

Teens and Alcohol Part 1 - Criminal and Civil Liability

How Could This Affect You and Your Family?

Roosevelt High School has a drinking problem. Like it or not, we have to tackle this problem head on if we want to have a chance of changing our teens' behavior. So please, take time to talk to your teen about alcohol consumption and its consequences.

It's no secret that teens caught "under the influence" have been dismissed from high school activities, and subsequently suspended from school. This year, results from Roosevelt High School's most recent dance indicate that this problem has escalated. This creates serious problems for the teens as well as for those who support them: parents, teachers, and staff. Not only does this interfere with their education and their long-term prospects; our community is at risk when teens are driving under the influence.

Let's bust a big myth associated with underage drinking:

Myth: Parents and other adults who are concerned about drinking and driving decide that since young people are going to drink, it is better they drink in their homes rather than somewhere else.

Answer: On the surface, it sounds sensible, but the truth is that teen drinking parties can be the source of many problems — of which only one is driving. Drinking parties almost always involve binge drinking, and can lead to violence, sexual assault, rape, and even alcohol poisoning.

In the state of Washington, ***laws hold adults accountable*** when they host underage drinking parties (RCW.66.44.270). Adults who serve or provide alcohol to a person under the age of 21 can be held criminally and civilly liable if that minor is killed or injured, or kills or injures another person. In two documented cases, parents found themselves personally liable for serious damages resulting from hosting underage drinking parties. In one case, the parents were at home and knew that the teens planned to drink, and then spent the night there to sleep it off. However, some teens woke at three in the morning, drove away from the house, and had a rollover accident. One teen was left with a permanent brain injury. Insurance did not cover the entire settlement, and the parents who hosted the party ended up paying thousands of dollars to cover the injured teen's medical expenses. In the second case, the results were even more tragic: an innocent driver in another car was killed.

In Washington, just the act of serving alcohol to minors (who are not your own children) is illegal. Under this law, the offense is the hosting of the party *itself* and parents or older friends and siblings can be arrested if they allow a drinking party to occur with their knowledge.

Bottom line: ***Don't provide liquor to minors.*** You're responsible for their actions. Don't think that insurance will cover it, particularly because giving alcohol to minors is illegal. You have no control over how serious an injury could be. You can be held personally liable. And yes, it really happens.

Teens and Alcohol Part 2 - Personal Responsibility

Teens may indulge in dangerous behaviors because they're convinced that "those things happen to others kids, not me." In Part 2 of Teens and Alcohol, we'll look at some of the biggest myths that teens perpetuate. Many of these myths have been shown to be untrue through actual experiences of Roosevelt High School teens.

Myth: Teens are not cited for their first alcohol offense.

Answer: Police officers may cite teens for "minor in possession", even on a first offense. The penalty may include forfeiting the teen's driver's license until he/she turns eighteen.

Myth: Using a fake ID is a safe way to buy alcohol for your friends and yourself.

Answer: Penalties are stiff for producing and/or buying a fake ID. Using a fake ID to buy alcohol is a gross misdemeanor, and the penalty is up to one year in jail, a \$5000 fine, or both.

Myth: Teens over 18 and parents who rent hotel rooms for drinking parties are providing a safe place for drinking.

Answer: Teens over 18 and parents who rent hotel rooms for teens may be criminally and civilly liable for injuries incurred by and/or caused by partygoers who drink alcohol at these parties. A major risk with hotel parties is that the kids who rent the rooms are not always in control of who shows up to party. Alcohol fueled or not, there was a violent incident during Prom Night last year at a hotel where many Roosevelt students were staying. A student from another high school came to a party uninvited. A fight broke out and he was badly beaten by another student. His head injuries were so severe that he was admitted to the Harborview intensive care unit.

Myth: If teens have a designated driver, it is safe for them to drink. They will safely get a ride home.

Answer: Having a designated driver is certainly better than not having one. That said, trusting your teen's friends to safely deliver him/her home is not a sure thing. In one late night incident at a popular local park, some teens that were drinking heavily had a designated driver who was not drinking. But when the cops came, all of the teens scattered, not wanting to risk punishment. They left behind a severely drunk friend, who got picked up by the cops.

Also, there may be some risk to you if your child is the designated driver. Would you want your teen to take on the responsibility for the actions of all his/her drunken friends?

Myth: All teens drink. Even if you get caught, there won't be any consequences.

Answer: Given the competitive nature of college admissions, colleges and universities may reject applicants on the basis of an arrest record. (They're already rescinding acceptance on the basis of senioritis!) In addition, information on myspace.com is publicly available, and college admissions directors may check these out to determine differences between candidates. Having pictures of students consuming alcohol on these sites could be a real deal-breaker.

For more information, and for suggestions on how to talk to your teen, see:

- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/>
- The Marin Institute. <http://www.marininstitute.org>
- Roosevelt/Marshall Teen Health Center (THC) provides preventive education on alcohol and other drug use. THC phone is 206-527-8336, and they have a page on the RHS website <http://www.rhs.seattleschools.org>