



Frenchtown Community Coalition

Working to create a healthy, engaged, and unified community for the youth of Frenchtown

Driving Under the Influence: What's Happening in the Teenage Brain

Driving is one of the most complex tasks the brain performs. It requires attention, judgment, impulse control, coordination, and the ability to respond quickly to unexpected situations. Alcohol and other drugs interfere with these skills in ways that are especially risky for teens and young drivers, even at low levels. Understanding what happens in the brain can help parents have more meaningful conversations with their teens about why drinking and drugged-driving are such a big deal.

Alcohol, cannabis, and other substances affect the brain's communication system. These substances change how brain cells send and receive signals, slowing reaction time and reducing accuracy. When someone is impaired, the brain takes longer to process visual information, such as brake lights, pedestrians, or changing traffic signals. This delay can be the difference between stopping safely and causing a crash.

One of the most important brain areas affected is the prefrontal cortex. This region is responsible for decision-making, judgment, impulse control, and assessing risk. In teens, the prefrontal cortex is still developing, which already makes risk evaluation harder. Alcohol and drugs further suppress this area, increasing confidence while decreasing caution. This is why impaired drivers may feel "fine" or believe they can drive safely even when their brain is clearly not functioning at full capacity.

Substances also affect the cerebellum, the part of the brain that controls balance, coordination, and motor skills. When the cerebellum is disrupted, steering becomes less precise, lane position worsens, and movements are less controlled. Even small amounts of alcohol or THC can reduce coordination, making tasks like braking smoothly or turning accurately more difficult.

Another key issue is divided attention. Safe driving requires multi-tasking — monitoring speed, watching the road, scanning mirrors, and responding to other drivers at the same time. Alcohol and drugs

reduce the brain's ability to split attention, meaning impaired drivers may fixate on one thing and miss others entirely. This is one reason crashes often involve "I didn't see them" scenarios.

Because teens are still developing strong executive function skills, impairment can have a bigger impact on their driving compared to adults. New drivers are also still building muscle memory and experience behind the wheel. Adding alcohol or drugs removes the mental "backup systems" that help compensate for inexperience.

Talking with teens about drinking and drugged-driving works best when the conversation focuses on safety, not punishment. Instead of asking only, "Will you ever drink?" try asking, "What would you do if you were somewhere and people had been drinking?" or "How would you get home if the driver wasn't safe?" These questions invite problem-solving rather than defensiveness.

One practical tool families can use is creating a CODEWORD together. A CODEWORD is any word, phrase, or emoji that means, "I need you to come pick me up, no questions asked right now." It can be something simple or silly — the key is that both the teen and the parent understand what it means. For example, your CODEWORD could be "banana bread." In an unsafe situation, your teen might call or text and say, "I need to make banana bread tomorrow." This is your cue to pick them up immediately. The goal is to remove fear and hesitation in moments where safety matters most.

Having a CODEWORD sends a powerful message: choosing not to drive after drinking or being around impaired drivers is always the right decision. It also reinforces that asking for help is a strength, not a failure. Parents can still have conversations later, when emotions are calmer and safety is no longer at risk.

Make it a goal this year to talk with your teens about drinking, drugged-driving, and safe exits from unsafe situations. Ask what they see at school or hear from friends. Share why the brain struggles under the influence and make a plan — including a CODEWORD — before they ever need it. These conversations, when had early and often, can save lives.

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