

**Pima County-
Tucson
Commission on
Addiction
Prevention and
Treatment**

April 12, 2006
Guest Opinion
Stopping Underage Drinking during Prom and Graduation Season

Addressed to all residents of Pima County:

Recently, the AZ Daily Star has printed a number of articles addressing the issue of underage drinking and the important role parents and adults have in reducing this hazardous behavior. As prom and graduation season approach, the Pima County-Tucson Commission on Addiction Prevention and Treatment and the Pima County Task Force to Reduce Underage Drinking encourage the entire community to commit themselves to stopping underage drinking.

Prom and graduation are times of nostalgia, excitement, new possibilities, and making choices and decisions. There will be plenty of opportunities where youth may consider drinking alcohol. Encourage teens to make each moment precious, exciting, and safe. Let them know you do not want them to miss out on important events, but poor choices, like drinking alcohol, can result in unexpected problems and sometimes tragic consequences.

In 2004, during prom and graduation season (April-June 2004), 713 youths under the age of 21 died in alcohol-related traffic fatalities nationwide according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) — stark evidence that prom and graduation season is a particularly dangerous time for our nation's youth. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) reports that sexual assault, including rape, occurs most commonly among women in late adolescence and early adulthood, usually within the context of a date. Research suggests that alcohol use increases the likelihood of sexual assault and engaging in high-risk sex.³ One bad choice could change a teen's life forever.

Teens who drink risk damaging their developing minds and bodies and face the possibility of addiction. According to the NIAAA, children who begin drinking before the age of 15 have a four times greater chance of becoming an alcoholic as an adult than those who begin at 21. Nationally and for Arizona, the average age of initiation is 13 years old. In Pima County, the age is much lower...12.2 years old.(4)

The key to stopping underage drinking is the involvement of parents. A recent survey commissioned by the Century Council revealed that 65% of teens obtain the alcohol they drink from parents, friends' parents, siblings, or older friends — with or without permission. The good news, however, is that among 10-18 year olds, 65% percent cite parents as the leading influence for them not to drink. The Commission on Addiction Prevention and Treatment and the Task Force to Reduce Underage Drinking encourage parents to talk with their teens about the dangers of underage drinking early and often; be a good role model; supervise your child; provide safe alternatives; recognize problem behavior; and seek help when necessary.

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Though use does not always end in addiction, addiction always begins with a decision to use. Experimentation is a big deal and should not be accepted as a rite of passage. What we do matters. Addressing underage drinking could be the most important thing you do. Get informed and take action early!

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Sources:

¹Monitoring the Future Survey, National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), 2005.

²Monitoring the Future Survey, NIDA, 2005.

³*Alcohol Alert*, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), June 2003.

4. *A Call to Action: Reduce Underage Drinking in Pima County!*, Pima County-Tucson Commission on Addiction Prevention and Treatment, August 2004.