

Drinking and driving: the leading cause of untimely death in adolescents

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Drinking and Driving: The Leading Cause of Untimely Death in Adolescents

The most horrifying event a parent can imagine is losing a child. Especially when it could have been avoided. According to David J. Hanson, " People aged sixteen to twenty-four were involved in twenty-eight percent of all alcohol related driving accidents, although they make up only fourteen percent of the population" (1). This statistic is shocking, but it should not be a surprise. A teenager in today's society is constantly pressured and bombarded by peers, parents, or advertising condoning the use alcohol. Drinking and driving among teenagers has become an epidemic and the staggering number of deceased is getting larger with each passing day. Teenagers often view themselves as invincible. They are often in denial when it comes to being too intoxicated to drive. " Intoxication implies a loss of motor control, judgment ability, and reduced inhibition that can easily occur in adolescents with the intake of even a relatively small amount of alcohol" (Holger et al. 1). Unfortunately, many make the decision to get behind the wheel of a car while intoxicated. As a result, " Driving under the influence has become the leading cause of death for young adults, aged fifteen to twenty-four years" (American Academy of Pediatrics 2). Although the number of teenagers who die in alcohol related accidents is painfully high, it is down dramatically from previous years. Hanson explains that, The proportion of American high school seniors who have ever consumed alcohol is down thirteen percent. The proportion of those who have consumed alcohol in the year prior to the survey is down fifteen percent. The proportion of those who have consumed alcohol in the thirty days prior to the survey is down twenty-seven percent. The proportion of those who have consumed

alcohol daily prior to the survey is down sixty-seven percent. And the proportion of those who have "binged" (consumed five or more drinks on an occasion) within the two weeks prior to the survey is down twenty-four percent. These statistics are encouraging. Hanson states that, "Deaths associated with young drinking drivers are down dramatically, having dropped forty-seven percent in a recent fifteen year period" (1). Great advancements have been made since 1984 and the statistics reflect a possible improvement in the war on adolescents who drive under the influence of alcohol. The reasons for alcohol abuse among teens are numerous. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that young people admit that the reason they drink is to escape problems. Other children say they drink in order to fit in with peers. Also, parents who are alcoholics or problem drinkers place their children at an increased risk of drug dependence (2). One would be foolish to expect a child to grow up surrounded by alcohol abuse and not be negatively affected. We live in a society where adolescents see alcohol use by friends, parents, actors, and seemingly everyone else with which they come in contact. Even the youngest of children are subjected to this onslaught of subliminal messaging. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, One out of three fourth graders believe that drinking is a "big problem" in their age group. About one out of seven fourth graders already have consumed alcohol to the point of intoxication. Four out of ten sixth graders say there is pressure from other students to drink alcohol. Three million children aged fourteen to seventeen are problem drinkers (1). By the time these fourth graders reach the driving age, it should be no surprise for them to have a drinking problem and

possibly drive under the influence of alcohol. Since children as young as fourth grade have problems with alcohol, certainly older children have the same problems. It is even probable that the symptoms of alcohol addiction worsen significantly as the years progress. In 1999, the New Zealand government lowered the drinking age from twenty-one to nineteen. As a result, there was an average increase of thirteen percent in alcohol related traffic crashes with injuries (" Lowering the Drinking Age" 1). A study by Robert B. Voas, PhD. found that, Lowering the drinking age causes a dramatic increase in alcohol-related car crashes among young people. The authors estimated that four hundred serious injuries and twelve deaths a year among fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds could be avoided in New Zealand by raising the drinking age. Road traffic crashes account for more than half of all fatalities and are second only to pregnancy as a cause of hospitalization for fifteen to nineteen year olds. Alcohol impairment is the largest contributing cause of serious traffic crashes in this age group. The evidence is significant for the United States, because drinking and driving patterns among young people are similar (1-3). This study seems to prove that strict regulations and enforcement of laws may be the answer to lowering the number of annual teenage deaths. Skeptics say that teenagers are simply not responsible enough to drive, sober or not. Anna Quindlen hypothesizes that teenagers would be dying at this rate, regardless of alcohol use. She states that sixteen year olds are too young to drive. She points out that most European countries have a driving age of eighteen (Quindlen 1-2). She argues, It's simple and inarguable: car crashes are the number one cause of death among fifteen- to twenty-year-olds in this

country. Parents seem to treat the right of a sixteen-year-old to drive as an inalienable one, something to be neither questioned nor abridged. In a survey of young drivers, only half said they had seen a peer drive after drinking. Nearly all, however, said they had witnessed speeding, which is the leading factor in fatal crashes by teenagers today. In 1984 a solution was devised for the problem of teenage auto accidents that lulled many parents into a false sense of security. The drinking age was raised from eighteen to twenty-one. It's become gospel that this saved thousands of lives, although no one actually knows if that's the case; fatalities fell, but the use of seatbelts and airbags may have as much to do with that as penalties for alcohol use (1-2). Her theory suggests that teenagers are going to be involved in car accidents regardless of factors like drinking and driving. Several attempts have been made at getting through to the youth in today's society. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends, Parents should set a good example at home by limiting their own use of alcohol. The conduct modeled at home sets the stage for a child's later actions. Never make light of getting drunk; make sure that your children understand that it is neither funny nor acceptable. Show your children that there are many ways to have fun without alcohol. Parents can further influence their children to say " no" in these ways: build your child's self-esteem, listen to what they say, offer advice about handling strong emotions, discuss topics of concern, and encourage enjoyable and worthwhile outside things to do (3). Holger Schmid recognizes: " education and preventative activity, such as the use of mass media campaigns; regulation of alcohol promotion, such as advertising restrictions for alcohol; and regulation of availability to youth, such as the

legal age limit for buying alcohol, including the rigor with which the law is enforced," as " preventative measures aimed at reducing alcohol consumption" (Holger et al. 2). Driving under the influence of alcohol is an epidemic that is killing the world's sons and daughters on a daily basis. Although much has been done to reduce the number of alcohol-related fatalities, a long way is still to go before any sense of legitimate security can be felt. Adolescents, alcohol, and driving do not mix. Teenagers cannot afford to ignore the facts any longer. Parents, teachers, and peers must come together if anything is to be done about this epidemic. If children are our future, the future is going to be without six thousand people for each year that passes, due to alcohol. Works Cited " Alcohol: your child and drugs." Pamphlet by: American Academy of Pediatrics. American Academy of Pediatrics, 1991. 1(4). Academic OneFile. Gale. Northeast State Technical Community Col. 28 Oct. 2007 . Hanson, David J. " Young Drivers and Alcohol." Alcohol Problems and Solutions. 28 Oct. 2007 . " Lowering the Drinking Age Increases Car Crashes Among Youth, Study Finds; Injuries, Deaths on the Rise After New Zealand Law Change." AScribe Health News Service (Nov 28, 2005): NA. Academic OneFile. Gale. Northeast State Technical Community Col. 28 Oct. 2007 . Quindlen, Anna. " Driving to The Funeral; If someone told you that there was one behavior most likely to lead to the premature death of your kid, wouldn't you do something about that?." Newsweek (June 11 2007) : 80. Academic OneFile. Gale. Northeast State Technical Community Col. 28 Oct. 2007 . Schmid, Holger, Tom Ter Bogt, Emanuelle Godeau, Anne Hublet, Sonia Ferreira Dias, and Anastasios Fotiou. " Drunkenness among young people: a cross-national comparison." Journal of

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