

Alcohol Abuse among Teenagers: Hope and Help for Leaders

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God creates us in the image of God and calls us to responsible stewardship of our bodies and of creation.

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The claim that on the sixth day God created humankind in God's own image or likeness makes a profound statement about who we are (Genesis 1:26–31). Although we do not literally look like God, we are in relationship with God unlike any other creature. Likewise, although we are not God, we do possess creative abilities. So we are like God in our capacity for relationship and in our activities, especially our creative ones.

Created in God's image, we have been given an ethic of care that defines us and tells us about the nature of God. In giving us dominion (authority) over every living thing that moves upon the earth, God has not given us the arbitrary power of consumption or destruction, but rather a responsibility of a sustaining stewardship, or responsible use. Our dominion is limited by an ethic of care, marked by benevolence and peace.

Finally, God has given us the nurturing gift of a blessing. God has touched us in a way that communicates a part of God to us. God's blessing declared us and our bodies as good—very good, in fact. Whatever self-esteem about our bodies we may lack, God holds out our bodies to us as a gift, freely given.

Because God gave us our bodies, and made us caretakers of our bodies, we care for them as God would care for them, blessing them and viewing them as good, very good. By virtue of our baptisms, our bodies take on yet another characteristic. Not only are our bodies good, they also represent Christ's body on earth. In fact, our bodies house God, the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). We care for our bodies as part of what sustains our relationship with God. When we offer our bodies an ethic of care, we make an offering to God, as surely as we make an offering to God when we pray or worship, study or tithe.

Some theologians say that stewardship is everything you do or say, after you say, "I believe." How are you a good steward of your body? Worship is our response to God and to God's gifts. When we acknowledge God's gifts to us, we respond to those gifts with our offerings, evidence of our stewardship. How is stewardship part of our worship of God? When we present our offerings in worship, we give evidence of our stewardship. When we take care of our bodies, we present evidence of our stewardship. Being a good steward is one of the ways that we worship God. When we take care of our bodies, we are making an offering to God.

Conversely, when we fail to care for our bodies or when we abuse them, we reject the image of God within us and deny the goodness of God's creation. The abuse of alcohol is one of the ways we deny God's good intentions for us.

Alcohol and Adolescents

Why do we need to teach young people about alcohol use and abuse? Because it is by far the most-used drug among teenagers and is the precursor to other drug use. A 2008 study from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) states that, "In 2008, rates of current alcohol use were 3.4 percent among persons aged twelve or thirteen, 13.1 percent of persons aged fourteen or fifteen, 26.2 percent of sixteen or seventeen year olds, (and) 48.7 percent of those aged eighteen to twenty. . . ."¹ Given these statistics, it is likely that some of the young people in your faith community have either experimented with alcohol or have been in a situation where alcohol was being consumed by their peers. It is safe to assume that, if they have not been exposed to underage drinking, they will be before they reach the legal drinking age.

Why do people abuse drugs and alcohol? Ultimately, people who abuse alcohol and other drugs are unhappy with themselves or their situations. They may want to escape from situations that are beyond their control, like a difficult family life, or physical or sexual abuse. Sometimes, people may try alcohol because they are curious or because of peer pressure. They think they are strong enough to do it "just this once." What they don't realize is that some drugs are designed to hook you the first time you try them. Others may not understand that they might be genetically more at risk for addiction.² Experimenting with drugs and alcohol is a choice that could negatively affect the rest of their lives.

What to Do?

Adult leaders should walk a fine line on alcohol use, depending on your own feelings about its use. Probably the most important thing here is to be honest, to have integrity. Even if the young people don't agree with you, at least perhaps they'll recognize your integrity and respect your refusal to be a hypocrite.

- Adult leaders on church-sponsored activities with young people in their care should not drink. Period. This can either be seen simply as refusing to present a situation that could be misinterpreted or refusing to be a "stumbling block" (1 Corinthians 8:9) in the way of the young person.
- Adult leaders in public, in private, and not "on duty" as a leader of youth, if choosing to use alcohol, should do so in moderation. Refer to the preceding definitions of social recreational drug use to make sure that you are not in a hazardous category.
- Adult leaders should refrain from having conversations with each other in front of young people or with young people themselves about drinking and any pleasure it gives them. They should refrain from wearing articles of clothing or bumper stickers that may be interpreted by youth as endorsing alcohol use.
- In the privacy of their own home, adult leaders should let their conscience be their guide. However, it is hoped that alcohol would not be in an obvious location and in large quantities, so that young people visiting the adult leader would not draw the conclusion that the adult leader is a heavy drinker.

1. drugabusestatistics.samhsa.gov

2. drugabuse.gov/infofacts/understand.html

Should abstinence from alcohol use during a church youth event be included in any covenant for that activity? Sure! And adult leaders should sign the covenant as well as youth participants, as a gesture of inclusivity, if nothing else.

Like so many other situations, there can never be enough conversation between adult leaders regarding what they would do in possible situations. Strive for integrity as well as consistency. Conversation about intervention should always include a church staff person, preferably a pastor or a professional counselor.

Alcoholism is a family illness. Typical problems in a family that includes an adult alcoholic include:

- Resentment that the alcoholic parent won't do anything about the problem.
- Financial difficulties, caused by not only the cost of buying alcohol but also by the loss of job security.
- Aggressive behavior by other members of the family who have so much stress that they act out in situations with others.
- Guilt by everyone involved that they may have caused the alcoholic to drink.
- Helplessness by everyone involved that they can't help the alcoholic get over his or her problems.
- Emotional withdrawal from the commitment of all family members to the family itself or to each other.
- Shame felt by all family members, especially when they try to hide or deny the problem.

What happens when a young person in an alcoholic home asks you for help? Sometimes helping a child of an alcoholic means directing them to someone with special skills, but for you as their adult leader, being there for them and listening with compassion is often the real beginning in help. Encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings. Get them involved in something they can feel good about. Do something with them on a regular basis to show them that adults can be counted on. Help them see behind their current pain to a life full of future possibilities. There is hope ahead!

What happens when a young person comes to visit with you in your role as an adult leader and says, "I have a drinking problem"? How can you help?

- Be compassionate. Show that you love and respect the youth as a child of God.
- Learn the facts about alcoholism.
- Understand your own emotions and reactions.
- Help them face the truth with themselves, with family members, and with other young people in the congregation.
- Continue to show support and love for the alcoholic and their family.
- Take action. Now that they have revealed their "problem," don't let it be swept back under the rug. This may be a real chance for recovery. Point them to any number of resources available in your community (Alcoholics Anonymous and professional counseling among others).
- Make an appointment with them in a reasonable time so they may report to you what steps they've taken.
- Expect a long, involved treatment that will not solve all of the problems that the alcoholic or their family members have.

What if a young person comes to you and says, “My friend has a problem. How can I help?” Share the above ways to help, but at the same time make sure that you share these don’ts:

- Don’t drink along with your friend, thinking you’re consoling them or that you can slow the pace of their drinking. This only reinforces their habit.
- Don’t give or loan them any money.
- Don’t cover up the problem by lying for them in order to shield them from the consequences of their actions.
- Don’t clean up after them (either their vomit or their trash).
- Don’t take over their responsibilities. This can only diminish their self-worth.
- Don’t make excuses for their behavior (“His parents are giving him a rough time.” “Her boyfriend just broke up with her”).
- Don’t demand unrealistic promises, such as “I’ll just quit right now forever.” Don’t let them make promises they can’t keep.
- Don’t try to reason with them when they’re not sober.
- Don’t ignore the situation. Do encourage the young person to take care not to get drawn into the lifestyle of the alcoholic. The young person may want to join Al-Anon or Alateen (al-anon.alateen.org), a support program for those twelve to twenty years of age with alcoholic friends or relatives that provides friendship and information.