

## Teenage Drunk Driving

Teenage drunken driving is as widespread as it is frightening. Parents often find themselves struggling over the question of how they should handle the possibility and probability that their child will be faced with the choices that come with the territory of being a teenager in the presence of alcohol. Is it better to “preach abstinence”—or will that approach foster a dishonest relationship in addition to adding fuel to a teenager’s naturally rebellious fire? It is okay to acknowledge the possibility that your teenager may be drinking and to offer yourself as a resource for a sober ride at the end of a night of socializing, or will they interpret the offer as permission to engage in risky, illegal behavior? There are no easy answers for a parent, especially if you suspect your teenage may already have a drinking problem. It is important to try and identify and isolate risky behaviors, and particularly patterns of, or dependence on such risky behaviors. The [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism](#) (NIAAA) points to a study (Swadi, 1999) that concluded that a problem with alcohol use as an adolescent is the “single most predictive factor” for dependence as an adult on alcohol (and other drugs). The [American Academy of Family Physicians](#) offers an even more striking statistic—people who begin drinking at age 15 are four times more likely to become alcoholics than those who begin drinking at age 21.

Teenage drunk driving is a complex issue and is a problem that is compounded by several factors. Teenagers often feel pressure to engage in drinking alcohol and they already may have an interest and curiosity in it, due to an adult culture that is very much alcoholic beverage oriented. This is exacerbated by the media—it almost seems as though the “underage” population is being targeted. The [American Academy of Family Physicians](#) points to a few troublesome statistics indicating that “youth view 45% more beer ads and 27% more liquor ads in magazines than do people of legal drinking age”, and that 20% of alcohol advertising on TV appeared on programming that young people aged 12-20 were more likely to watch than those of legal drinking age.

Teenagers have obtained a degree of freedom with newly granted driving privileges, but they feel in most cases as though they have to be secretive with their alcoholic beverage consuming (if they have chosen to do so) and therefore it is likely to be done away from home, which encourages travel. Drunk driving is a problem on its own; teenage drinking is a problem on its own. Combining the two behaviors is a recipe for disaster. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) credit motor vehicle crashes as the leading cause of death for teenagers, and the CDC goes on to reference a 2008 [study](#) that found that 22% of 15-20 year olds involved in fatal crashes had been drinking.

## Contributing Psychological Factors in Underage Drinking

The [NIAAA](#) highlights a group of psychological traits that are consistently identified in study subjects prone to alcohol use problems, whether they are adults or adolescents. These traits are high novelty seeking, low harm avoidance and high reward dependence.

### High Novelty Seeking & Low Harm Avoidance

Many psychological studies link the “high novelty seeking” and “low harm avoidance” traits when discussing the behavioral characteristics of certain psychological types. [Phys.org](#) helps describe this behavioral combination by saying that a person who possesses these traits tends to be impulsive, danger-seeking and can be aggressive. Novelty refers to something that is new and exciting. Perhaps the person gets bored easily and is always trying to find that something ‘different’ to do, something new they haven’t experienced before, maybe seeking out challenges—because by virtue of it being a

challenge, to succeed may be something new and exciting. This person may not be content with routine and experiencing the expected. The [National Center for Biotechnology Information](#) states, “A wealth of data suggests that drug seeking and novelty seeking have common neurobiological substrates” (substrates being a material on which an enzyme acts)—or, some of the same things are going on in the brains of drug and alcohol seekers and novelty seekers. They may also have a hard time with their personal relationships because of always wanting something new.

Low harm avoidance can almost be interpreted as low survival instinct—unafraid in the face of danger, optimistic and confident no matter the circumstances. On the contrary, people with high harm avoidance characteristics tend to be extremely cautious, analytical, worried about potential negative outcomes even sometimes without any evidence that a negative outcome is likely.

### **High Reward Dependence**

People with high reward dependence will be very persistent in pursuing those things that result in reward and can be constantly seeking peer approval. Perhaps in the world of a teenager, this means always needing to be the most popular, or having the best brand name of trending clothing.

### **The Prefrontal Cortex**

While the previously mentioned traits are associated with both adults and adolescents, there is a part of the brain that the [US Department of Health and Human Services](#) (HHS) discusses as being the last to develop and is still in its process of maturation as teenagers are being faced with the decisions of whether to drink and often whether to drink and drive. This is the prefrontal cortex—lying just behind the forehead. The functions associated with the prefrontal cortex are listed as the following:

“•Focusing attention

- Organizing thoughts and problem solving
- Foreseeing and weighing possible consequences of behavior
- Considering the future and making predictions
- Forming strategies and planning
- Ability to balance short-term rewards with long term goals
- Shifting/adjusting behavior when situations change
- Impulse control and delaying gratification
- Modulation of intense emotions
- Inhibiting inappropriate behavior and initiating appropriate behavior
- Simultaneously considering multiple streams of information when faced with complex and challenging information”

One can reasonably link several of these items to the traits that have been identified in individuals with alcohol problems, to help form a complete picture of what to be aware of as a parent. Namely, a teenager with a still-developing prefrontal cortex will be less able to “balance short-term rewards with long term goals” and delay gratification—both of which may compound an inclination or existing ‘issue’ in the brain that has already made the person highly reward dependent. A maturing prefrontal cortex lends itself to a problem with impulse control—exacerbating the impulsivity quality of someone who already exhibits a high level of novelty seeking and low harm avoidance.

### **A Real Danger**

If you are a parent and facing the questions raised by having a teenager recently granted new freedoms and presented with new opportunities—many of which are not in their best interest—the possibilities of what can go wrong and what may influence the direction your teenager’s life takes will seem daunting and overwhelming. An adolescent with mounting pressures and being presented with a variety of circumstances that they may or may not be fully equipped to deal with essentially makes their ‘every day’ into a house of cards, and one bad choice such as drinking and driving may easily cause the house to fall, sending them into a spiral of other bad choices, at best--and related addictions, at worst. It is important to recognize the reality of such pressures, try and identify the source of related problems, and treat the root of your adolescent’s poor decision-making if you are witnessing them spiral into the depths of a possible alcohol addiction.

### **Help is Available at Newport Academy**

Newport Academy can help with isolating and treating the source of your teenager’s alcohol addiction, and we offer an extensive scope of services to include your teenager’s entire personal environment by way of complete family counseling so that his or her support network is strengthened as they deal with their own very unique set of circumstances and influencing factors. We at Newport Academy are equipped to help a teenager and their family identify their individual roles in crafting a life full of positive choices, so that the two responsibilities of drinking and driving no longer meet and additional heartache may be spared. Call us if you are feeling overwhelmed and like you are in new territory with your teenager and their very adult challenges with alcohol addiction. We can help, and we have mapped the territory so that all may remain safe on its roads.