every option has advantages as well as drawbacks. This document provides an overview of three options for addressing the issue of childhood drinking. It is intended to help you make choices about this question:

How should our community prevent and reduce drinking by children aged 9-15?

Option One: Reach Children With Problems Early		
Greatest Concern	Examples of What Might Be Done	Possible Consequences and Trade-offs to Consider
<p>“Some children have problems when it comes to alcohol and other issues. We need to find them as early as possible and help them.”</p> <p>Childhood drinking can contribute to academic failure, difficulty in employment, and chronic criminal behavior. It can lead to risky sexual behavior, alcoholism, mental health problems, personality changes, injury, and other problems.</p> <p>We should provide vulnerable children and their families with the support they need in order to recognize and deal with such problems.</p>	<p>Make sure there are early warning systems and effective intervention options.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community groups can provide places for families to turn to if they discover their child or a friend is drinking. • Schools can train teachers to identify children who need more support than they are getting at home. • Schools can improve remedial academic counseling so children can get back on track. • Government can require health-care professionals to screen children and adolescents for alcohol problems and intervene when necessary. • Significantly increase availability and appeal of affordable and appropriate alcohol treatment designed for adolescents and their families. 	<p>Professionals will intrude in families’ lives; the issue may get pushed underground.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families will have to risk exposure and ask for help on this uncomfortable issue. • Parents will have to tolerate questions and suspicion from school. • Students getting specialized help will feel different and stigmatized. This may make their cases even worse. • Families will have to tolerate intrusion from health-care workers. • Focusing so much energy on treatment programs will mean that children with less serious problems will not get the same attention even though they may need it.

Option Two: Remove Access and Incentives		
Greatest Concern	Examples of What Might Be Done	Possible Consequences and Trade-offs to Consider
<p>"If we are going to make it so our children don't drink, we will need to change the community. This includes not only making it harder to get access to alcohol, but also stronger enforcement of the laws."</p> <p>Children live in an environment where drinking is prevalent in too many aspects of daily life. Upbeat media portrayals of drinking, the presence of alcohol at home, sporting, and family social events, lax enforcement of existing rules and laws, and other factors undermine the abilities of parents, families, and communities to keep children from drinking.</p> <p>We need to create an environment that makes it possible for children to grow up without alcohol.</p>	<p><i>Remove opportunities for children to drink, and make alcohol less available and visible</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community groups and schools can increase afterschool activities and other events so there are fewer "idle spaces" in children's days. • Government can change regulations to make alcohol less easily accessible to children and youth. • Police departments can increase funds and manpower devoted to enforcement of underage drinking laws. They can take drinking seriously by enforcing the laws against serving alcohol to children in the home. Community members can openly identify parents who allow parties where children drink. • Churches and other community groups can protest positive media portrayals of underage drinking and rebellious behavior. • Government can create a law to eliminate advertising of alcohol. • Families can make alcohol less accessible in the home by removing or securing it. Communities can implement measures that make access to alcohol more difficult at public events. 	<p><i>We will need more control over children's day-to-day activities as well as more restrictions on adults' behavior</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children will become even more "scheduled" than they already are. • This will add to an already burdensome regulatory regime. • Increased enforcement means increased punishment of young people, which can change the course of their life for the worse. Parents may also face legal consequences. This may turn some community members against one another and could break up families. • Such protests may make the groups appear sanctimonious and lose relevance in the community. • Restrictions on advertising can interfere with free speech. • This will interfere with access to alcohol for all people, adults as well as children. Some adults will find this to be a burden and will protest.

Option Three: Help Children Through A Difficult Time In Development		
Greatest Concern	Examples of What Might Be Done	Possible Consequences and Trade-offs to Consider
<p>"We need to help children through the difficult elementary and middle school years so they do not get derailed."</p> <p>Elementary and middle school can be hard years for children. It is a time when experimentation on a number of fronts is natural. Children need support to make it through this period in a healthy way. Childhood drinking can interfere with healthy development.</p> <p>We need to provide resources, support, and information so all children can develop without turning to negative influences.</p>	<p><i>Focus on wellness and healthy development for all children.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Community groups can create workshops to help parents learn to provide the right balance of nurture and discipline, and model good behavior when it comes to alcohol.</i> • <i>Schools can teach children ways to avoid drinking and make other healthy decisions through substance abuse prevention programs and other ways.</i> • <i>Schools can create opportunities in school for every child to feel connected and better known, and have a relationship with at least one adult.</i> • <i>Government health services and businesses can create public awareness campaigns about the significant health dangers of childhood drinking.</i> • <i>Community groups and churches can create programs that educate adults about how to talk about alcohol with their children.</i> • <i>Community groups can create campaigns that create new social norms and make it clear that childhood drinking is not "normal."</i> 	<p><i>Responsibility for parenting children will shift from the family to professionals.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Some parents will have to change their parenting styles as well as their approach to their own alcohol use. Parents who would benefit most may not take part.</i> • <i>There are many programs and initiatives designed to promote healthy decisions but they cannot reach everyone.</i> • <i>This will further increase the importance of schools and educators in the lives of children. Some parents will resent the feeling of being replaced by school officials. Teachers are already overburdened.</i> • <i>Many adults drank alcohol when underage, yet turned out OK. They may see such efforts as "scare tactics" that may have the opposite effect at a time when risk taking is attractive.</i> • <i>Many parents will avoid uncomfortable conversations no matter how much education they have about how to hold them. This does nothing for children in dysfunctional families.</i> • <i>It is difficult for individual groups, or even coalitions, to create changes in society. Such efforts are long-term and expensive.</i>