

# Holiday Cheer

## Underage Drinking: Reality, Responsibility, and Accountability

By Stephen G. Wallace

The alcohol-imbued antics of some Danvers, Massachusetts, High School cheerleaders at a recent playoff football game (not to mention the subsequent arrest of the co-captains for a stunning barrage of obscenity-laced recriminations directed at those in charge) provide important insights into the not-so-secret world of too many of today's teens. But not all is lost. The spectacle of intoxicated seventeen-year-olds astride the gridiron offers important lessons about reality, responsibility, and accountability. And with the holiday season upon us, there's no better time for a crash course in keeping kids safe and alive.

What have we to learn?

**Lesson One - Reality:** New *Teens Today* research from SADD and Liberty Mutual Group makes clear just how big a battle looms for those intent on putting a dent in underage drinking. Almost three-quarters of high school students and almost one-half of middle school students report having drunk alcohol. These findings correspond with Monitoring The Future's 2003 report, which noted that nearly four out of five students reported having consumed alcohol by the end of high school and nearly 48 percent of seniors reported having drunk alcohol in the prior 30 days. Remarkably, many parents remain unaware of the degree to which their children drink.

**Lesson Two - Responsibility:** Responsibility for underage drinking lies not just with teens, but also with the adults who guide them. Influential adults who model inappropriate alcohol-related behavior set a compelling, and easily replicable, example for teens to follow. And, as the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine of the National Academies point out, adults often provide the alcohol teens are drinking. Parents who host – even allow – alcohol-included events in their homes undermine important education, prevention, and enforcement efforts by concerned parents, students, teachers, and police officers and reinforce the message that underage drinking is not only tolerated, but also accepted and enabled.

**Lesson Three - Accountability:** A startling number of adults demonstrate disinterest in holding teens accountable for personal behavior, perhaps fearing angry children or the lasting effects of a suspension, expulsion, or arrest. Others figure drinking is just part of growing up. Not making teens responsible for their violations of rules – and laws – perpetuates the perception that adult America is not really all that serious about underage drinking and does little to prepare teens for the far less forgiving world that lies ahead.

Sadly, the Danvers High melee signals a more widespread encroachment of adult-inspired indiscretion on adolescent behavior.

Recent high-profile incidents of alcohol-fueled sports imbroglios (hello, Detroit?) detail a clear, and disturbing, roadmap for young people. Live television, for example, captured the long-awaited championship celebration of the Boston Red Sox, complete with the chugging, crumpling, and throwing of beer cans ... then recoiled in horror at similar behavior taking place by teens just on the other side of (or, in some cases, on top of) Fenway Park's fabled Green Monster. The Sox first baseman's subsequent assertion that the champs were downing shots of Jack Daniel's in preparation for the historic games only added to destructive lessons shared with youth already confronting difficult decisions about drinking.

The truth is that alcohol is used more frequently, and more heavily, by teens than are all other drugs combined. And alcohol use by teens is inextricably linked with falling grades, failing relationships, automobile crashes, sexual assaults, and suicide. Young people do not benefit from adult inattention and indifference. Rather, they benefit from parents and mentors who help them to understand, and fully appreciate, the physical, social, emotional, and legal risks that come with underage drinking.

So, where's the good news in all of this? It's on the flip side of the inevitability coin. After all, if 62 percent of middle and high school students say they have consumed alcohol (*Teens Today* 2004), that means that 38 percent haven't. And many of the students who haven't are those who have taken positive risks in their lives, their schools, and their communities. Indeed, as this new study reveals, teens who challenge themselves through athletics, academics, or community service (to give just a few examples) are 20 percent more likely than other teens to avoid alcohol and drugs. Not surprisingly, they are also more likely to describe themselves as responsible, confident, successful, happy, and optimistic and less likely to say they are bored or depressed – factors that often point to alcohol use in the first place.

And there's more good news in the fact that teens themselves list parents and friends as their most important influencers when it comes to taking positive risks. Here's how they can help:

- Support club membership and/or athletic participation;
- Encourage focus on academics and consideration of higher level courses; and
- Involve family and friends in community-service project(s).

With less structure and fewer rules, the holidays are among the most dangerous times of year for young people. 'Tis the season for teens themselves, aided and abetted by caring adults, to change that reality. Let's be sure we cheer them on.

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*Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc., has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. SADD sponsors education and prevention programs nationwide, including the **Think About It ...** campaigns funded by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. For more information about SADD or the **SADD/Liberty Mutual Teens Today** research, visit [www.sadd.org](http://www.sadd.org) or [www.libertymutualinsurance.com](http://www.libertymutualinsurance.com).*