

# The Hidden Epidemic of Very Young Alcoholics

By Heather Millar

*The stats disguise a startling truth: Kids are starting to drink at the age of 11, 10, even 9. This is how it's happening — and how three young drinkers finally stopped.*

Mary Brennan was only 10 years old when she downed her first vodka screwdriver. Her dad, who runs a dental-equipment company, was at work that afternoon, and her mother hadn't lived with the family since Mary was 5. After school, Mary went home with a friend who lived nearby in Chicago's northwest suburbs. The girl's older brother, an eighth-grader, was drinking in his room with some buddies. Someone had sneaked a bottle of vodka out of his parents' liquor cabinet, and the boys were mixing it with orange juice. Mary, an athletic, gregarious tomboy who constantly sought approval from her own older brothers, hung around the fringes with her friend. She was both scared and thrilled when the friend's brother offered her a glass. "I felt like, Wow, now I'm one of the older kids," recalls Mary, now 18.

By age 12, Mary was drinking most weekends, experimenting to see how much she could hold, sometimes blacking out. By 14, she was drinking every day with friends, getting the booze from the oldest of her three brothers or from kids whose parents looked the other way. Her father, busy making a living and trying to keep the household running, didn't notice. "I got to be an expert at acting sober in front of my father," Mary says now. "And I made sure I didn't let him smell the alcohol on my breath." By 15, she was taking vodka to school in Gatorade bottles. "I couldn't go to class without being drunk," Mary says. "I have no idea how I did any schoolwork, but I got decent grades. I was always amazed that the teachers didn't know I was drunk."

The fall of her sophomore year, Mary went to a party, drank an entire bottle of vodka, and smoked a lot of pot. Then she blacked out. When she regained consciousness two hours later, she felt horribly ill and pleaded with the other kids — none of whom she knew well — to phone for help. But nobody would call an ambulance because they were afraid of getting arrested. "I had never felt so sick," Mary says. "Everything was spinning. I was lying on the floor, throwing up. I was freezing; then I was hot. I would think I was okay, then try to get up and realize that I couldn't. It was terrifying. I was convinced I was going to die."

Finally, one of the kids at the party drove Mary home. She slept off what she later learned was alcohol poisoning — a potentially fatal suppression of the central nervous system (which regulates breathing and heart rate, among other things) caused by guzzling toxic amounts of liquor in a short time. The very next day, Mary was back to drinking.

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## A Hidden Epidemic

The total number of underage drinkers has remained almost the same since the early 1990s — about 20 percent of eighth-graders and 58 percent of 12th-graders report being drunk at least once in their lives. But these statistics disguise an even more disturbing fact: Some studies show that kids who drink are starting earlier. Much earlier.

“A third of kids ages 12 to 17 had their first drink before 13,” says Susan Foster, director of policy research for the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA). “That’s about 6.4 million kids, many more than there have been historically. Very young drinkers are a huge concern.”

No large, nationally representative studies specifically track drinking before age 12. But in a national survey conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan, a significant number of 13-year-old drinkers reported starting two years earlier, at age 11. At least one national study, sponsored by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, says that nearly 10 percent of 9-year-olds have had more than a sip of liquor — a finding that suggests that approximately 427,000 9-year-olds have tried alcohol. And some do more than try. “We’ve received calls from parents of kids as young as 8,” says Cole Rucker, CEO and cofounder of Echo Malibu, a California residential treatment center. “Every year, alcohol use shows up in younger and younger kids.”

Kids who start drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to have later problems with alcohol abuse than those who start drinking at 21, according to a long-term national survey by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). Young drinkers may set themselves up for a host of other troubles, experts say, including abuse of different drugs; possible impairment of critical, developing brain areas; and accidents, suicides, and homicides. They’re more likely to be the victims of a violent crime, and more likely to have unprotected sex, contract STDs, and get pregnant. And they are also four times more likely to be involved in car crashes than kids who don’t drink at all, reports the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

## How Kids Get Started

Where do kids that young get liquor? Many, like Mary, are supplied by older friends or siblings. Others live in households where little or no effort is made to keep alcohol out of kids’ hands. In two nationwide surveys sponsored by the American Medical Association in 2005, underage drinkers (the study polled kids as young as 13) said they found it easy to obtain alcohol from an adult. Two-thirds said it was easy to get alcohol at home without their parents’ finding out — and one-third said they could get it easily with their parents’ knowledge.

Now 24, Brooke B. (she doesn’t want her last name used) remembers asking her dad for a drink when she was only 10. A shy child, she was always eager to please, to do things perfectly, to make

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everything right. After her parents divorced and she and her mother moved to Palm Springs, CA, Brooke regularly visited her dad in Coeur d'Alene, ID, where he worked as a beer distributor. On a hot summer day, Brooke asked her dad if she could try one of his beers. To her surprise, he handed her a can. She found the taste “disgusting” at first, she says, but she liked the idea of doing something daring.

“I asked for beer every so often after that, when we were on camping trips, and my dad always gave it to me,” she recalls. “Then I started sneaking. It was easy to do because alcohol was everywhere in my dad’s house. I snuck it for years and years.”

Brooke got drunk for the first time when she was 12, sitting in her father’s living room with her then-13-year-old stepsister, watching for the headlights of his car, the signal to hide all evidence of their secret partying. “I knew my dad liked drinking,” Brooke says today, “but I also knew what it did to him when he had too much — made him grumpy and sloppy. I guess I was curious to see what it would do to me.” She felt transformed. “I didn’t have to be shy anymore,” Brooke says. “I didn’t have to be me.”

At 15, Brooke veered out of control. A straight-A student until then, she began failing in school and disappearing from her mother’s house for days at a time, staying with her 19-year-old boyfriend. “My mother would call the cops to bring me back home,” Brooke says. As a high school senior, she started using pot, cocaine, and ecstasy. Her mother tried to deal with the problem by grounding Brooke. “She’d take away my car. And one time she took off the door to my room, so she could see what was going on or if I was sneaking out.” Brooke graduated from high school, turned 17 a week later, and moved out. “My mother and I had both had enough,” Brooke says. “I just wanted to be on my own. She was getting in the way of my partying.”

Brooke lived with her boyfriend for a while, then tried junior college, but her addiction kept her from moving forward. Four years after high school, just before she entered treatment at the Betty Ford Center, Brooke was virtually homeless, crashing for a night or two with friends, then wandering the streets of San Diego, committing petty crimes to pay for drugs and alcohol.

## Risk Factors to Watch For

“The traditional thinking is that risk factors for alcohol abuse show up in adolescence,” says Robert A. Zucker, Ph.D., director of the Addiction Research Center at the University of Michigan, who has led studies designed to identify kids at risk for alcohol and other substance abuse. “But, actually, they can show up earlier — in children 9 or younger, even in preschoolers.”

Chad Dignan of Eden Prairie, MN, got drunk for the first time when he was 9, at a party thrown by one of his older sisters while their parents were away. A thin boy with sandy hair, Chad wandered into the living room and started drinking beer. He also tried his first cigarette and puffed some

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marijuana. Soon after, he began nipping the leftovers from his father's martinis, then stealing from vodka bottles that his father stored in the garage. His parents' marriage was troubled, and his dad was a problem drinker, sometimes verbally abusive when he was under the influence. "Drinking was an escape from all my problems," explains Chad, now 19 and clean for more than three years.

Kids at risk for early drinking may have a parent who is an alcoholic or a problem drinker. That was the case with Chad and Brooke, whose fathers drank heavily, and with Mary, whose mother is an alcoholic in recovery. But having an alcoholic parent doesn't guarantee that a kid will drink — and not having an alcoholic parent doesn't guarantee that a kid won't. "Yes, we see problems in kids who are children of alcoholics," says Vivian B. Faden, Ph.D., deputy director of the Division of Epidemiology and Prevention Research at the NIAAA. "But we have a huge problem going on with lots of other kids too. Some who fall off the cliff are kids you never would have expected, kids who always followed the rules and have had minimal previous involvement with drinking. They can end up making poor decisions."

## Other Risk Factors

Children at risk for early drinking may also:

- \* Have a close friend or sibling who uses alcohol and/or other drugs
- \* Tend to hold in anger or negative feelings instead of expressing themselves — or, at the other extreme, fly off the handle too easily
- \* Be socially awkward
- \* Have poor impulse control
- \* Engage in risk-taking behavior
- \* Have parents who don't keep track of their whereabouts or behavior
- \* Have experienced trauma, such as a parental divorce
- \* Receive harsh or inconsistent discipline from parents
- \* Have experienced childhood abuse
- \* Be aggressive or hard to control
- \* Do poorly in school

Zucker points out that not every child with these traits and behaviors will become a drinker, nor will every young drinker exhibit them. But knowing about risk factors can help alert parents, teachers, and counselors to potential problems so they can be prevented by timely intervention.

Chad was 11 when his parents announced they were divorcing. After that, he says, his drinking and drug use accelerated. "I tried it all: crystal meth, LSD, cocaine, ecstasy. And I never stopped drinking." In fact, he graduated to binge drinking — consuming more than five drinks in a sitting.

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According to a 2005 national survey at the University of Michigan, 10.5 percent of all eighth-graders and 28 percent of high school seniors had engaged in binge-drinking in the previous two-week period. “When I was bingeing, I felt cool and popular,” Chad says.

When he was 14, Chad discovered hotel parties: An older kid, at least 18, would rent a room. “We’d all show up, get high, and drink a lot,” says Chad. “No parents were there, so we could trash the hotel room. I would always tell my parents I was going to some smart kid’s house, a kid who was doing well in school.” Chad’s parents didn’t ask many questions, something his mother, Reneé Dignan, now admits was a big mistake. “I didn’t want to believe there was a problem,” she says.

Things got worse. Always an athlete, Chad began to get high on cocaine, pot, and alcohol before football and ice hockey games. He played football drunk, hurt his knee, and required surgery. While on acid, he set fire to his school. For many kids, as with Chad, early drinking leads to early abuse of other drugs. More than 66 percent of kids who are heavy drinkers also use illicit drugs, compared with 5.5 percent of nondrinkers, according to a CASA report.

## Why Treatment Is Tough

After her frightening bout with alcohol poisoning, Mary Brennan told her father she thought she needed help. But he was unable to grasp the seriousness of her problem. “I think he was in denial,” says Mary. “He said, ‘You’re only 15. There’s no way that it’s already out of hand. It can’t be that bad.’” He sent her to an outpatient treatment center in their suburban town. “It was hard to take the program seriously,” Mary recalls. “The people who ran it were amazing, but they were only with us a few hours a day. After a while, I realized that half the kids in there were lying about their drinking, about wanting to quit. I started drinking again too.” For two years after her unsuccessful trip to rehab, Mary led a double life. To her dad and her counselors, she was “in recovery.” To her friends, she was a party animal who still drank every day. Brooke and Chad also bounced out of their first outpatient rehab programs and continued drinking.

Nine out of 10 teens who get treatment for alcohol abuse will relapse at least once, according to Judi Hanson, program director of Sobriety High West Academy in Edina, MN, a charter school for teens with substance-abuse problems. Emerging research suggests that part of the reason may be changes in brain development caused by early alcohol abuse: Very young drinkers may prime themselves to seek out alcohol even if it makes them sick, according to a 2006 animal study.

Jaime Diaz-Granados, M.D., chairman of the psychology and neuroscience department at Baylor University, exposed adolescent mice to alcohol. Then, when the mice grew up, he and his team offered them alcohol again. “We found that if we first exposed animals to alcohol as adolescents, they would seek it out as adults, even though it then made them sick,” he says. A different group of mice got its first illness-inducing exposure to alcohol in adulthood. When these mice were

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offered alcohol a second time, they refused it. “This relates to children,” Dr. Diaz-Granados explains. “Early drinking can alter normal brain development, leaving the adult more vulnerable to drinking problems.”

## Getting Through at Last

Many kids who abuse alcohol don’t get effective treatment — or any treatment at all. Of the 3.7 million kids ages 12 to 17 who met the criteria for alcohol-abuse disorder (and/or received some treatment for it) in 2004, only 232,000, or less than one-tenth, were treated in a specialty facility, reports the NIAAA. And rehab programs for young people often consist of short-term outpatient treatment, mainly because that’s what health insurance companies are most likely to pay for. But that form of treatment works better for adults than for kids, who need more support and structure. In 2004, the Steering Committee of the NIAAA’s Initiative on Underage Drinking Research launched a long-term research program to help professionals better understand how to prevent and treat adolescent alcohol abuse. Treating teen and preteen drinking is a big job, says Carol Loveland-Cherry, Ph.D., a professor at the University of Michigan School of Nursing who has studied alcohol use among young school-age children. “It requires work at multiple levels — with the adolescent, the school, the family, and the community.” This kind of “whole person” approach is labor-intensive, and thus often expensive. For example, residential programs — often the most effective treatment for teen drinkers who haven’t been helped by outpatient programs — involve a regimented daily schedule: breakfast, school, lunch, art classes or recreational therapy, individual therapy sessions, chores, dinner, then a 12-step meeting that can last up to two hours. Such programs often aren’t covered by insurance.

The whole-person approach is what finally worked for Mary Brennan, Brooke B., and Chad Dignan. When Mary was 17, she again asked her father for help. This time, he faced the fact that his daughter was an alcoholic, researched addiction programs, and flew with her to California, where she entered Echo Malibu, a treatment center that admits only six teens at a time. “It was, ‘I’m doing this or I’m not going to survive,’” Mary says. “I was hanging out with drug dealers, always looking over my shoulder.”

In 2003, 20-year-old Brooke, emaciated at 85 pounds, called home and begged her mother to check her into the Betty Ford Center in Rancho Mirage, CA. Brooke responded well, she says, to the strict structure of the treatment program. And because she’d always been shy, she found comfort in the recovery community. “Knowing that there are other people like me gave me strength,” Brooke says. “I learned that I’m not crazy, I’m just alcoholic.” Sober since rehab, she works at an insurance company.

After he set the fire, Chad Dignan faced a police officer in the principal’s office who gave him a choice: juvenile detention or rehab. A counselor at the outpatient treatment center Chad attended



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suggested he enroll at Sobriety High West Academy in nearby Edina, one of five Sobriety High campuses in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. His mother was reluctant to transfer him from an affluent school district with lots of extracurricular programs and sports, but Chad insisted. “He kept saying if he went back to his old school, he would go back to using,” says Reneé Dignan. She knew things were different at Sobriety High when Chad threw a Halloween party not long after starting there. Some of his former, drug-using friends showed up — and his new classmates surrounded the uninvited guests and escorted them out. “Sobriety High was a lifeline,” says Reneé, who now serves on the school’s board, as does Chad, a community college student.

Mary found enough peace and individual counseling at Echo Malibu to begin working through the rage and pain she had felt when her mother left their family. “At Echo, I had to accept that my mom may never be the way I want her to be,” says Mary, who’s now a freshman at a Christian university in Southern California. “My dad and I started to create a great relationship. And every day I get up and make a conscious decision not to drink.”

## **Signs that your child may be drinking:**

He or she has a new friend who makes you uneasy, or a friend you’ve never met; adopts a “nothing matters” attitude; withdraws emotionally, becoming depressed, anxious, or secretive; is having trouble at school. If you see any of these signs and suspect a serious problem, take a whiff of your kid’s soft drink or sports drink bottles. Filling empty bottles with alcohol is a common tactic of underage drinkers. And don’t forget the most obvious tip-offs: You smell alcohol on your child’s breath or find bottles or cans in her backpack or closet.