

LAWYERS Assistance

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

RISKS FOR MINORS USING ALCOHOL

New studies have established that the use of alcohol before the age of 15 can result in four times the risk of becoming an alcoholic at some point later in life. According to the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH), the earlier a person begins using alcohol, the greater the risk of not only developing alcoholism but also developing other serious problems.¹ The NIH said:

People who reported starting to drink before the age of 15 were four times more likely to also report meeting the criteria for alcohol dependence at some point in their lives. In fact, new research shows that the serious drinking problems (including what is called alcoholism) typically associated with middle age actually begin to appear much earlier, during young adulthood and even adolescence.

Other research shows that the younger children and adolescents are when they start to drink, the more likely they will be to engage in behaviors that harm themselves and others. For example, frequent binge drinkers (nearly 1 million high school students nationwide) are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, including using other drugs such as marijuana and cocaine, having sex with six or more partners, and earning grades that are mostly Ds and Fs in school.

According to the NIH article referenced above, the brain does not fully develop until a person reaches his/her 20s. Child and adolescent brains are at high risk for damage by alcohol (and other mood-altering drugs). Nonetheless, alcohol use by minors is currently widespread. A 2005 study cited by the NIH has established that three-fourths of 12th graders, at least two-thirds of 10th graders and about two in every five eighth graders have consumed alcohol.

More troubling still, when adolescents drink, a significant number of them “binge” drink, often consuming four to five drinks at

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one time. The NIH indicates that 11 percent of eighth graders, 22 percent of 10th graders and 29 percent of 12th graders had participated in binge drinking within the past two weeks of the survey.

The Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) published information in 2011 stating that 74 percent of people ages 18 to 30 who were admitted for substance abuse treatment reported that they began using mood-altering substances at 17 or earlier. At least 10 percent of those admitted for treatment started using alcohol or drugs at age 11 or younger.²

Moreover, there appears to be an additional link between early alcohol use and the potential for addiction to multiple substances, not just alcohol. Of people who started drinking at age 11 or younger, a staggering 78 percent of those people reported eventually abusing two or more mood-altering substances prior to treatment.

In contrast, for those who reported first starting to use alcohol later in life at age 25 to 30, less than half as many — 30.4 percent — reported abusing two or more substances. Per SAMHSA:

“Early to late adolescence is considered a critical risk period for the beginning of alcohol and drug use,” said SAMHSA Administrator Pamela S. Hyde. “Knowing the age a person starts the use of a substance can inform treatment facilities so that they can better provide timely and appropriate prevention and treatment programs.”

As science uncovers more contributing

factors that increase the risk of developing alcoholism and addiction, we can all take advantage of that information to undertake appropriate steps to reduce the odds that someone in our family will become an alcoholic or addict in the fullness of time.

Based on the recent findings discussed above, it is now more important than ever to ensure that young people, including older teenagers and young adults, are extremely careful about alcohol use and the potential impact that alcohol consumption can have on their developing brains. By drinking too much alcohol too soon, young people may be setting themselves up for dramatically increased likelihoods of developing alcohol dependency and other serious substance use disorders — all of which requiring clinical intervention and treatment later in life.

The Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc. (LAP) not only provides confidential assistance to lawyers and judges, but also to the family members of the Bar, including children and adolescents. If you are concerned about alcohol or drug use by any member of your family, call LAP for confidential assistance at (866)354-9334 or email LAP@louisianalap.com.

FOOTNOTES

1. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, Alcohol Alert Number 67: “Underage Drinking: Why Do Adolescents Drink, What Are the Risks, and How Can Underage Drinking Be Prevented?” <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/AA67/AA67.htm>.

2. Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration: “Substance use during childhood or adolescence is linked to long-term health risks.” <http://www.samhsa.gov/newsroom/advvisories/1407174039.aspx>.

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