

# What If ...?

## Combating Complacency Is Key to Keeping Kids Safe During the Summer Season

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By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.

Another senseless prom night tragedy left a Massachusetts woman dead and an eighteen-year-old high school senior behind bars, perhaps for a very long time. According to the police report, the male student admitted to drinking ten beers between the 4:30 a.m. conclusion of the school-sponsored event and the 7:30 a.m. car crash.

Sadly, we've heard it all before.

The good news is that some things *have* changed. Almost systematically, more progressive schools have ramped up education and enforcement efforts, instituting everything from awareness assemblies to Breathalyzer exams, fortunately focusing not just on prom but, necessarily, on all types of school events and activities. Though educators can do only so much.

That's where the bad news comes in.

Across the land there is a concerning complacency among many adults, including – strikingly – parents of teens themselves. Indeed, many communities have a not-so-subtle culture of ignoring, accepting, or even facilitating underage drinking, leaving parents divided, school officials exasperated, and kids at risk.

And, incredibly, these include communities where alcohol-related teen tragedies have recently taken place.

Underlying the malaise are three myths that perpetuate the epidemic that is underage drinking. As we approach the dangerous summer season, perhaps it's a good time to once again clear out the underbrush that tangles and chokes prevention efforts nationwide.

### 1. The Myth of Improbability

**Myth:** Other kids may be drinking alcohol, but mine isn't.

**Fact:** Compared to what their parents say about them, high school students are eight times more likely to say they use alcohol.

Or, conversely ...

### 2. The Myth of Inevitability

**Myth:** Kids are going to drink no matter what (more than half of parents believe this, according to SADD's *Teens Today* research).

**Fact:** More than one in three teens say they have never even tried alcohol.

And, finally ...

### 3. The Myth of Irrelevancy

**Myth:** Teenagers don't listen to what their parents have to say.

**Fact:** Parents are the number one reason why teens make good choices, especially those who initiate dialogue, establish expectations, and enforce consequences.



Yet too often we fail our kids – and maybe others – by remaining silent, or worse.

Many young people say that their parents know they attend parties where underage drinking is taking place yet don't raise the subject. And more than one quarter of parents say adults in their area allow older teens to drink alcohol in their homes if the teens aren't going to be driving, according to a Harris Interactive/*Wall Street Journal* poll.

Which brings us to one other myth worth mentioning: **The Myth of the Car Key Basket.**

More than a few adults mistakenly believe that collecting car keys and keeping kids overnight makes them safe when using alcohol, even though many end up leaving anyway, according to some teens participating in driving research for SADD and Liberty Mutual Insurance. One said, "My parents thought everyone was staying, but most people left." Another offered, "They're getting in their cars and driving away." And a third reported, "Parents do nothing about the fact that teens are drinking and driving."

Enter complacency.

Of course, kids and cars are only part of the problem. Adults who subscribe to this myth also seem to assume that impaired driving is the only danger associated with underage drinking. In truth, many kids die nowhere near an automobile, victims of acute alcohol intoxications, asphyxiations, assaults, accidents, and drownings.

It's troubling then that alcohol is used by young people more frequently than are all other drugs combined. It's

troubling that it is used more heavily, too. According to the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, nearly one out of every five teenagers (16 percent) has experienced "blackout" spells in which he or she could not remember what happened the previous evening because of heavy binge drinking – behavior that is strongly predictive of high-risk drinking later on.

Let's not wait to act.

In *King Lear*, William Shakespeare wrote, "You will gain nothing if you invest nothing." And such is the case regarding underage drinking.

Summer is almost upon us. It's time we rally in defense of our kids.

What if *all* adults embraced and invested in the proven strategies that help to keep kids safe and alive, such as regular, no-nonsense communication about the dangers of alcohol use (including its deleterious impact on still-developing adolescent brains), confirmed adult supervision of teen parties, regularly reinforced rules, and real ramifications for breaking them?

What if ...? Just think of the possibilities.

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