

# Refuse, Remove, Reasons: Alcohol Education – It’s Never Too Early

## On the Video...

When do most kids start drinking alcohol? Kim was only 12 when she started.

“I was drinking and then I was smoking, and then I tried so many different drugs,” says Kim, 15.

“She was experimenting with drugs and liquor. We had to put all the liquor away in the house, and she was going to friends houses and sampling,” says Jim, Kim’s father.

According to a University of Minnesota study, one in six children start drinking by the sixth grade. Research shows the earlier kids start the more likely they are to become addicted.

“If you have your first drink before age 14, you’re four times more likely to develop alcoholism in your life than if you wait until after age 20,” says Susan Tapert, Ph.D.

That’s why, experts say, the first line of defense against alcohol and drugs is parents who talk to their kids often and start when they’re young.

“You know, I can’t tell you how many times parents come in and they have never, never approached the word drugs or alcohol with their kids. They just want to ignore it. If they ignore it... it will go away and their kid won’t be involved,” says Shirley Kaczmarek, Ed.D., educational director.

“Let them know the risks of their behaviors, and what the consequences might be and you can help them with handling those situations, and knowing what to do in order to avoid them,” says Rhonda Jeffries, M.D., pediatrician.

After months in counseling and a year in a school for troubled teens Kim is now drug and alcohol free.

“I’m very proud of myself,” says Kim.

## What We Need to Know...

Consequences of underage drinking cannot be underestimated. The primary goal of prevention is to delay the first use of alcohol or other drugs. Research indicates that adolescents who begin drinking before age 14 are significantly more likely to experience alcohol dependence at some point in their lives compared to individuals who begin drinking after 21 years of age. During adolescence significant changes occur in the body, including the formation of new networks in the brain. Alcohol use during this time may affect brain development. In addition, youth who drink alcohol are more likely to experience a number of negative consequences, such as physical or sexual assault, unintentional injuries, memory problems, legal problems, and impaired school performance.

How can we prevent substance abuse? Experts recommend pervasive, consistent messages to young people about drugs and alcohol from many messengers: schools, parents, peers, and the community repeatedly throughout childhood and adolescence. Parents have more influence than they think. In fact, teens’ primary source of advice about drugs and alcohol is their parents, according to a study funded by the Hazelden Foundation.

Prevention works best when attention is given to multiple risk and protective factors. Warning signs of teenage alcohol and drug abuse may include:

**Physical:** Fatigue, repeated health complaints, red and glazed eyes, and a lasting cough.

**Emotional:** personality change, sudden mood changes, irritability, irresponsible behavior, low self-esteem, poor judgment, depression, and a general lack of interest.

**Family:** starting arguments, breaking rules, or withdrawing from the family.

**School:** decreased interest, negative attitude, drop in grades, many absences, truancy, and discipline problems.

**Social problems:** new friends who are less interested in standard home and school activities, problems with the law, and changes to less conventional styles in dress and music.

## Conversation Starters...

- What or who helps influence your decision making when it comes to drinking?
- Do you understand how we feel about underage drinking?
- What really makes for a “good time” when you and your friends get together?