

James L. Holly, M.D.

**Take The Pledge!
Underage Alcohol Use
By James L. Holly, MD
Your Life Your Health
The Examiner
May 11, 2006**

We protect everything! We buy insurance to protect our property from storms. Insurance is nothing but shared risk, where those who have a loss are helped by those who do not. We form neighborhood watch associations to protect our properties from theft. Again, neighbors share the burden of watching over their property. What one neighbor, through absence or neglect, fails to see, another may see and a loss is prevented.

Yet, with our children, we often leave everything to chance. We hope that our children do not try drugs. And, we particularly hope they do not use the drugs which we keep in our homes, the most common of which is alcohol. Yet, we don't organize the community or the neighborhood to keep watch when we are not home or when we are inattentive.

Television Advertisement

Have you seen it? Were you as shocked and alarmed as I was? A gathering of people is portrayed in this television ad. A boy of eight stands and says, "Hi, my name is David, in eight years, I will be an alcoholic. I will begin drinking at age 12 at school parties."

Seeing this advertisement has motivated me to renew a pledge which I have kept all of my life. In that there is no alcohol in my home, my pledge has to do with my commitment not to sit passively by while young people are destroyed by alcohol. I pledge that if I know of anyone – individual, organization, school, institution, parent or other person – who has or is illegally providing alcohol to those who are underage, I will report those people to the proper authorities and will press for their prosecution.

This pledge is not motivated by a desire for the renewal of the Volstead Act (1919-1933). No one wants a return to the Prohibition Era. Neither is this pledge motivated by a desire to impose my abhorrence of beverage alcohol upon others. It is a pledge however which is motivated by a desire to see the full weight of the law fall upon those who give alcohol to minors or who allow minors to drink illegally in their homes..

Texas Law on Underage Drinking

Sadly, Texas State law allows parents to provide alcohol for their own children, provided that the parent is physically and visibly present when the alcohol is being consumed by the minor. This means that the parent must be in the same room with the child while the child is drinking the alcohol. However, it is a crime for a parent to provide alcohol to a minor who is not his/her child or for whom he/she does not have legal guardianship. It is also a crime for a minor who is given alcohol to give that alcohol to another minor. Furthermore, it is a crime for the parent who provides alcohol “legally” to his/her own child knowingly to allow another minor to drink that alcohol, if the other child’s parent is not physically present. The penalty, while inadequate in my judgment is up to one year in jail and \$4,000 dollars.

Parents Who Host, Lose The Most

This is also the pledge of the “Parents Who Host, Lose the Most,” campaign in Dallas, Texas. The motivation for this program may come from the fact that Dallas has more alcohol-related traffic-accident deaths among teenagers than any other city in the nation. The Dallas program and community leaders are taking aim at parents who provide a keg, six-packs, or shots to underage drinkers

The program, also sponsored by the North Texas Police Chiefs Association, schools and community programs, warns that those who give minors alcohol – either voluntarily or through negligence -- will be punished. One Alliance member stated, “Too often parents look the other way when it comes to teen drinking, assuming it is a rite of passage. It is not unusual for well-meaning parents to provide alcohol to their teens’ friends at home parties.” Area police departments promise enforcement of the state’s “zero tolerance” police of providing alcohol to minors.

Facts about underage drinking

- Alcohol kills five times more Texas teens than all other drugs combined. Its use plays a substantial role in all three leading causes of death among youth — unintentional injuries (including motor vehicle fatalities and drowning), suicides, and homicides.
- Texas leads the nation in the rate of alcohol-related traffic deaths among 15 to 20-year-olds.
- **People who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to develop alcoholism than those who begin at 21. (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism)**
- **Young people who drink alcohol are 7.5 times more likely to use illicit drugs and 50 times more likely to use cocaine than young people who never drink alcohol. (The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University)**

- Alcohol use also impedes normal emotional growth during the critical teen years of development, and significantly lowers the learning capacity of developing adolescents, ages 12–20.
- Use of alcohol also is associated with most other drug uses, and is highly correlated with violence, fighting, negative attitudes, academic failure and poor health practices.
- Alcohol-using, sexually active teens are more likely to engage in high-risk behavior leading to unplanned pregnancies, HIV or STDs.
- Why do youth drink? Most say it's because drinking makes them "feel good." It helps them forget their problems. Nearly 50% in one survey said they get drunk because they have nothing better to do.
- Among Texas students, the average age for first drinking beer is 12.4, followed by 12.7 for wine coolers and 13.3 for liquor.
- When ask where they get the alcohol they drink 65% of youth surveyed in Dallas said that they got it from family and friends.
- 27% of seniors report binge drinking of beer and 22% report binge drinking of liquor. Binge drinking is defined as drinking five or more drinks at a time.
- Almost 16% of high school students reported driving after drinking and 40% reported riding with a drinking driver in the past months.
- About two-thirds of teenagers who drink report they can buy their own alcoholic beverages. (Department of Health and Human Services study)
- More than three out of every four students have had alcohol by the end of high school with almost half by the eighth grade. More than half of twelfth graders and a fifth of the eighth graders have been drunk at least once. (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2004 Monitoring the Future study)
- A clear relationship exists between alcohol use and grade point average (GPAs) among college students: Students with GPAs of D's or F's drink three times as much as those who earn A's. (South Illinois University survey)
- Alcohol use is the number one drug problem among young people. It's easy to understand why. For adults, alcohol is legal, widely accepted in American culture and easily accessible. Many kids can get a drink right in their own homes.

Things you can do as a parent:

- **Set a Good Example.** Your children are watching you! Be moderate in your own use of alcohol or abstain altogether, and avoid using alcohol as a way to relax or cope with problems. Don't drink under unsafe conditions such as while driving. Your child will not make safe decisions if you don't. A "do as I say, not as I do" attitude just won't cut it.
- **Lay down the ground rules.** It's your job to teach your child that alcohol is not an option. When parents "bargain" with kids, allowing them to drink as long as they promise not to drive, kids are actually more likely to drive after drinking or to be in a car with someone who has been drinking. Set reasonable but firm rules that you will enforce. Explain the facts about alcohol as well as your family's opinions. Make it clear that alcohol is not an option until your child is 21. And make the legal consequences and your family's rules and consequences known.
- **Listen to your children.** Pay attention to them and play an active role in their lives. Build their self-esteem and avoid constant criticism. Let them talk to you without interrupting them or taking issue with their point of view. Research shows that one of the best ways to prevent alcohol use and abuse is communication between parent and child.
- **Talk to your children.** Teach your children that actions have consequences at any age, and every choice matters. Talk to them about alcohol, and everything else! And start early. The teen-age years often bring strong feelings and emotions. Establish a strong foundation by beginning a dialogue in their pre-teen years.
- **Keep the lines of communication open.** One or two conversations about alcohol with your children is not enough. If you want them to come to you, you're going to have to get comfortable with difficult subjects. Encourage discussion on topics of concern to your teenager: alcohol, drugs, sex and the need for peer group acceptance.
- **Don't be naïve.** Watch for signs of abuse like dropping grades, switching friends, missing money, and withdrawal – to name just a few. If you sense a problem, seek help. It could save your child's life.
- **Refuse to supply alcohol to youth.**
- **Be at home when your teen has a party.** Make sure that alcohol is not brought into your home or on your property by your teen's friends.
- **Talk to other parents** about not providing alcohol at other events your child will be attending.
- **Create alcohol-free opportunities** and activities in your home so teens will feel welcome.
- **Report underage drinking by calling the anonymous, toll-free hotline at (888) 843-8322.**

Plan of Action

Beaumont needs to start a program like the Dallas program. Our City Council has taken visionary leadership in eliminating smoking in public places. The next step is for the parents of school age children to “take the pledge.” It is time for this city to say, “If you provide alcohol to my child you will go to jail.” It is time for Beaumont City Policy to establish and enforce a “zero tolerance” policy. It is time for parents to be held accountable when and if they provide alcohol illegally to minors.

Several schools in Beaumont, even parochial schools, have a reputation for ignoring the drinking problems which are created by school-sponsored or parent-sponsored social activities. This is not to say that the schools promote underage alcohol, but it is to say that if we do not actively oppose an illegal act, we tacitly approve of it.

Every Parent Teacher Association ought to encourage all of their parents to take the pledge. Every parent of a child in the fifth grade and up should never allow their child to attend a party, a social function, or be a guest in any home where the parent has not “taken the pledge.” If this happens, we will attend fewer funerals of our teens and we will see fewer lives destroyed by alcohol addiction.

Remember, it is your life and it is your health, but if you are the typical parent or grandparent, the health of your child or grandchild is more important than your own health. It is your child’s LIFE and HEALTH – Take The Pledge!!