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Teens who drink are younger -- and more reckless

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P-I REPORTER

King County parents, take note: Chances are about one in three that your high school sophomore hit the bottle at some point in the past month.

The legal drinking age may be 21, but that doesn't stop hundreds of teenagers from obtaining and drinking alcohol, according to the most recent Healthy Youth Survey, a biennial statewide student study conducted by the Department of Health, the Liquor Control Board and other state agencies.

While underage drinking certainly isn't new, these days teens who drink are younger, are binge-drinking and are more likely to engage in risky behavior, school officials and police agree.

With prom season approaching, they say, it's time to get people talking.

"It's a major problem, and I think it's becoming more dangerous," said Madison Middle School community coordinator Renaé Gaines, who helped organize the "Stop Youth Drinking, Start Thinking" Coalition in West Seattle.

The coalition is hosting a community forum this week to discuss teen alcohol abuse and offer advice for parents on how to talk to their children about it. The forums are nationwide, with local events planned on Mercer Island and in Shoreline and Federal Way.

"Some communities come together after a tragedy; that's when people want to do something," Gaines said. "But we need to start doing something *before* something bad happens."

Experts at another recent teen drinking forum in Northeast Seattle outlined how alcohol can harm teens' developing brains, impair judgment and increase chances of becoming addicted to alcohol later.

Seattle Police Officer Kipp Strong told the crowd of about 80 people gathered at Eckstein Middle School that drunken driving is always a concern, but he's also seen underage drinking lead to fights at parties, sexual assaults after proms and teens who drive their car in "doughnuts," "ruining the lawn of a city park.

It's not just a problem for the teens and their parents -- it's something the whole community needs to be aware of, he said.

Some teens, however, argue that cracking down may only make drinking more enticing.

Expecting all teenagers not to drink is as unrealistic as expecting all teenagers to abstain from having sex, said Matthew Pfeiffer, a senior at Seattle's Nova High School who spoke at the Eckstein forum.

Adults should focus on teaching teens how to drink in moderation and know their limits, and provide

help and counseling for addicts, he said.

"The scariest parties I've ever been to are the parties where kids ... start to drink really, really aggressively at the party for the first time, and they've never even had a beer," Pfeiffer said. "They can really hurt themselves. Maybe they'll drive, maybe they'll just get lost. But they'll just do really reckless things because they just don't know how to handle it."

Obviously, not every teenager is tempted to drink, said Bob Conroy, who manages Seattle Public Schools' prevention and intervention services department.

If a third of the student body had alcohol in the past month, that means two-thirds haven't, he said, but parents shouldn't assume underage drinking doesn't happen in their family.

"A lot of parents just don't think their child could ever be involved," he said, but if teens are determined, they can usually get alcohol somewhere.

Gaines said she's caught middle-schoolers drinking on campus before, so it's also a mistake to wait until teens are in high school to broach the subject.

"I don't really think people realize how young they're starting drinking," she said. "Don't wait until they start driving and then just say, 'Don't drink and drive.' "

More troubling to school officials and law enforcement officers are parents who have permissive attitudes toward teen drinking -- in some cases, offering to host parties where alcohol is served, as long as the teens are supervised and their keys confiscated for the evening.

Under Washington state law, that's illegal, and can lead to a potential lawsuit against the adult involved if property is damaged, another crime committed or if anyone is harmed as a result of the drinking.

"There's an attitude that, 'Oh, I did it as a kid, how bad can it be?' But there's a lot more opportunities for kids to hurt themselves now," Conroy said.

Pfeiffer points out that people don't automatically start drinking responsibly the moment they turn 21. If teenagers were introduced to alcohol at a younger age, as happens in parts of Europe, they might learn to manage their drinking better and alcohol-related crimes might drop, he said.

He's not advocating for adults to encourage teen drinking, he said, but if teens are going to do it anyway, adults should teach about moderation.

"It's possible to make kids be more responsible with alcohol," Pfeiffer said. "But I think it's impossible to make kids not drink.

"Prohibition didn't work out so well."

GET INVOLVED

Upcoming forums on teen drinking:

- Tuesday, 6-8 p.m. at South Seattle Community College, 6000 16th Ave S.W., Seattle

- Tuesday, 5:30-7:30 p.m. at Enterprise Elementary, 35101 Fifth Ave. S.W., Federal Way
- Tuesday, 7 p.m. at the Shorecrest High School theater, 15343 25th Ave. N.E., Shoreline (featured speaker is state Attorney General Rob McKenna)
- April 16, 7-9 p.m. at the Islander Middle School library, 8225 S.E. 72nd, Mercer Island

ON THE WEB

Visit the PI's new education blog, School Zone (**blog.seattlepi.com/schoolzone**) and let us know what you think. Here are more resources for parents:

starttalkingnow.org-- Advice for parents from the Washington State Coalition to Reduce Underage Drinking

clearinghouse.adhl.org/-- A collection of Web links with info on alcohol and drug use in Washington

askhys.net/-- More information from the Washington state Healthy Youth Survey

madd.org/Parents.aspx-- Info and tips to prevent underage drinking, from Mothers Against Drunk Driving

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