A Proposal to Promote Effective Parenting Against Underage Alcohol Abuse

Underage drinking is perhaps the single greatest, yet misunderstood societal problem in the United States. Several ill-fated attempts at resolving the crisis through controlling the industry and educating children have demonstrated the need for a different approach. Past efforts have not been effective because they have not been directed at a major source of the problem. Targeting children is analogous to attempting to extinguish a fire by spraying through the flames instead of aiming at its base. It is the parents of the nation’s youth that can have the greatest impact on the problem of underage drinking. Households represent the most basic unit of society. It follows that the best way to reform society as whole is to reform its constituent parts: the families.

In a very real way, parents form society’s standards; they are the ones who impress upon children moral values and a conception of right and wrong. The majority of parents fail to understand how to effectively protect their children against the pressure to drink. Although a successful course of action necessarily requires the commitment and action of government, businesses, schools, and peer groups, parental involvement in the assault on underage drinking remains paramount. A successful national program to combat underage drinking must include a mandatory educational seminar for parents that emphasizes effectual communication and parenting skills.

“Alcohol almost destroyed my life. I started out drinking with my friends, trying to be cool. I drank to get drunk . . . and I did some stupid things while I was drunk. Now I’m trying to get my life back, and it’s not easy with a baby.”
-Amy, Colorado
The Negative Impact of Underage Drinking on Society

The behavioral and health related consequences of underage drinking cannot be exaggerated. In addition to the well-known physiological damage, alcohol use causes serious mental side effects among teens. Because the human brain continues to develop until midtwenties, alcohol use is especially dangerous for youth as it interferes with cognitive development to a much greater extent than it does in adults. Alcohol use has been shown to have a negative effect on the areas in the brain that are primarily used for planning, decisionmaking, impulse control, voluntary movement, memory, speech and more (White 39). Measurable consequences of these mental effects are far-reaching. It is proven that alcohol and its impairment of an adolescent’s mind and body has strong connections to violence, unhealthy sexual activity, and psychological disorders.

Violence

In the past, drunk driving has been the target of numerous laws and campaigns. The impairment of cognitive processes and reaction times create a higher risk for intoxicated adolescents behind the wheel. Accidents not only happen more often as the result of intoxication but the crashes are far more likely to result in death or serious injury. Recent studies have shown that 37 percent of youth traffic fatalities are linked to alcohol (National 61). Alcohol is involved in over a third of the homicides regarding people under 21, and it is the second-leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year olds. (National 62). A strong causal relationship also exists between alcohol and homicide and suicide levels. “Individuals under the age of 21 commit 45 percent of rapes, 44 percent of robberies and 37 percent of other assaults” (National 62). Of these crimes, about half are alcohol-related.

Sexual Activity

A recent survey concluded that 12% of teens age 15 to 17 reported having unprotected sex as a result of having been drinking or using drugs. In addition, 29% reported that because of their substance use, they had “done more” sexually then they had planned. Adolescents that consume alcohol are at a higher risk for unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. The relationship between sexual activity and alcohol is shown in Figure 1 (previous page). Teens often realize that alcohol has these effects but decide to drink anyway (Dangerous par 7). The home is failing to teach youth discipline and self-control.

Psychological Effects

Alcohol, though often used to deal with stress, appears to be a devastating cause of stress among teens. Intoxicated teens fail to recognize the consequences of their actions resulting in many of the impulsive crimes that teenagers commit. Figure 2 shows that alcohol use is a much more accepted practice among teens than other drugs, demonstrating their lack of understanding the consequences. Among 8th grade girls who drink heavily, 37% report attempting suicide. Teens ages 12 to 16 who are currently drinkers are four times more likely than their non-drinking peers to suffer depression. Thirty-one percent exhibit extreme levels of psychological distress and 39% exhibit serious behavioral problems such as self-mutilation (Children’s par 6).
Drinking on College Campuses

The problems of underage drinking extend to our nation’s colleges. Many expulsions or withdrawals can be tied to alcohol use, to say nothing of alcohol’s negative academic impact. Figure 3 shows the connection between alcohol use and its association with campus problems. It has been reported that “the nation’s 12 million undergraduates polish off some 4 billion cans of beer a year, averaging 55 six-packs apiece and forking over $446 on alcohol—more than they spend on textbooks and soft drinks” (Scrivo par 3). A study by the NIAAA Task Force on College Drinking revealed “drinking by college students age 18-24 contributes to an estimated 1,400 student deaths, 500,000 injuries, and 70,000 cases of sexual assault or date rape each year” (College par 1). 95 percent of violent crime and 90 percent of college rapes are alcohol-related (National 62).

All of these societal sub problems are the offspring of underage drinking. By controlling underage drinking, many of the problems previously discussed would also be addressed. Though underage drinking’s origin is complex, the most significant cause is that many parents do not teach their children by example not to drink nor do they systematically discipline, correct, or help them to quit or control their drinking habits (Tyler et al 35). Parents tend to underestimate their child thus providing them with opportunities to drink by allowing them to attend unsupervised parties and come home at later hours (Haynie 403). It is essential that parents be educated on how to be better role models and how to discuss hard topics with their children.

Previously tried solutions: What works?

Studies of alcohol prevention programs have shown what components are successful in preventing underage drinking. In the current condition, the millions of dollars that are spent on underage alcohol abuse prevention are not appropriated evenly or used most effectively. Precious funds from the government and advocacy groups should be streamlined into a single, coherent program known to have an effect in the real world. Examining programs that have demonstrated a positive effect is essential when developing a new, improved program.

The overall goal of an education policy is to shape social and cultural norms about drinking (Lang 122). Acceptance among their peers is a major desire of teenagers. “During adolescence, it is common for youth who engage in inappropriate drinking behaviors to grossly overestimate the prevalence and acceptability of alcohol use among peers” (National 198). To combat the skewed views of society’s youth, parents must teach their children about the reality of alcohol. A common element of all successful programs is consistent interaction with parents (Williams 115). Though the school system can supplement information taught in the home, it cannot replace it. The message children receive in the home should emphasize that there is never any reason for drinking to be expected or needed (Lang 124).

Successful programs have commonalities that suggest reasons for their achievements. Some common elements in each program include starting in early adolescence, using interactive exercises, and involving the family and community. It has been shown in numerous studies that using so-called “scare” tactics—exaggerated or one-sided graphic or factual messages—is ineffective (Lang 123). The following projects have successfully incorporated family, school, and community components into a comprehensive strategy to reduce alcohol use among adolescents:
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Emphasis</th>
<th>Results</th>
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| Project Northland (PN)              | • Parent-child communication  
• Peer influences  
• Community Response Strategies (SAMSHA: PN par 2) | • After three years, monthly drinking was 20% lower and weekly drinking was 30% lower (Project par 4).  
• Regarded as one of the nation’s most highly effective programs (National 198). |
| Multisystematic Therapy (MST)       | • Helping youth by helping families (SAMSHA: MST par 5)  
• Personal Growth Skills  
• Family Enhancement Skills  
• Interpersonal Communication Skills (SAMHSA: CLFC par 1) | • Decrease in adolescent substance use and psychiatric symptoms (SAMHSA: MST sidebar) |
| Creating Lasting Family Connections (CLFC) | • Personal Growth Skills  
• Family Enhancement Skills  
• Interpersonal Communication Skills (SAMHSA: CLFC par 1) | • Delayed onset and decreased use of alcohol and drugs (SAMHSA: CLFC sidebar). |
| Life-Skills Training (LST)          | • Drug Resistance Skills  
• Personal Self-Management Skills  
• General Social Skills (SAMHSA: LST par 3) | • Alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use cut 50 to 75 percent.  
• Multiple drug use decreased up to 66 percent. (SAMHSA: LST sidebar). |
| Start Taking Alcohol Risks Seriously (STARS) for families | • Applies media-related, interpersonal, and environmental prevention strategies to each child’s specific stages of alcohol initiation (SAMHSA: STARS par 1) | • Youth participating are 3.6 times less likely to use alcohol in the next six months, and 3 times less likely to drink overall (SAMHSA: STARS sidebar). |

With these components in mind, a new approach to resolving the problem of underage drinking must be developed.

**Proposed Program**

Just as immunization against diseases is required, preventative measures to counter the widespread disease of underage alcohol abuse should be mandated. To help parents recognize the responsibility they have as the primary guardians against underage alcohol abuse, one parent of every child will be required to attend a seminar held at the school before the child may enter the public school system. By starting early with their children and continually reinforcing healthy habits in the home, parents can create an unbreakable resolve against premature alcohol consumption. The emphasis of the program will be the following five parenting skills as outlined by the American Academy of Pediatrics:

1. Setting a good example
2. Listening to one’s children (watching for risk signs)
3. Offering advice
4. Keeping the lines of communication open
5. Encouraging enjoyable and worthwhile outside activities

(Underage par 10)

As parents are taught, understand, and apply these principles, youth will be fortified against outside pressures to drink. Skillful parenting *is* an attainable reality.

Alcohol awareness will be a key topic in the seminar so that parents will grasp the severity of the problem. The program should emphasize the parents’ responsibility in educating their children. Key topics must
include how to talk to children about alcohol and how to effectively answer the questions they raise—while the children are young and on through high school years.

Following the initial seminar before Kindergarten, additional mandatory seminars for the parents must be held at the beginning of every other school year, beginning in third grade, that continue to address the new concerns of that age group. Knowledgeable and talented speakers must be brought into the seminars to make the concepts interesting and valuable to the parents. Multimedia must also be incorporated to allow the presentation to be both appealing and educationally enriching. Online forums and discussion boards will be promoted and maintained so that parents can find answers to questions that arise. Several such sites exist, but are not publicized and lack the endorsement of the community.

For the first two years (kindergarten and third grade) the parents will participate without their children. Starting in fifth grade, the students should accompany their parents to the seminar. At this stage, the pressure to drink will have become very real. The average age that a child first drinks alcohol is age 11 for boys and 13 for girls (Underage par 1). Interactive exercises will be incorporated into the seminar, allowing parents and their students to discuss issues and facilitate communication.

Proposed Solution as Part of a Comprehensive Effort

The magnitude of the problem of underage drinking requires a comprehensive effort. The proposed program is only one small, but important part of a larger endeavor. “Experts have described three basic categories of prevention efforts, each focusing on a particular method for reducing drinking problems:

1. Distribution policies, designed to influence drinking policies indirectly by controlling rates of per capita consumption;
2. Education and enforcement policies, which attempt to shape acceptable drinking practices mainly by calling attention to inappropriate or unsafe practices; and
3. Environmental safety policies, which seek to make the world safer for alcohol-impaired persons and those around them” (Lang 117).

The proposed parental education program describes only one aspect of an education policy; it would be supplemented by a series of interactive in-class exercises, such as role-playing situations, that address:

- Decision-making skills
- Self-control
- Effects of alcohol
- Refusal Strategies
- Responsibility
- Peer Pressure
- Communication skills
- Coping with alcohol
- Life goals and plans
- Myths of alcohol use
- Respect for others

Instruction and role-playing or assertive skills that build self confidence have been a part of successful education programs for the adolescents themselves (Lang 123). The risk of having the students “tune out” their regular teacher during the program is very much an issue; the “Say ‘no’ to drugs” speech has become redundant and meaningless. The fiscal possibility of having professional motivational speakers to teach this curriculum to the students should be examined. To enhance the efficacy of classroom instruction, high school students who have been impacted by alcohol abuse will be invited to share their experiences and insights. Real-life situations that vividly depict the negative consequences of alcohol will be far more effective than factoids and statistics. The parental education seminar should be coordinated with the school-based program to promote further discussion and follow-up in the home.

Other tools outside of an educational policy must be employed including youth-directed media campaigns, alcohol excise taxes, the monitoring of the industry’s advertisement, and enforcement of underage drinking laws and alcohol permits. Prevention effects are maximized when school, family and community-based interventions are used in concert and in a mutually supporting manner (National 197).

Financial Implementation Strategy

The Institute of Medicine suggests creating a federal interagency to coordinate efforts to combat the plague of underage drinking (National 237). This body would head the proposed national parental education program. It would be responsible for implementing and evaluating the results of the program.
Resources to support the proposed program would come from government civic improvement funds. While some may see it as a tax burden, it is estimated to cost society between $1.7 and $2.3 million dollars per student that leaves high school for a life of crime and substance abuse (Snyder 82). The US government spent $71.1 million in 2001 through the Departments of Justice, Health and Human Services, and Transportation focusing on alcohol and youth (National 235). These funds are directed at a score of different programs, not all of which have been proven effective. If funds toward educational policies are streamlined into one program instead of the current disarray, the money has more of a chance to be effective in producing measurable results in society.

The cost-effectiveness of raising alcohol excise taxes should be examined as a proposed financial source for funding the proposed program. "Alcohol prices should reflect the full social cost of production and consumption" (National 243). This cost, which includes an excise tax, should reflect not only the cost to produce the alcohol but also the costs inflicted by drinkers on society (National 243). Not only would the tax increase funds to support anti-alcohol campaigns, but yet another incentive would be created for youth to consume less alcohol (National 244). Figure 4 indicates the historical decline in excise taxes. Because the costs of drinking to society have only increased historically, excise taxes ought to be raised to match this cost. (NOT AVAILABLE)

**Weaknesses, Concerns, and Opposition**

**Families and employment**

Many cases exist in today’s society that present challenges to the implementation of the proposed program. Any mandated program is sure to draw fire from civil liberty advocates. It must be shown that results of this program will far outweigh any periodic inconvenience. For some, the burden of a few hours every other year is real. For companies that demand workers, and families that literally live paycheck-to-paycheck, this sacrifice may seem implausible. The overall goal must be kept in mind as a driving force to combat these minuscule problems. Employers will be required to allow time for working parents to attend this meeting. Tax deductions for companies that comply should be examined. Action must also be taken to ensure that foster care families, immigrant families, single-parent families and even families in which the child is home-schooled, are reached with this important message. A thorough analysis of these complications should be conducted as not all the implications can be discussed here.

**Enforcement**

A policy of this magnitude will be difficult to enforce. Even so, no child should be held out of school or put at risk for alcohol abuse because of parental neglect or apathy. In accordance with President Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” campaign, this program must be strictly enforced. The penalty for parents who are absent from the seminars (held multiple nights to allow some flexibility) will be a moderate fine. The parents will also be required to complete the course at a later date at their own expense. Technology will facilitate attendance tracking. Though this may seem an unwarranted intrusion into the lives of the citizens, it is only one night every other year.

**Conclusion**

If a national effort to combat underage drinking is to be successful, a mandatory educational seminar for parents must be included as part of that effort. This seminar would educate parents on effectual communication and parenting skills that would promote instruction of youth regarding the negative effects of alcohol. With the organization and funding of a national interagency, it will be possible to place funds where they will be needed.
The effectiveness of this program depends on strong enforcement and a willingness to accept some minor inconveniences. The dividends of solving this problem will far outweigh initial expenses. It must be kept in mind, however, that it will take time for results to be seen. At least one generation will need to move through the program before the effects will be seen. The children that complete the program will then be in a position to train their children and thus perpetuate skillful parenting for generations to come. Never before has underage drinking been such a concern in the history of the nation. If this problem is left to current trends, alcoholism may become a significant factor in the disintegration of society. Taking appropriate steps now will establish a healthy community for future generations.

Works Cited


