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‘Tis the Season

Allowing Holiday Drinking by Teens Sets Dangerous Precedent

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed., Chairman/CEO of SADD

Dancing and prancing through Jingle Bell Square, more than a few seasonal revelers mistake alcohol consumption for holiday celebration – teens included. Following the lead of influential adults, many young people are tempted, even encouraged, to finish up the old and ring in the new by, well, downing a few.

According to a new *Teens Today* study from SADD and Liberty Mutual Group, nearly half of high school teens (45 percent) say their parents allow them to drink at home, including almost one in three who say they are allowed to do so to mark special occasions, such as holidays.

Where’s the harm in that? Let’s make a list:

- The younger a child is when he starts to drink, the higher the chances he will have alcohol-related problems later in life.
- Alcohol use by teens affects still-developing cognitive abilities and impairs memory and learning.
- Teens who drink are more likely to commit or be the victim of violence (including sexual assault) and to experience stress, depression, and suicidal thoughts.

So, why the inaction on the part of otherwise caring adults? Among the likely reasons is a longstanding myth that allowing teens to drink at home will make it less likely they will drink elsewhere.

It is also widely believed that “teaching teens to drink responsibly” to celebrate a holiday or other important event will demystify alcohol and lead to more thoughtful, less destructive behavior.

Wishful thinking, through and through.

In truth, teens who are allowed to drink alcohol at home are significantly more likely to drink with their friends. “Even if only on special occasions?” asked an incredulous mother during a recent presentation of the new research results. Yes, even if only on special occasions.

Here’s what the data say:

- Among high school teens, those who tend to avoid alcohol are more than twice as likely than those who repeatedly use alcohol to say their parents never let them drink at home (84 percent vs. 40 percent).
- More than half (57 percent) of high school teens who report their parents allow them to drink at home, even once in a while, say they drink with their friends, as compared to just 14 percent of teens who say their parents don't let them drink.

This carry-over effect can be explained by a simple tendency to bring attitudes in line with behaviors so as to reduce the psychological discomfort caused by conflicting information: *It's okay to drink with my friends since I drink at home!* Also common among teens is seeing things in black and white, particularly when it comes to justifying personal behavior: *If adults drink to celebrate the holidays, why shouldn't I?*

Rationalizing or not, young people use alcohol more frequently, and more heavily, than all other drugs combined. *Teens Today* research reveals that drinking increases significantly between the sixth and seventh grades; that the average age for teens to start drinking is 13 years old; and that by 12th grade, more than four in five teens are drinking.

That constitutes an epidemic – one likely only to grow during this celebratory season.

The silver lining in this holiday cloud can be found in widespread agreement among teens that their parents are significant forces when it comes to decisions about alcohol. According to *Teens Today*, almost seven in ten high school teens (66 percent) rate mom and dad as most influential in their decisions not to drink.

But influence cuts two ways. By allowing underage drinking during the holidays, adults deprive teens of the unambiguous, common sense guidelines they need to make good choices all year long.

It is clear that parents who talk with their teens about underage drinking, set expectations for behavior, and enforce consequences for violating the rules are significantly less likely to have children who use alcohol.

But there are other important reasons many teens say they choose not to drink, including deference to the law, chance of injury to themselves or others, loss of control, impact on academic and/or athletic performance, setting an example for siblings, and fitting in with friends who don't drink. Each of these is fodder for important parent-teen dialogue – both during the holidays and into the New Year – about the appropriate role of alcohol in society and the dangers it poses to young lives.

After all, 'tis the season.

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