

Ask a psychotherapist

Question: My 15-year-old son has always been a good kid but lately I've been smelling alcohol on his breath on the weekends and after he's been to a friend's after school. When I asked him about it, he says that some of his friends' dads offer him beer whenever he visits. He says it's ok because it's 'only' beer and if other parents are ok with it, why can't we be? We don't let him drink at home. Am I just being too uptight?

Answer: Leaving aside the fact that it's illegal in Ontario to serve alcohol to anyone under 19, both parents and kids need to learn about the particular harms that alcohol can do to developing young brains. Adolescents who start drinking at 15 are four times more likely to abuse alcohol as adults than kids who start drinking later.

The latest neuroscience research is showing that the brain is not finished developing until somewhere between the ages of 24 and 26. During the adolescent years, the prefrontal cortex (or thinking part of the brain) is developing rapidly and catching up with the more emotional parts of the brain that are responsible for memory, feelings and impulsiveness among other things. Consequently, adolescents are prone to be risk-takers and experimenters while often displaying a lack of judgment or foresight about the potential long-term consequences of their behaviours.

Alcohol not only causes adolescent judgment to go off-line during consumption but it has been shown to delay and in some cases to irrevocably harm the developing brain of the young. Binge-drinking (more than 5 drinks at a sitting) and blackouts are especially damaging to teen brains.

For more information on the effects of alcohol and other substances on the developing brain, see *The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist's Survival Guide to Raising adolescents and Young Adults* by Frances M. Jensen, M.D. (2015) or the overview article *'The Shrinking Teenage Brain'* (Maclean's magazine, Jan. 12, 2015).

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