

## Teen Parties and Alcohol

Adolescents love nothing more than extended periods of free time and the chance to “hang out” with their friends. Parents, however, are rightfully concerned about how their teens fill their free time – especially if it involves spending time at teen-initiated parties. Ohio parents became particularly aware of the types of problems unsupervised teens can encounter when the national spotlight shown on a sexual assault of a teenage girl committed by adolescent boys in Steubenville, Ohio. The event that propelled Steubenville from obscurity to a town whose name became synonymous with teenage rape took place at an end of summer fling for a group of teens.

Parents must be wary of making the assumption that their child could never be party to such horrific events. Although the focus of the national press has been on the sexual assault and aftermath, we cannot overlook the steps that set the stage. Having worked with hundreds of teens who have engaged in behaviors shocking to their parents, at The Buckeye Ranch we recognize how frequently underage drinking is involved in such events. The Steubenville tragedy likely would not have occurred if the teens did not have seemingly unlimited access to alcohol and an absence of adult supervision. When we read the reports telling us that alcohol flowed freely for these teens as they moved from house to house, we must ask ourselves: Where were the grown-ups?

Teen drinking is a public health problem, resulting not only in the events seen in the Steubenville case, but also in the deaths of thousands of teens each year. It is a problem, however, that is magnified when parents underestimate the importance of adult supervision. As teenage children demonstrate increasing competence and maturity, it is sometimes hard to remember that they continue to need adult supervision. As summer begins, it is important that parents plan their methods of structure and supervision to avoid tragedies associated with teen drinking.

A few unbendable rules can go a long way towards making summer a time to build wonderful rather than tragic memories. Parents need to be involved in their teenager’s lives. They need to know their teen’s friends, where they go, and what they are doing. They must become smart about social media (The American Association of Pediatrics has tips for doing this at [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)). Parents need to introduce themselves to other parents -- parent networking is considered to be the best prevention tool to reduce underage drinking. Repeatedly talking to children about alcohol – its effects, the law, and most importantly expectations regarding their behavior is critical. If a teen is going to a party, parents need to confirm that there will be adult supervision. Clear, firm rules around curfew need to be set and enforced. And always be certain that a young person clearly knows never to ride in a vehicle with someone who has been drinking.

Partying is an important part of the life of a teen. It should not be an event that forever changes (or ends) their future. We can only wonder how different things would have turned out in Steubenville if there had been adult supervision. Parents are not powerless in this endeavor. Other tips that will help you prepare for safe summer celebrating are available in “A Parent’s Guide to Teen Parties” at <http://www.healthychildren.org>.