



The inaugural launch of the Office of Drug Strategy’s e-mail notification distribution system known as “ODS + ENDS” received an enormous amount of positive feedback last month. Many parents, educators, and community members specifically asked for additional tips and information on preventing underage alcohol use. To promote April as Alcohol Awareness Month, we have answered the call.

### **Alcohol and the Developing Brain**

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General. (2007). [The Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking: A Guide for Families](#) (PDF 889KB).

Alcohol can cause alterations in the structure and function of the developing brain, which continues to mature into a person’s mid 20s, and it may have consequences reaching far beyond adolescence. In adolescence, brain development is characterized by dramatic changes to the brain’s structure, neuron connectivity (i.e., “wiring”), and physiology. These changes in the brain affect everything from emerging sexuality to emotionality and judgment. Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant. Alcohol can appear to be a stimulant because, initially, it depresses the part of the brain that controls inhibitions.

Not all parts of the adolescent brain mature at the same time, which may put an adolescent at a disadvantage in certain situations. For example, the limbic areas of the brain mature earlier than the frontal lobes. The limbic areas regulate emotions and are associated with an adolescent’s lowered sensitivity to risk. The frontal lobes are responsible for self-regulation, judgment, reasoning, problem-solving, and impulse control. Differences in maturation among parts of the brain can result in impulsive decisions or actions and a disregard for consequences.

### **Additional Tips on What You Can Do To Help Prevent Underage Alcohol Use**

#### **Be aware of factors that may increase the *risk* of teen alcohol use.**

- Significant social transitions such as graduating to middle or high school or getting a driver’s license
- A history of conduct problems
- Depression and other serious emotional problems
- A family history of alcoholism
- Contact with peers involved in deviant activities

#### **Be a positive adult *role model*.**

- If you drink yourself, drink responsibly. That means not drinking too much or too often.
- Stay away from alcohol in high-risk situations. For example, don’t drive or go boating when you’ve been drinking.

- Get help if you think you have an alcohol-related problem.
- Do not give alcohol to your teens. Tell them that any alcohol in your home is off limits to them and to their friends.

**Support your children and teens and give them space to grow.**

- Be involved in your teens' lives and make it easy for your teens to share information about their lives.
- Know where your teens are, what they're doing, who they're with, and who their friends are.
- Find ways for your teens to be involved in family life, such as by doing chores or caring for a younger brother or sister.
- Set clear rules, including rules about alcohol use. Enforce the rules you set.
- Help your teens find ways to have fun without alcohol.
- Don't let your teens attend parties where alcohol is served. Make sure alcohol isn't available at teen parties in your own home.
- Help your teens get professional help if you're worried about their involvement with alcohol.

**Need additional help?**

For several years the Partnership for a Drug Free America Alliance has offered Denver access to research-based national public education resources that motivate and equip parents and adults with the conversational tools needed to prevent children from using drugs and alcohol. The new PDFFA "**Time to Act**" (<http://timetoact.drugfree.org/>) resource offers additional tools for parents, adults, and even youth to find help and treatment for family and friends who are already experimenting with or using drugs and alcohol. Time to Act is a multi-layered approach to meet parents and adults where they are at to address their concerns, connect them with the resources we have around the nation and here in Denver, and utilize the expertise and support of families who have confronted substance abuse in their own lives. We are excited to add this valuable tool to our existing resources to better serve families in Denver.

The **Too Smart To Start** Web site helps youth, families, educators, and communities prevent underage alcohol use and its related problems. It provides useful programs and strategies, downloadable materials, interactive games and exercises, and other resources to support you in responding to *The Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking*. <http://www.toosmartostart.samhsa.gov/>

April is **Alcohol Awareness Month!** <http://ncadi.samhsa.gov/seasonal/aprilalcohol/>