

# American Medical Association

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As the high school party season moves from prom to graduation parties, many parents rightfully worry about the safety of their children. But instead of worrying or trying to reduce underage access to alcohol, an increasing number of parents are actually supplying alcohol for teenagers.

Recent polls by the American Medical Association (AMA) asked parents (with children age 12-20) and teens about their perceptions of and experiences with high school graduation and prom parties. One in 10 parents responded that it was okay for underage teens to attend prom or graduation parties with alcohol if a parent were present. But twice as many 16-18 year olds responded that they have attended a graduation party with drinking and parents present. And 15 percent of those respondents had been to a graduation party where the alcohol was actually supplied by parents. The polls were funded as part of the AMA's partnership with The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The higher number of teen responses than parents suggests a dangerous trend in parents supplementing their own judgment for others. This small minority of parents undermines the authority of the vast majority who, rightly, do not allow their teenage children to drink.

Many of these parents hope that by throwing parties themselves, they can control where or how their children celebrate. Some actually purchase and serve the alcohol themselves, believing that underage drinking is inevitable or even a "rite of passage."

But fatal car accidents, injuries and assaults are not rites of passage for any child. Underage drinking is a major factor in the two leading causes of teenage deaths: car accidents and fatal injuries. A 2002 study revealed that 40 percent of teen traffic fatalities during prom and graduation weekends were alcohol-related.

It is also linked to two-thirds of all sexual assaults and date rapes of teens, and increases the likelihood of contracting HIV or sexually transmitted diseases. And a recent AMA report reveals the long-term, irreversible damage that drinking does to teen brains, which continue developing until age 20.

More and more communities are prosecuting parents who allow such parties. A 46-year-old woman in Pennsylvania is currently serving a prison sentence for throwing a party in her home for her two high school-age daughters. A 19-year-old in attendance crashed his vehicle after the 2002 party, killing himself and two passengers.

Communities and elected officials should send a strong message to parents who think that supplying alcohol to teenagers is okay. Current laws against providing alcohol to minors should be enforced, and more communities should implement reforms and measures that have worked elsewhere, such as alcohol-free party for seniors, public education campaigns, anonymous tip lines to report underage parties, and signed pledges from parents to not provide alcohol to teens.

Parents should talk to children about the harmful consequences of drinking and explain why they won't be serving alcohol at graduation parties. Parents should talk with other parents to ensure that alcohol consumption by minors is not an option at graduation celebrations.

Serving alcohol to one's own children may be legal in some states, or considered by some as culturally acceptable, but serving someone else's child is illegal, life-threatening and unacceptable.

Bad decisions by parents, or the communities who accept parent-hosted parties, should not put our children, or their futures at risk. Responsible parents can make high school graduation and prom a fun and lasting memory for everyone without the alcohol.