



How WI Prevents Underage Drinking

# Backgrounder: An Adult-Focused Campaign

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services is committed to reducing underage drinking in Wisconsin. In 2018, the Division of Care and Treatment Services approached KW2, a Madison-based marketing firm, to develop a new statewide underage drinking prevention campaign.

The Small Talks campaign is based on research and collaboration with Wisconsin groups interested in underage drinking prevention, including parents, Alliance for Wisconsin Youth coalitions, and substance use prevention specialists. These groups provided feedback through sessions at the 2018 Wisconsin Alcohol Policy Seminar, focus groups, and meetings of the State Council on Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse's Prevention Committee.

## Culture of drinking

Alcohol is heavily engrained into Wisconsin's culture. Drinking alcohol is not only acceptable, but it is expected as a rite of passage. Parents and other caring adults may be reluctant to have conversations about underage drinking because they don't know where to start, what to do, and what to say. It is critical that parents and caring adults have the information and confidence to have conversations about the dangers of underage drinking. Research shows that parents and other caring adults are the most powerful influence on a young person's choices about underage drinking.

## Underage drinking is a problem

Underage drinking and its associated problems have profound consequences not just for underage drinkers, but also for their families, their communities, and society. Alcohol use at a young age can permanently impair brain function by affecting the physical development of the brain structure as well as brain functioning. Negative effects include decreased ability in planning, executive functioning, memory, spatial operations, and attention. The benefits of reducing underage drinking are substantial, including saving lives and dollars and promoting the health of young people. Delaying the age at which young people begin drinking will reduce their chances of developing an alcohol use disorder and of experiencing other negative consequences.

## Because you care about your kids, you care about underage drinking

Small Talks is a multi-year campaign focused on perception and behavior change.

Current perception	Desired perception
Attitudes and behaviors are instilled in youth that drinking is okay. Because it's so accepted in Wisconsin culture parents may think it is without harm to youth.	Underage drinking has real harmful health effects and is a problem parents have the confidence to talk about.
Current behavior	Desired behavior
Parents don't know how to talk to their kids about underage drinking.	Parents frequently talk to their children about underage drinking.

The Small Talks campaign launched in April 2020.

## **Objective**

The objective of the Small Talks campaign is to create public awareness of the importance of talking to young people early and often about the effects of underage drinking.

## **Goal**

The goal of the Small Talks campaign is to normalize conversations with young people about the dangers of underage drinking.

## **Audiences**

The Small Talks campaign has three target audiences.

- **Primary:** Parents and caregivers of young children (ages 8-12)
- **Secondary:** Teachers, coaches, and other mentors who have influence or interact with children on a regular basis
- **Tertiary:** Policymakers

## **Tactics**

The Small Talks campaign features a suite of resources for parents and caregivers to increase the awareness of the prevalence and risks of underage drinking; equip them with knowledge, skills, and confidence to prevent underage drinking; and increase their actions to prevent underage drinking. The suite of products includes a website – [SmallTalksWI.org](http://SmallTalksWI.org) – fact sheets, Facebook posts, Instagram posts, newsletter articles, posters, website buttons, a window cling, and yard signs. All of the products were tested to ensure they deliver the right messages to the primary audience.

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services will amplify Small Talks messaging throughout the state, utilizing the Alliance for Wisconsin Youth, community groups, an electronic newsletter, events, press releases, social media, and schools.

## **Evaluation**

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services is using several methods to track the impact of this campaign. A pre-campaign launch survey was distributed statewide through the Alliance for Wisconsin Youth, Facebook, and Twitter to gauge the attitudes and behaviors of adults regarding underage drinking. A post-campaign launch survey will be developed and distributed through the same channels to provide insight on changes in perceptions and behaviors. Additionally, visits to the campaign website will be reviewed monthly to track engagement with the online content, including downloads of the campaign materials – fact sheets, posters, etc. All organizations helping children grow up healthy and alcohol-free are invited to join this campaign by using the materials available on the campaign website. All partner organizations are invited to share stories on how they are implementing the campaign and its impact locally.

## **Funding**

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services is using funding from the federal Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant to develop, implement, and evaluate the Small Talks campaign.