

ENGAGE

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Kids, Alcohol, and an Alarming New Way to “Drink”

Dr. Walt Mueller

They feel invulnerable. Bad stuff “won’t happen to me.” They see adults doing it and they want to feel like and be perceived as older than they really are. It’s aggressively advertised as something fun, cool, and a passport to the good life. Everyone else seems to be doing it. Not only that, it’s easy to obtain. There are numerous reasons why kids are drawn to alcohol abuse like moths to a flame.

But underage drinking is illegal, immoral, and extremely dangerous. The risks are great. As I’ve done too many times before, I recently attended the funeral of a young teenage friend who, after spending an evening drinking with friends, never woke up the next morning. This was not what the folks at Miller Lite promised when they were advertising their brew as “liquid fun.” I looked around at the shocked and sad young faces that made up about two-thirds of the congregation at his funeral and wondered how many would walk away determined to do the right thing, and how many would walk away determined to drown their sorrows and confusion in alcohol later that day.

Americans love to drink. Researchers tell us that over the course of a year, the average American drinks 27 gallons of beer, 2.77 gallons of wine, and 2 gallons of hard liquor. In once recent year, alcohol beverage sales in the U.S. topped \$130 billion. This love affair with alcohol is shared by the teen population. Alcohol is by far the number one drug used and abused by teenagers. Drinking has become a normal adolescent activity and serves as a rite of passage for kids as they move from childhood to adulthood.

The Monitoring the Future survey (conducted annually by the folks at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research) is by far the most extensive and accurate longstanding study of teenagers and substance abuse. According to the most recent survey results, 36.6 percent of 8th graders, 59.1 percent of 10th graders, and 72.3 percent of 12th graders report having used alcohol at some time in their lives. In addition, 17.4 percent of 8th graders, 38.6 percent of 10th graders, and 56.5 percent of 12th graders report having been drunk. When asked if they had had five or more drinks in a row (binge drinking) in the last thirty days, 15 percent of 8th graders, 30 percent of 10th graders, and 44 percent of 12th graders said “yes.” The prob-

lem is even greater among our nation's college students. In the past 12 months, 31 percent of college students met the criteria for a diagnosis of alcohol abuse, and 6 percent for a diagnosis of alcohol dependence. Two out of five college students are binge drinkers.

On a more positive note, these alarming statistics have spurred many to take a more proactive stance against underage drinking. But because they are creative and determined to drink, kids actively look for new ways to drink without getting caught.

One of the most alarming and hard-to-believe reports says that some teens are now seeking to get intoxicated by soaking tampons in vodka and then inserting them vaginally or rectally. Even though several reputable news organizations and academic journals (as early as the 1990s) are reporting the trend, some skeptics are wondering if these reports aren't the result of an urban legend. Regardless of whether or not the initial reports of the practice were only rumors, the fact is that the rumors have been spreading through youth culture, leading a growing number of kids curious about and even trying the practice. For that reason, we feel it's important to inform parents and those other adults who care for and love kids of this developing trend.

Why would kids engage in this type of behavior? Experts familiar with the practice have heard kids state numerous reasons.

First, it is believed one is far less likely to get caught by parents or other adults if they choose intoxication by alcohol-soaked tampon. Alcohol abuse is most often detected by smelling one's breathe. Kids believe that if they can bypass their mouths, their parents will never know. Experts say this is an entirely false notion, as alcohol that's absorbed into the bloodstream is always eliminated at some level through one's lungs.

Second, practitioners believe that by bypassing the stomach, the alcohol is absorbed more quickly and fully into one's system.

Third, weight conscious individuals believe that bypassing the stomach eliminates caloric intake and the weight gain that comes with alcohol use.

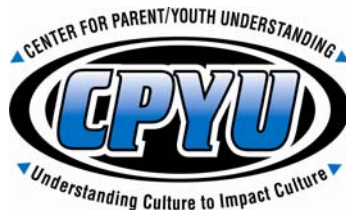
And finally, it is believed that rectal or vaginal intoxication eliminates the nasty effects of sick stomachs and hangovers that plague drinkers the morning after.

Every one of our teenagers will be faced with the pressure, temptation, and opportunity to abuse drugs and alcohol. What choices will they make? As parents and youth workers we have the responsibility to give them the information and assistance they need in order to make the right decisions. If we choose not to give them guidance and support, they'll still have to make a choice.

We suggest that you be diligent in monitoring your child. While talking about using alcohol-soaked tampons to get intoxicated could plant the idea in a teen's head, it's more likely that they've already heard about the practice, particularly if they already have a history of alcohol use and abuse. Prayerfully use your intuition to come to a decision about whether or not and how you should warn your kids.

Again, no one knows for sure just how widespread this alarming and dangerous practice is. What we do know is that the word about it is spreading. And when the word spreads virally through youth culture, many kids are prone to give things a try.

Dr. Walt Mueller is the founder and President of the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding. For more information about teenage substance abuse and strategies for helping teens make safe and Godly drug and alcohol choices, see Chapter 10 of his book Youth Culture 101, available in our CPYU Online Resource Center at www.cpyu.org.



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