

## The Parent Trap

Statements Heard Around the Globe Regarding Alcohol and Other Drug Use in Teens

by Brenda Conlan

### **1. It's hypocritical of me to forbid my child to drink alcohol when he/she sees me enjoy a drink or two when I am socializing, eating or celebrating.**

If you are modeling moderate use of alcohol to your child, that's actually ideal. It is positive for kids to see adults approach alcohol as a beverage – something that compliments an event (a meal, party, or special occasion) with no visible personality changes or other consequences. Unfortunately, teens who drink tend to approach alcohol as a drug – they are likely drinking for the intoxicating effects only, and in doing so, incur great risk to their physical, social and emotional lives.

Teens don't stand around at a party enjoying the dry, crisp taste of a Chardonnay wine and eating a piece of cheese – they drink to feel different, relieve anxiety, “get their spark,” be close to their friends – sadly, what they “gain” from alcohol is only a loan and there is a good possibility that alcohol will have to be on board to re-capture those feelings in the future. This is how dependence sets in and it can be avoided by delaying the onset of alcohol use in young people.

As an adult, you are free to enjoy many activities that society has determined your adolescent is not prepared for – there is no need to justify social drinking, voting, driving a car, having sex or anything else you may do that our society feels adults can navigate safely and maturely. It really is okay for you to be the adult and your kid to be the kid!

### **2. It's unrealistic to believe my child will never drink in high school or at least try it with friends.**

It's important that we don't take on our teen's worldview in the matter of substance use – kids need adults to have a different perspective than their peers in order to feel like someone is in charge. Parents who see alcohol and other drug use as normal, understandable or inevitable will almost certainly have children who use – their own parents don't believe they can or should abstain. The “everybody's doing it” idea is simply not true.

Drinkers have more visibility and seem to get more microphone time, but solid research shows us that the majority of teens are making sound, healthy decisions regarding alcohol and other drugs, they are just not as loud about their lives! Experiencing “wild sobriety” every weekend is not a sexy story to tell at the cafeteria table. National Studies have proven that teens who receive a firm, loving non-use message at home are significantly less likely to engage in substance use of any kind. Parents who focus on the health and safety issues have more success, as this is rooted in love and concern, rather than judgment. All research points to parental involvement as being the single most important factor in an adolescent's relationship to alcohol. Drug free kids cite parental disappointment as the #1 reason for their choice not to use.

Our goal is not to make sure that our child never drinks in their lifetime; we are hoping to postpone drinking as long as possible. When people have acquired a complete set of cognitive, social and coping skills, they will be ready to approach alcohol reasonably as an adult.

### **3. Since teens are going to drink no matter what we say, we might as well have them drink at our homes where we can keep an eye on them and take the car keys away.**

Yikes! This is not only a myth, but indeed a very dangerous belief system. Taking care of the external physical landscape does not make the internal landscape of a vulnerable adolescent safe. Teens drinking in your home could be on medications you are unaware of that will interact negatively with alcohol. They may come from homes where there is a history of alcoholism and addiction and be particularly at risk – they may cross the line from weekend binge drinker to alcoholic in your basement that night.

There are many other behaviors that don't involve driving that could result in alcohol related injury or even death. Keeping an eye on a bunch of drunk kids is a daunting task – the likelihood of unsafe sexual activity and violence amongst the teens increases dramatically when alcohol is present. Lastly, a friendly reminder – it's against the law and the liability issues are profound.

#### **4. Thank goodness my teen is only drinking and not doing drugs.**

Alcohol is a powerful central nervous depressant and one of the most potent drugs available. Let's not forget that alcohol (beer, actually) causes more teen deaths than all illegal drugs combined. Alcohol is especially confusing to teens, as they understand that it can be used safely by adults and don't see why it is regulated in such a way that they are not allowed to purchase or use it – many teens (and adults) will claim that it is this "forbidden fruit" aspect that makes drinking so attractive. This may partially explain alcohol's allure the first time a teen drinks, but kids with established drinking patterns are long past this initial reason and have settled into a relationship with alcohol. Lowering or eliminating the drinking age would only turn the forbidden fruit into low hanging fruit that's easy to pick! Reducing access to alcohol reduces use and creates a safer environment for everybody.

#### **5. If we were like the Europeans and introduced alcohol at a young age, kids would see it as no big deal and drink moderately.**

This is an intriguing idea and people like the sound of it. The reality is that Europe has plenty of problems with alcohol. I lived in Germany for 4 years and I have taught at schools in Belgium, Norway and Portugal. The teen drinking in these environments was the most intense I have ever seen in my career of over 10 years. Roughly 25% of American teens identify themselves as binge drinkers, whereas 60% of northern European teens reported being intoxicated in the last 30 days. European surveys of teens in several countries show that European teens are more likely to drink than American teens, experience more problems as a result of drinking and develop alcoholism at a greater rate than we do.

There is also a hazard in trying to take one sliver of another country's social behavior and implementing it in the United States. Arranged marriage is successful in countries where there is a social or religious context for it, but it would fail in this country, as we have no structure or support system for that kind of relationship. It's true that European teens don't lose their lives drinking the way our teens do. There are some built-in safety nets in European society that make the landscape safer: European teens don't drive, they don't drink in secret afraid to call for help if someone is ill and they stay closer to home drinking in clubs, cafes and restaurants where adults will intervene if necessary.

#### **6. Teens need to practice drinking in high school so they can learn their limits early and don't go wild in college.**

Heavy drinking in high school increases limits (tolerance) in a dangerous way and can prevent teens from developing the very skills necessary for an emotionally healthy adult life. High school students need to practice living, not drinking, in order to be ready for college. Young people who are "prepared" for college life have mastered the crucial tasks of adolescence – they are able to deal with disappointment, boredom and joy. They know how to regulate their moods and manage their feelings without alcohol – this is how they gain the maturity to drink alcohol safely.

Again, many college students are making low risk choices around alcohol, but nobody is writing articles or showing newscasts about them. Studies have shown us that the students who fall apart drinking in college are the ones who brought a drinking problem with them from high school. When the fences that kept them somewhat under control in high school fall away and they are free to drink they way they always dreamed of ... that's when disaster strikes. Binge drinking doesn't really begin on college campuses, it's continued in a more reckless way. I believe that the many students I meet who are making good decisions in high school continue to make good decisions in college – even if they dabble in alcohol, it is not going to make or break them, as they are already fairly complete when they arrive.

### **7. My son/daughter is a good kid – I trust him/her to do the right thing when away from the family.**

Uh, oh! Don't fall into the trust trap. Being a good person does not mean you will make perfect decisions at every moment of your life. Your three year old daughter knows she is supposed to look both ways when she crosses the street – you've explained it to her many times. When the time comes to actually cross the street, you take the child's hand – you know your three year old could forget or get distracted and walk in front of a car. You also don't trust drivers to be careful and stop in time ... part of it is that your child might not have the skills necessary to take this step alone AND you don't trust the environment to look out for your child. If only parents of teens could stay this vigilant as the child reaches middle and high school and spends more time away from home.

Most plans your teen proposes on a Friday night will have to be checked out and modified so that you can be comfortable when your child walks out the door – your child will not thank you for calling ahead to the party or saying no to a loony plan. Be prepared for some tense moments with your teen when you pull rank and do what you feel is necessary to protect your child. This is when you need to say, "honey, I don't trust the situation you would like to enter tonight – I know situations have a way of growing bigger than the people in them and it's my job to keep you safe – sorry, you are going to miss this party."

Love and trust are not the same thing – love is always there, trust comes later when competence has been demonstrated in all major areas of life – when your child is in their mid thirties ...

### **8. I feel like I'm the only parent who is strict and my child is suffering socially as a result.**

Drinking and other drug use will hurt your child socially in a much more lasting way. Congratulations to you for rolling up your sleeves and digging into this incredibly difficult job of parenting. You are not alone, I meet parents at every school I visit who are doing everything they can to raise healthy, substance free kids. It's inconvenient and disheartening to battle over rules with your teen. Hopefully, your negotiations are done in a caring, compassionate framework and your teen understands and shares your concern for their well-being.

I've met thousands of teens and most of them are just fine. They need our help thinking about these issues and they are looking for approachable adults who handle the issue of substance abuse with clarity and sensitivity. Network with other parents and find out who has similar views to you on substance use and see what you can do to positively affect teen life in your community.

### **9. If I used alcohol or other drugs as a teen, I guess I'll have to lie about it to my child or else it will give them permission to do the same thing.**

I saved the best for last! This one is tough – I've been thinking about it for over a decade. I don't think you have to lie – if your child asks you about your own life, they are looking for the ultimate outcome, not the gory details ... I think it can be a fruitful conversation to let them know that you struggled, too and explain to them why you don't use now (I'm assuming that's the case!). That is the most important message you can give them – I would say as little as possible about the details of your escapades and stick to the discomforts and consequences. On the same token, if you were a non-user in high school, this can be very powerful, as well – tell your child about the joys and challenges of non-use and how you came to that decision. I think the truth is in order – kids can sniff out a lie or sense you ducking the question anyway.

#### **About the Author** (from [www.brendaconlan.com](http://www.brendaconlan.com))

"Brenda Conlan has been an Alcohol and Other Drug Educator since 1994. Students, parents and faculty in over 100 schools throughout the world have enjoyed her lively, honest presentation style and her colorful personality. ... A 1989 graduate of UMASS Amherst, Brenda taught languages in Germany before she began her training in the field of drug prevention. Brenda's truthful account of her own adolescence, which was derailed by early addiction to drugs, gives her a magic credibility in her student seminars."