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# Parents have power to prevent teen binge drinking

Jacoba Urist, TODAY Contributor

Jan. 11, 2013 at 8:04 AM ET

Parents of teen girls got alarming news from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention this week in a new report that showed that 1 in 3 high school girls reports drinking alcohol, 1 in 5 reports binge drinking, and 27 percent of high school senior girls say they've indulged in bingeing behavior.

However, amid all the somber statistics there's some good news, especially for parents who want to protect their teens from the hazards of excessive alcohol consumption. Experts say that parents play a pivotal role in controlling teen binge drinking, and they can do a lot to prevent teens from engaging in this risky behavior.

Binge drinking is defined as having four or more drinks during a two- to three-hour period. It's a problem for all teens, but especially for girls because they process alcohol differently from males, and they tend to be smaller than the boys. Female drinkers are more susceptible to both the long- and short-term effects of bingeing -- problems like heart and liver disease, cancer, and stroke risk, as well as unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. According to the CDC, binge drinking causes more than half of the estimated 23,000 excessive alcohol-related fatalities among women and girls in the US every year.

David Jernigan, director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, believes the key to reducing youth binge drinking is to inoculate kids against alcohol advertising. He explains that the more kids are exposed to alcohol marketing, the more they drink and the younger they start experimenting with substance abuse.

"The federal government says we need to talk to our kids about drinking," explains Jernigan, "But I say we need to talk to our kids about alcohol marketing too."

He recommends actively engaging teens about alcohol advertisements in magazines and on billboards, and about the drinking they see on their favorite TV shows or in the movies geared specifically towards high schoolers, as soon as the child is ready to absorb the information.

"When you see an ad or a scene on TV, glamorizing teenagers partying, talk about the things they never show you," advises Jernigan. "Like a car crash or how heavy drinking literally makes you stupider, how the teenage brain is really plastic and still developing until you're twenty-one."

And it's critical to start talking about binge drinking and ad campaigns early. Jernigan recommends beginning the conversation about excessive drinking and alcohol marketing, sometime in a child's tween years, but definitely, he says, by age 12. He warns parents that it's equally important to sustain the dialogue even after your kid "disappears," spending more and more time in their room or with their friends, or at school activities.



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When Jernigan's own children were teenagers, he made it a point to drive them to school for example, and to spend a two- or three-hour block of time, as often as possible, "in their world, on their terms."

"Parents shouldn't underestimate the power of car time," he says. "It's a great opportunity to keep the conversation with adolescents going about drinking, and the marketing they're seeing around them every day."

According to Jernigan, in the late 1990's, liquor companies found that females were "under-performing as alcohol consumers," and developed a set of products to market directly to women. Today, with shelves of flavored vodkas and lower-calorie cocktails, alcohol manufacturers are pursuing young women and teenage girls, and it's important to discuss that honestly with girls through high school.

Parents need to pay attention to their own alcohol consumption too, and remember that moderation is the key.

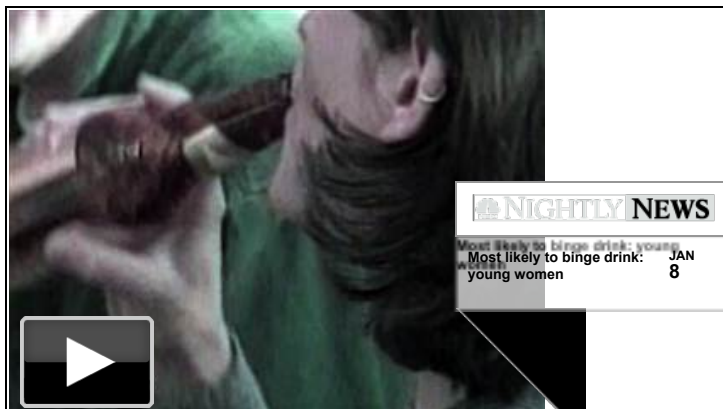
"Teens model their parents' binge behavior," says Dafna Kanny, a senior scientist with the CDC's Alcohol Program and lead author of Tuesday's binge drinking study. Kanny says the recent report emphasizes the relationship between youth and adult drinking. As the mother of a daughter who's a senior in high school, and a 14-year old son, Kanny says her findings really hit home.

Kanny reminds parents that U.S. dietary guidelines recommend up to one drink a day for adult women, and up to two drinks a day for men.

But if your teen sees you coming home and knocking back three or four cocktails to "unwind," or sees you on the weekend intoxicated after a dinner out with your friends— they'll get the message loud and clear: that binge drinking is a normalized behavior.

Kids also tend to obtain their alcohol from adults in the household, Kanny warns. In many cases, parents play a role in providing the liquor that results in underage and binge drinking, and so it's crucial to keep an eye on the alcohol in your home and to be vigilant if you suspect that your teen is using it.

Remember though, Jernigan tells parents, there is a silver lining to the CDC findings. If 1 in 5 teen girls is binge drinking, it means that 4 out of 5 aren't. While it's imperative to raise awareness about this public health problem, that's also really great news. We can talk to our kids, and we can still wield quite a bit of influence over their behavior.



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Video: Binge drinking, defined as having four or more drinks on one occasion, is becoming a potentially dangerous and often overlooked health problem for women. NBC's Rehema Ellis

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