

## Urgent Family Information

# Underage Drinking and Social Hosting

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Nearly everyone knows that it is against the law in the United States for young people under age 21 to drink alcohol. But you may not be aware that to uphold the law and to prevent underage drinking, some state and local governments are limiting youth access to alcohol by passing social host liability laws. And the number of states adopting these laws is increasing.

**Social hosting is providing and/or serving alcohol to a young person who is under the minimum age of 21. Social hosting can take place in a party-like atmosphere or by any adult simply providing alcohol to teenagers and their peers for them to drink. It can even extend to parents and homeowners who are not on the premises and/or did not provide the alcohol.**

- Social host liability refers to laws that hold noncommercial individuals (social hosts) responsible for underage drinking events on property they own, lease, or otherwise control.
- You may not need to actually serve or provide alcohol to underage guests to violate these laws.
- The penalties for breaking these laws are possible jail time, fines, and civil lawsuits—and the public humiliation that goes along with them.
- By violating the law, you are sending every child you know a message that can have dangerous consequences.

High school students in our community, along with your local high school administrator, athletic director and coaches, teachers, and parent/community coordinator or PTA/PTO president, are taking part in **Not in Our House: A Nationwide Initiative on Underage Drinking and Social Hosting**. The program's education component, sent to 9th- and 10th-grade language arts teachers, addresses the issues of underage drinking and social hosting by challenging students' oral and written communication skills and helping them transform their new knowledge into advocacy.

You can get involved by becoming informed about the laws in your area that regulate providing alcohol to youth and underage drinking parties. More critically, you can work to enforce existing social hosting laws or, if no laws exist in your state or community, lobby government to implement and enforce state social host laws that keep young people safe.

In addition, take the time to read through this handout. Its valuable information and tips will assist you in preventing underage drinking parties from occurring in your home.



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## Startling Statistics

- More than three out of every four students have had alcohol by the end of high school. More than half of 12th-graders and a fifth of 8th-graders have been drunk at least once.<sup>1</sup>
- In recent surveys of high school students, 93 percent of 12th-graders and 64 percent of 8th-graders reported that alcohol is "fairly" or "very" easy to get.<sup>2</sup>
- Research has indicated that one typical way underage youth procure alcohol is at parties where parents and other adults have left them unsupervised.<sup>3</sup>
- Alcohol is linked with an estimated 5,000 deaths in people under age 21 each year—more than all illegal drugs combined.<sup>4</sup>
- Sixty-five percent of underage youth who drink reported obtaining alcohol from family and friends.<sup>5</sup>

1. Johnston, L.S.; O'Malley, P.M.; Bachman, J.G.; and Schulenberg, J.E., 2006, *Monitoring the Future national results on adolescent drug use: Overview of key findings, 2005* (NIH Publication No. 06-5882), Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse. 2. Johnston, L.S., et al., 2006. 3. Jones-Webb, R., et al., 1997, "Relationships among alcohol availability, drinking location, alcohol consumption and drinking problems in adolescents," *Substance Use and Misuse* 32, 1261-1285. 4. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, "Underage Drinking: Why Do Adolescents Drink, What Are the Risks, and How Can Underage Drinking Be Prevented?" *Alcohol Alert* 67, January 2006. 5. Teenage Research Unlimited (TRU) for The Century Council, Omnibuzz, 2003.

## Urgent Family Information (continued)

### What exactly is “social hosting”?

*Social hosting* is providing and/or serving alcohol to a young person who is under the minimum age of 21. It can take place in a party-like atmosphere or by any adult simply providing alcohol to teens and their peers for consumption. It can even extend to parents and homeowners who are not on the premises and/or did not provide the alcohol.

### Who can be held responsible?

If your area has **social host liability laws**:

- Adults who serve or provide alcohol to an underage youth anywhere on their property can be held criminally liable if that youth is killed or injured—or if that youth kills or injures someone else.
- The law can extend to include adults who don't take sufficient measures to stop underage drinking—even if they are not home when the drinking occurs.
- Adults may also be held responsible if underage drinking takes place anywhere on their property, not just inside their home.
- It is illegal simply to host a party where underage youth are drinking.
- Adults, older family members, and friends can be arrested if they allow underage consumption to occur with their knowledge, even if they did not provide the alcohol.
- *No one has to get hurt*—all it takes is for alcohol to be present at the party.

### What are some of the consequences?

- You could pay a fine, serve jail time, and/or have your driver's license suspended.
- Your homeowner's insurance may increase. (Most policies don't cover damage or theft from underage drinking.)
- Another adult can hold you civilly liable, and any injuries, alcohol poisoning, or sexual assaults that occur may result in lawsuits.
- You could be charged for medical bills or property damage, or sued for emotional suffering or pain.
- In some states, legislation is pending that would immediately suspend the driver's license (without regard to criminal conviction) of any adult who knowingly furnishes alcohol to anyone under 21.
- You can face negative exposure in your local media.
- Worst of all, someone could be injured or die.



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### What You Can Do

**Work together to create an environment where underage drinking is not acceptable so young people can steer clear of illegal or dangerous situations:**

- Set a good example.
- Know the warning signs for underage drinking: mood changes, school problems/poor attendance, switching friends, finding alcohol in your child's room/backpack.
- Securely store the alcohol in your home.
- Create an atmosphere in your home and community where underage alcohol consumption is not acceptable behavior.
- Set ground rules with your teen before any party. Make it understood that you will be present to provide supervision.
- Create a support network with other parents who also believe it is unacceptable to serve alcohol to underage youth.
- Involve yourself and your child in your community's existing efforts to address underage drinking.
- Work with others in the community to lobby the government to implement and/or enforce state and community social host laws.

**Keep an open dialogue with your child:**

- Learn what is important to your teen and discuss how underage drinking can affect the dreams they have, the people they care about, and their performance in sports or school.
- Use alcohol-related incidents that have occurred in your community as “teachable” moments.
- Talk frankly about the consequences of illegally providing alcohol to an underage youth in your home—the legal consequences (lawsuits, jail, and criminal record), financial burden (losing the family savings), and risk of injury and even death.

**If your teenager is involved in an alcohol violation, address the issue immediately:**

- Remind him or her that underage drinking is illegal. Explore the reasons why your teenager drank, what he or she has learned, and what decisions he or she will make in the future.