

# The State of Underage Drinking in North Carolina

## *Qualitative Executive Summary*

### **Background**

In 2014, the ABC Commission of North Carolina conducted research on the topic of underage drinking. The impetus behind this research was to inform an awareness campaign within the state to highlight the problem of underage drinking and its ensuing consequences. The findings from the qualitative phase of research did uncover insights that were woven into a statewide, communications campaign. Pre/post quantitative research indicates that the campaign was successful in moving the needle on awareness. As a result, the State of North Carolina is continuing their efforts with a Round II Awareness Campaign. This campaign will focus on recent scientific breakthroughs, which indicate that the brain continues to develop up until the age of 25 and to relay the potential, detrimental effects of drinking on the developing brain.

In preparation for this next phase of an on-going awareness campaign, the agency, Eckel & Vaughan, has contracted additional qualitative research to understand what resonates with their target audience and inform this new direction in communications. Though underage drinking and its impact on brain development affects people all the way up through young adulthood, for the purposes of this study and subsequent communications, the agency is focusing their efforts on the middle school ages where they feel the campaign can have the most impact for influencing attitudes and behaviors. Insights obtained in this qualitative phase of research will also be used in a follow-up quantitative study to help identify which messages may have the most wide-reaching impact.

### **Research Purpose**

To understand which specific messages are most impactful for getting across to youth and parents the impact of underage drinking on the developing brain and therefore inform a continued communication campaign on the hazards of underage drinking.

### **Objectives**

- *Understand the perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes of middle school age children and their parents* in relation to the topic of underage drinking.
- Identify *gaps in perceptions* between adults and teens.
- Seek to find a *common level of understanding* that can be leveraged in the development of a communication platform regarding teenage drinking.
- *Identify language that is relatable and motivating* to parents and teens; in other words, put the story in “their own words” so that the story has greater relevancy and impact.

## **Methodology and Research Approach**

Focus groups were a successful forum for obtaining the information in Round I of research and were duplicated for this study. This round of research also mirrored the number of groups and make-up of each group as follows:

### 4 Focus Groups

- 2: Parents of middle school teens
- 1: Middle school age boys
- 1: Middle school age girls
- Each group seated 8 members
- Parental groups lasted 2 hours
- Children's groups lasted 1.5 hours

The focus groups were conducted in the early evening to allow parents/responsible adult (who may work) to transport the child participants to and from the groups.

Each group involved general discussion and a series of interactive exercises to facilitate the questioning and conversation.

## **TOPLINE SUMMARY**

### **PARENTAL CONCERNS REGARDING ALCOHOL AND OTHER ISSUES**

- What are their teens being exposed to via internet/phone/social media?
- Being exposed to more at an earlier age
- What are they as parents not seeing/missing? (Even if they have access to phones/social media platforms etc.)
- As teens become less communicative – what are they not saying?
- Impact of omnipresent technology – Lack of face to face contact/communication in general (even with peers) let alone with parents
- Impact of materialism
- Pressures / Stress
  - Of performing in school/sports
  - Social
  - Societal standards (e.g. body image - especially for girls) etc.
- Drugs

### *Takeaways:*

1. *Alcohol use is just one of a myriad of issues, making it harder for it to get the attention/recognition it may rightfully deserve.*
2. *Also, alcohol use may be actually masked by some of these other challenges.*

## **ADOLESCENT BRAIN—TEEN PERSPECTIVE**

### *Thoughts on Brain Health*

- Girls seemed to initially equate “brain health” either with academic performance, psychoanalysis or physical brain scans.
- Boys tended to talk about getting “headaches” which they equate to stress or the potential for something to be physically wrong. Some also related brain health to being “crazy” or not normal.

### *Perceptions of Activities that Will Help with Brain Development*

- Boys: Do brain “games” (on-line), some video games, study in school and stay away from smoking pot.
- Girls: Studying in school

## **ADOLESCENT BRAIN—PARENT PERSPECTIVE**

### *Thoughts on Brain Health*

- Some parents initially tended to be more confused by the topic
- Parents tend to think of brain development more with their infants and very young children, and some were surprised to find that the brain is still developing to the extent that it is.
- A couple recognized the importance of brain development in this age group because of experience with a child getting a sports-related concussion.
- One parent had been previously exposed to much of this information in a professional seminar and was greatly impacted by it.

### *Perceptions of Activities that Will Help with Brain Development*

- Reading (non-tech, old fashioned, page turning books)
- Taking a break from technology
- Technology use in moderation
- Exercising creativity and imagination
- Old fashioned board games
- Being exposed to different cultures / new ideas
- Family time
- Physical Activity

### *Takeaways:*

1. *Parents’ perspectives are understandably broader than teens, yet they still don’t fully understand the dynamics and full importance of ongoing brain development in their adolescent children.*
2. *Girls seem to be focused on school in relation to the brain.*
3. *Boys seem to relate to what’s most familiar in their world (games, school and apparently the dangers of drugs, but not necessarily recognizing alcohol as a drug).*

### **GIRLS' EMOTIONAL PROGRESSION DURING DISCUSSION**

- Initially ranged from “bored” (by the topic) or “concerned” (expressed as cautious, suspicious anxious etc.) because they don’t know a lot about the brain.
- In general moved towards “confident” (because they now know more) and to feeling they would be more “cautious” about their behavior.

#### *Takeaways:*

1. *The movement of the girls from disinterest to confidence and caution seems like a successful step.*
2. *This may indicate that a campaign centered on the topic of alcohol use and its effect on the developing brain may have the desired effect of changing teen girls’ attitudes and behaviors.*

### **BOYS' EMOTIONAL PROGRESSION DURING DISCUSSION**

- Initially “confused” or “frustrated” – because it’s hard to talk about feelings *and* a topic that they don’t know much about all at the same time.
- Continued to express negative emotions after being presented with the facts related to drinking and brain development. (Cautious, shocked, frustrated, frightened, embarrassed, ashamed, suspicious) presumably about the “state of affairs” related to teenage drinking.

#### *Takeaways:*

1. *These boys at least profess a sense of confidence in their own ability to make good choices and they seem to feel invincible in some ways.*
2. *They tended to feel much of the information presented was irrelevant to them personally, because they are convinced that they are not going to be “stupid” enough to drink and especially not “binge” drink (because they won’t, in their minds, even take the first drink).*
3. *This may indicate that the information did motivate them to act by encouraging them to abstain from alcohol use. (Although they said that they already had no intention of drinking before seeing this information.)*
4. *Interestingly, this same set of boys when asked about the previous NC awareness campaign were very familiar and demonstrated remarkable recall.*
5. *Implication: It’s possible that the previous campaign is having some desired effect.*

## PARENTS' EMOTIONAL PROGRESSION DURING DISCUSSION

- At the beginning of the discussion, the two groups of parents expressed different emotions:
- **Group 1** was *very receptive/positive* about the topic and seemed Excited/Hopeful to learn.
- **Group 2** expressed a broader range of emotions, with some parents seeming “Happy/Hopeful” and others seeming “Overwhelmed/Anxious” about the topic.
- At the end of the discussion, **Group 2** parents still expressed a mix of emotions. Some felt “Confident/Informed” and “armed” with information.
- If they felt positive at the beginning – they tended to feel positive afterwards as well—with maybe some “Caution” or “Surprise” layered in.
- However, one person did move from positive to feeling what seemed to be “defeated” by the stats.
- A couple who felt negative at the beginning continued to exhibit similar feelings including anxious or frightened.
- NOTE: Group 1 did not have the opportunity to express their emotions, at the end of the discussion.

### Takeaways:

1. *The images of the brain scan did have a strong emotional impact on parents—with them using words like “dramatic” and “shocking”—and many did say they intended to go home and talk with their kids. Even if the nature of the discussion might not be as robust as what the team would hope, it is at least a start.*
2. *The focus group conversation did motivate many parents to take some action.*

## WRITTEN STATEMENT EVALUATION

### Most Impactful Statements:

- ***Adolescents are more likely to binge drink (drink 5 or more drinks at a time), experience blackouts (loss of memory from the event) and experience adverse events like unplanned and unwanted sexual activity, fights, accidents and driving while intoxicated than adults.***
  - Reason: Similar to the previous round of research, teens and parents react to the litany of possible hazards of drinking, and this statement links drinking to a variety of consequences.
- ***At least one fifth of North Carolina students started drinking alcohol by age 14. As with the previous research, this statement grabbed attention.***
  - Some felt this percent to be surprisingly high and/or the age surprisingly low.
  - Others imagined that it might be understated.
  - Teens because of what they've seen/been exposed to.
  - Adults more so because they feel survey takers might not be honest, therefore the numbers might not reflect reality, and reality could be even worse.
  - Others question the stat and poke holes: (*Does this mean “taste” it? Was in the presence of their parents or out with friends?*)

- Key Takeaway/Implication: Regardless of the reaction – this statistic gets attention and sparks discussion/debate.
- **For teens, ingesting 3 drinks an hour is potentially lethal because the body cannot process and eliminate the alcohol at that rate.**
  - Part of the reason this statistic garnered so much attention is because it was so challenging for participants to wrap their heads around the idea of a teen drinking this much.
  - Adults in particular questioned what “kind” of a drink (a shot, a beer, a mixed drink? etc.) recognizing that not all drinks are created equal in volume/alcohol content.

#### Moderately Impactful Statements

- **The “back” of the brain controls breathing automatically by sending messages to the diaphragm to contract. High levels of alcohol can slow that center of the brain down so much that a person stops breathing. This can happen during a single drinking event in a teen.**
- **Alcohol kills by anesthetizing (shutting down) the part of the brain that tells you to breathe. Teens are more at risk for this because of being physiologically predisposed to binge drinking.**

#### Neutral Statements

- **Adolescent binge drinking may disrupt brain development in relation to motivation, impulsiveness, self-control and emotion.**
- **Research findings suggest that adolescent alcohol exposure leads to long-lasting brain and behavioral changes in adulthood.**
- **Even moderate drinking in adolescence on a regular basis can cause potentially long lasting changes in the brain.**
- **US study points to genetic changes as a result of binge drinking that makes teenagers more prone to alcoholism and anxiety later in life.**
- **The younger the age of drinking initiation, the greater the risk of alcohol dependence.**
- **An episode of binge drinking can impair judgment and affect performance for days afterward.**

#### Takeaways:

1. The statements linking drinking to brain development/impairment (and potentially death) didn't pack the punch that it was hoped that they would have.
2. Parents in particular seemed less motivated by long-term effects.
  - a. Quote: “At least they aren't dead. Death is permanent.”
3. Parents on day 2 did not really strongly gravitate to the revised statements, which more directly linked alcohol and its impact on the brain with death. However, neither did they indicate anything as being least impactful. “I didn't cross off anything.” This may be an indication that all the information seemed relevant/important to them and/or was even perhaps overwhelming.

4. *Implications: This information may be a lot for teens AND parents to absorb. **Strive to keep it simple; feeding them most impactful bits of info, but being cautious not to overwhelm them, which may lead to inaction.** Try to paint a picture not only of the potentially negative consequences of underage drinking and its impact on the brain, but also help parents feel empowered to make a difference.*

## COMMUNICATION

- Some parents are recognizing that their middle school children are becoming less communicative, and this does raise some concerns about what is going on with their kids and what they are being exposed to. These parents seemed perplexed by how to break through and get their kids to talk.
- Even for those who have had conversations, the talks tend to be more passive and in response to questions the teens ask vs. proactive.
  - In general they express: *“You know - you can come to me with anything.”*
  - Generally the assumption/hope seems to be – *“if they aren’t bringing it up and asking – maybe they aren’t being exposed yet”.*
  - These parents tend to feel they will address the topic once their child is exposed and broaches the subject.
  - Implication: These parents need to be prompted with a sense of urgency.
- Some teens feel that conversations about alcohol equate to their parents lecturing them.

### Takeaways:

1. *Parents seem to want to talk to their kids and recognize the need for communication, they just are in need of tools.*

## IMPACTFUL QUOTES

- Parents want to see what is happening to a teenage brain under the effects of alcohol.
  - “I just need to know what kind of [brain] changes they are talking about. You know how when they show you a smoker, their lungs? And then they show you a non-smoker's lungs? This is your brain. This is your brain on alcohol.”
  - “I'm amazed that they didn't talk more about the brain because when we were growing up it was all about the liver. It make your liver grow smaller, but if you stopped your liver could regrow. But there wasn't anything talking about it affects your brain. It's kind of strange that that's never come out.”
- Parents feel drinking is more of a concern for their high school age children.
  - “I'm thinking I want some statistics. How prevalent is adolescent drinking? Middle school age drinking? You think about high school for sure. But you don't have a bunch of middle school-age kids getting together having a keg party. I don't anyway.”
  - “I am with you. I can see high school more so - they can drive. Unless they're having a party at their house, how can they get to it? I just don't see it.”
- The idea of long-range, potential brain effects doesn't have as much impact as more immediate concerns about the dangers of drinking which could cause death.
  - “I guess it doesn't resonate to me as much, because you still have a brain. But these other things, you can die. That's more immediate. We want them to be safe. They could die. They could stop breathing. That's just like, whoa, they are dead. But you still have a brain. You still going to function even if you drink. We see that. It doesn't resonate that it's as important as the other statements.”
- Importance of family time / dinner time. (parents – re: image of family at the dinner table)
  - “I truly, honestly believe that if 9 out of 10 families sit down to eat together, the world would be a better place, honestly.”
  - “Yeah, that parents are showing an interest in their children. It's important.”
  - “It reflects on the divorce stats in this country. 60% of the people are divorced. I came from a divorced home and my goal was to not have that happen and we have dinner every night at the table.”
    - *Implication: Perhaps this perspective could be leveraged to depict a tool parents can use to connect/open up communication with their kids.*
    - Thought Starter: As not all families look “traditional” and lifestyles don't always lend to dinner at home around the table, perhaps include even dinners “on the go” at a fast food restaurant or in the car, but still as a positive time of connection.

## CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### Information

- The more specific / data driven statements tend to be more impactful.
- However, scientific information must be balanced out by being presented in a basic, consumer- friendly sort of way that can appeal to (and be understood by) adolescents and adults alike.

### Emotional Impact / Motivation to Act

- Short-Term Outweighs Long-Term: Parents especially seem to be more concerned with immediate (and potentially terminal) effects of alcohol use and abuse vs. more long-term, but less severe consequences.
- Denial: There seems to be a level of denial among parents and teens regarding the likelihood of drinking, particularly binge drinking. Teen boys especially say that they “aren’t going to do it”. Some parents seem to be convinced that their kids won’t drink or that if they are feeling pressure they will come to their parents and talk about it.
  - *Implication: These parents need something to jar them out of their denial.*
- Age of Initiation: Also, the younger their children are – the less convinced parents are that their kids will experience immediate risk. Parents tend to equate risk with being of driving age--not just because of the dangers of drinking and driving, but because that’s when their teens in general have more freedom and parents feel they will start to have less control. However, the “1/5 start drinking at age 14” stat does catch attention and could be leveraged (even though some parents poke holes in the stat: “Does that mean a taste? With or without parents present?”).
- Communication: Other parents realize some level of risk, because they already note that their middle school teens are communicating less than before. This makes some parents nervous about what their child is being exposed to. Implication: They need a conversation starter.
- Being overwhelmed may explain in part why some parents didn’t feel inclined to immediately act by communicating this particular brain/alcohol information to their children. (Though some did profess they were going to go home and “chat” with their kids. The general line was: “you can come to us any time, with anything”.) Parents may be concerned about overwhelming their teens and further alienating those who may already be somewhat uncommunicative.
  - *Implication: Care should be taken in a campaign to feed information in manageable chunks, as well as outline simple action items in order to empower parents.*
- “Show” vs. “Tell” whenever possible. (e.g. Respondents poke holes in stats – while the “at a glance” side-by-side brain scan is very impactful. The absence of words seems to give them less to haggle over.)