

Topic Forum – Upper School

-- UNDERAGE DRINKING -- IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT DRUNK DRIVING

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Underage drinking within the Independent Schools in Baltimore remains the single greatest threat to the safety and well being of our children.

Our teenagers are thrust into countless arenas where they are challenged to consume alcohol; be it prom time, senior week, Hunt Cup, or just at weekend parties. They believe that drinking is part of having fun and a rite of passage. They also assume that “everyone is doing it.”

Moreover, teens are regularly receiving mixed messages from parents. In our effort to keep them safe, we have been telling them not to drink and drive. Incredibly, we have forgotten to tell them not to drink!! Underage drinking can have catastrophic effects on a teen’s life and not just by driving drunk. Alcohol is the basis of many accidents, injuries, sexual assaults, and deaths among our teens. Thus, the consequences continue to escalate.

There are an estimated 18 million alcoholics in the United States -- and one out of every 4 is a teenager. The Centers for Disease Control reports that alcohol is very often involved in the top four leading causes of death for those under age 20: car crashes, homicide, suicide, and drowning. One study found that 58% of girls and 75% of boys involved in date rape had been drinking. Even when sex is consensual, teens who drink are more likely to have multiple partners and are much less likely to practice safe sex, thereby exposing themselves to unwanted pregnancies and the rising level of sterilizing and fatal sexually transmitted diseases. Alcohol poisoning sends hundreds of underage teens to the hospital emergency rooms each year. Teens tend to drink large amounts of alcohol in a short period of time, thus elevating the blood alcohol concentration so fast that it may result in a coma or death.

PARENTS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Parents may not realize it, but they do have a strong influence over their children’s decision to consume alcohol. Studies have shown that parents are the primary influence on their child’s decision-making. When it comes to underage drinking, parents need to establish their rules and expectations candidly, and clearly assert that underage drinking is simply against the law. Teens should know the consequences of breaking the rules, and parents need to consistently enforce them. Teens should know that they can call their parents if they end up at a party where alcohol is available. Remember, a teen who is not

drinking can still get into trouble for just being at a party where alcohol is being served if the police show up.

Moreover, remember that our children are watching as we model for them! Parents who want to discourage underage drinking need to demonstrate responsibility and accountability. This means drinking responsibly, not letting your teen see you drunk and never allowing another adult to get behind the wheel of a car when intoxicated. Teens sometimes have rough days at school and when they come home we offer them a glass of milk. As parents, when have rough days at work, instead of coming home and self medicating with your drink of choice, maybe we need to show our children we can cope by enjoying a glass of milk.

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