

# Convos with Kiddos

Talking with Your 10- to 14-Year-Old About Alcohol



# Why Talk to Kids About Alcohol?

- Kids who drink are more likely to be the victims of violent crimes.
- Kids who drink are more likely to be involved in alcohol-related traffic crashes.
- Kids who drink are more likely to have serious school-related problems.
- You have more influence on your child's values and decisions about drinking before he or she begins to use alcohol.
- Parent involvement can have a major impact on children's drinking, especially during the preteen and early teen years. Your child looks to you for guidance and support in making life decisions—including the decision not to use alcohol.

# “But 10 to 14 is So Young!”

- This is the age when some children begin experimenting with alcohol. Even if your child is not yet drinking alcohol, he/she may be receiving pressure to drink or hearing about friends who have.
- **Act Now.** Keeping quiet about how you feel about your child’s alcohol use might lead him/her to believe you think alcohol use is OK for kids.
- **It’s NOT easy.** As kids get older, their friends’ influence becomes more and more important. Being accepted by other young people is a priority for kids and teens as they are forming their tribe and building a sense of community independent from their parents. While this is developmentally on track, it can be a tough pill for parents to swallow. Keep hanging in there.
- **Kids WILL listen...** even if you think they’re not. Study after study shows even during the teen years, parents have an enormous influence on their children’s behaviors.
- The point here is, **YOU make a difference.**
- Most kids, preteens and teens don’t drink yet, and parents voicing disapproval of underage alcohol consumption is the prime reason kids choose not to drink.

# The Risks

- Because alcohol use alters the thought process, teens may fail to recognize the risks associated with otherwise normal activities. Alcohol use has been linked with teen deaths by drowning, suicide and homicide.
- Teens who use alcohol are more likely to be sexually active at earlier ages, to have sexual intercourse more often, and to have unprotected sex than teens who don't drink.
- The majority of kids who drink tend to drink to get drunk, or binge drink (5 or more drinks during one occasion for boys; 4 or more drinks during one occasion for girls).
- A person who begins drinking as a young teen is four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than someone who waits until adulthood to use alcohol.

# Their World

- Early adolescence is a time of big and often confusing changes for young people and their parents. It is a whole new world with a whole new dynamic.
- Trying to understand what it means to be a teen in today's world can help you stay closer to your child and have more influence on the choices he or she makes.



# Changes in the Brain

- As a child matures and grows, his or her brain continues to develop too. In fact, the brain's final, adult wiring may not even be complete well into the 20s!
- In some ways, the pre-teen/teen brain is “wired” to help youth navigate adolescence and to take some of the risks necessary to find independence from their parents. They want to fit in AND stand out. This may help to explain why teens often seek out new, thrilling, and sometimes dangerous experiences—they are looking to increase their own understanding of the world and develop their own value system.
- It can also offer a possible reason for why young people act so impulsively, often not recognizing that their actions can lead to serious problems. Partying and drinking can exacerbate these risks.

# Growing Up and Fitting In

- As children approach adolescence, “fitting in” becomes vital to their social existence. Kids begin to become more self-conscious about their bodies and their look; they wonder if they are good enough; they compare themselves to celebrities and peers alike.
- Young people look to friends and the media for clues on how they measure up and how they should act. They begin to explore social norms and question adult values and rules.
- Naturally, this desire for independence can also lead to conflict between young people and their parents. Respecting your child’s growth and independence while still providing support and setting limits is a key challenge during this period.
- Teens who feel misunderstood, left out, or that they don’t fit in are more likely to do things to try to please their peers, including procuring and experimenting with alcohol. Because this is a time in their development that often leaves young people feeling unsure of themselves, it’s important you let your child know they, in your eyes, do measure up and that you care about them deeply.

# Your Influence

- The best way to influence your kids to avoid drinking is to have a strong, trusting relationship with them.
  - Being attuned, responsive, engaged and predictable creates a foundation for healthy attachment.
- Kids are more likely to delay drinking when they have a close, supportive tie with a parent or guardian
  - As your child is confronted with making big decisions in the face of peer pressure, help them to feel good about sharing their feelings by validating their experiences.
- If your kids do begin to drink, a healthy relationship with them will help protect them from alcohol-related problems

# Build a Bond

- **Establish open communication** – Make it easy for your kiddo to talk to you. Validate his or her experiences rather than dismissing or minimizing. Cars are often a great place to have a tough or uncomfortable talk. The positioning of passengers in a car eliminates the need for eye contact and keeps people from giving up on the conversation since they can't walk out.
- **Show you care** – Even though they might not always act like it, teens need to know they are important to their parents. Make a point to regularly spend one-on-one time with them—when you can put down your phone, your work, or other responsibilities to offer them your undivided attention.
- **Get in tune** – As parents, it is natural to want to fix problems and offer solutions; to minimize their issues; to put things into perspective. But sometimes, parents just need to listen, empathize, reflect, and notice how their kids are feeling. Kids need to know you are doing more than *hearing*, that you are *listening*. Perhaps more importantly, they need to know you are in this with them, helping them learn to accept and manage their feelings in healthy ways.

# Build a Bond

- **Draw the line** – Stress is often rooted in the unknown, and adolescence is a period for young people that is uncharted territory. Setting clear, realistic expectations, boundaries and limits offer a baseline from which children can make choices. Establishing rules and appropriate consequences for breaking those rules provides structure; there is calm in consistency.
- **Offer acceptance** – Make sure your teen knows you realize being young is tough and that you appreciate them and the healthy choices they make. Recognize and celebrate accomplishments and efforts alike. Provide constructive feedback, while avoiding mocking, teasing, and criticizing.
- **Understand your child is growing up** – This doesn't mean you shouldn't be involved. Rather, as you guide your kiddo's behavior, make an effort to respect his or her growing need for independence and privacy.

# Tips for Talking

- **Encourage conversation** – Again, the car can be a great time and place for constructive conversation; they're a captive audience and there's also the benefit that they don't have to be facing you, which can make things less awkward.
- **Ask open-ended questions** – This is key if you don't want a one-word answer. You can also add, "There is no right answer... I'm curious about your thoughts/opinion." If your child feels you are interviewing or interrogating them on their beliefs about substances, the responses you get will be stifled and fail to be a true representation of their developing belief system.
- **Control your emotions** – People tend to mirror each other's behavior. If you escalate, so will your child. If you use an even, respectful tone, chances are your child will follow suit. They are ultimately in control of making big decisions regarding alcohol use. Maintaining your composure shows you can be a trusted source of support and guidance.

# Tips for Talking

- **Rethink asking “why?”** – “Why” is a word that creates a defensive reaction. It alerts us, causes us to feel questioned, and presents a need to justify our reasoning for whatever is in question. Here’s an example of asking the same question, two different ways: *Why did you do that? What made that your choice?*
  - “Why did you do that?” calls for typical responses that include, “Because I felt like it” and “Because I can.” Whereas, “What made that your choice?” promotes thoughtfulness and contemplation and may sound less accusatory.
- **Pick a good time** – Deciding to talk when either you or your child/teen is angry, upset or sad is not a great idea, since you would be initiating the conversation with an emotional charge. Finding a time when you can sit down without distractions and enjoy discussing expectations and concerns and learning about each other is paramount. Also, consider what may be going on in their lives to determine if they are in a good place to talk. Initiating a heartfelt conversation during finals week or as they are on their way to an event may lead you to be seen as out of sync and disconnected.
- **Avoid the soapbox** – Your kid will tune you out if you go into lecture mode. Connection and engagement are the keys to making a lasting impact that they will value and thoughtfully consider. Prior to talking to your child, you may also want to consider and recall the attitudes you had about drinking prior to turning 21. As you have grown, your understanding of the dangers of underage alcohol use have undoubtedly become clearer. That being said, how receptive were you to these conversations when you were in their shoes? What helped or do you think might have been more effective?

# Their Views

- Ask your kids what they already know about alcohol
- Ask how they feel about drinking
- Ask what they think the reasons are that kids drink
  
- Listen without interrupting
- Avoid making judgments
- Seize the opportunity



# Facts About Alcohol

- Alcohol is a powerful drug that slows down the body and mind. It impairs coordination, slows reaction time, and impairs vision, clear thinking and judgement.
- Beer and wine are not “safer” than hard alcohol.
- 12 oz of beer = 5 oz of wine = 1.5 oz of 80-proof liquor
- All have the same effects on the body and mind.
- Anyone can develop a serious drinking problem, even a teenager.

# Good Reasons Not to Drink

When you talk to your kiddos about drinking alcohol, try to avoid scare tactics. Most young people are aware many people drink without problems, so it is important to discuss the consequences of alcohol use without overstating your case. Adolescents tend to feel invincible and hold a “that-wont-happen-to-me” mentality. The more exceptions you give, the more removed from the realistic consequences you may make them feel. You don’t want to cause extra reason for eye-rolling.



# Good Reasons Not to Drink

- **You want your child to avoid alcohol** – Share your expectations about their drinking. As mentioned earlier, your values and attitudes matter, even though your child might not always show it. Letting them know the reasons you don't want them to drink is important too—it's not because you're an officer of the fun police; you know the dangers and want them to be safe because you care for them.
- **To maintain self-respect** – Appeal to your child's strength and self-respect by letting them know they are too smart and have too much going for them to need alcohol. Maybe talk about how some people use alcohol as a coping tool or to self-medicate. You may also want to share relatable examples of how alcohol use might lead to embarrassing situations or events.
- **Drinking is illegal** – Getting caught using alcohol could lead to issues with the police or at school, which could negatively impact their ability to participate on sports teams or in academic clubs, hinder college acceptance, and/or limit employment opportunities. Even if it doesn't become a legal issue, their friends' parents may not let their child hang out with them.

# Good Reasons Not to Drink

- **Drinking can be dangerous** – One of the leading causes of teen deaths is motor vehicle crashes involving alcohol. Alcohol impairs judgment, which can result in increased vulnerability to risks such as sexual assault and unprotected sex. Someone who has been drinking is likely to underestimate danger and less effective at protecting him or herself.
- **You have a family history of alcohol use disorder** – If one or more members of your family has suffered from alcohol use disorder, your child may be somewhat more vulnerable to developing a drinking problem.
- **Alcohol affects young people differently than adults** – Drinking while the brain is still maturing may lead to long-lasting intellectual effects and may even increase the likelihood of developing a drinking problem later in life. While the brain is still developing, young people should be learning healthy coping skills and effective strategies for dealing with big feelings.

# Handle Peer Pressure

- The media glamorizes drinking
- Kids want to be accepted by their peers
- Help your child to anticipate high-pressure situations by brainstorming
  - “You go to a party and your friend offers you a beer...”
  - “A friend is passing around alcohol at a sleepover...”
  - “An older friend who has been drinking offers you a ride home...”
  - “At a friend’s house, the parents are home but make you give them your keys...”
  - What other situations can your child suggest?

# Tips to Say “No”

- Be assertive
- Stand up straight
- Make eye contact
- Say how you feel
- Don't make excuses
- Stand up for yourself

# Tips for Hosting a Teen Party

- **Agree on a set guest list (no party crashers)** – Have a discussion with your child about the list he or she presents to gauge the type of gathering and the number of people who will be attending.
- **Discuss ground rules in advance** – Let them know what is and what is not allowed in your home. Can guests leave and come back? What time does it end? Can people stay overnight? Door open or closed? Work through possible issues before the event so you and your child can be prepared and able to anticipate what to expect.
- **Encourage your child to involve a responsible friend** – Including a friend in the planning may increase enthusiasm for the gathering, take some of the pressure off of your teen, and ensure a peer has your child's back in the event that questionable behavior ensues. There is strength in numbers, and having two people invested in hosting increases the chances of a successful party.

# Tips for Hosting a Teen Party

- **Brainstorm fun activities** – Choosing a theme gives a party structure. Pinterest is full of ideas for keeping people entertained. Yard games, popular board games, painting, crafting, making homemade pizzas, etc. give direction to a party and foster interaction and connection.
- **If a guest brings alcohol into your house, ask them to leave** – Let your teen know this will be your plan so they're not surprised if it happens.
- **Serve plenty of snacks and non-alcoholic drinks** – Again, Pinterest is a great resource to find recipes for fun party foods and unique, non-alcoholic drinks.
- **Be visible and available—but don't join the party** – You are there to make sure everyone is safe and respecting the rules of your home. Give them their space and privacy while also being present enough to make sure they have enough snacks and are upholding your expectations.

# Prevention Strategies – Be Involved

- **Monitor alcohol use in your home** – Know your alcohol supply and keep track of what you have. Make it clear to your child that you don't allow parties or gatherings in your home when an adult isn't present. Encourage your child to invite friends over when you are home or include a friend in a family outing as a way to get to know your child's peer group. Similarly to your own child, if their friends value and respect you, they will be less likely to encourage behavior in your home that would disappoint you.
- **Connect with other parents** – Get to know other parents and guardians so you can keep closer tabs on your child—it takes a village. Getting acquainted with other parents makes it easier to call them if you have questions or concerns about activities that may be occurring. Building a community of parents also suggests to your child and their friends that you are not alone in having concerns about teen drinking—many parents share the same concerns about risky behavior.
- **Keep track of your teen** – Be aware of your child's whereabouts and plans and ask them to be accountable. In conversations with your child, express your need to know where they are is out of care and concern, rather than that you distrust them. Request check-in phone calls and/or discuss a phone app that shows their location as a term of paying their cellphone bill.

# Prevention Strategies – Set a Good Example

- Children and teens are influenced by the world around them, but your influence and attitudes have the strongest impact on them when it comes to drinking alcohol. Consider what they are seeing you doing, and remember, they are watching and taking cues.
- By modeling healthy and responsible choices when it comes to alcohol, you are demonstrating positive behavior for your child. Children who witness the use of substances to manage difficult and uncomfortable emotions may be more likely to resort to the same strategies when challenges arise in their lives, thereby fostering the continuation of intergenerational addiction.
- The messages we send:
  - **Abstaining** from drinking shows them that alcohol isn't essential for having fun and enjoying life.
  - **Moderate drinking** shows how to have a healthy relationship with alcohol.
  - **Drinking heavily and often** shows them that you try to solve problems in an unhealthy way.

# Warning Signs

- Finding alcohol among your child's belongings
- Smelling alcohol on his/her breath
- Mood changes
  - E.g., increased secrecy, lying, escalated anger, irritability, defensiveness, isolation, guilt
- School problems
  - E.g., poor attendance, low grades, outreach from school faculty, recent disciplinary issues, drinking on school trips or at school functions
- Change in friends—with reluctance to have you get to know them or spend time around them
- “Nothing matters” attitude
  - E.g., poor hygiene, disheveled appearance, lack of involvement in activities, decrease in motivation, general low energy (think chronically hungover)
- Physical or mental problems
  - E.g., memory lapses, poor recall, lack of focus, bloodshot eyes, lack of coordination, slurred speech

# Free Parent Toolkits

- ***Talking to Teens About Drugs and Alcohol, HealthyChildren.org***
  - <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/teen/substance-abuse/Pages/Talking-to-Teens-About-Drugs-and-Alcohol.aspx>
- ***Talking to Your Teen About Alcohol, DrinkWise.org***
  - <https://drinkwise.org.au/parents/talking-to-your-teen-about-alcohol/#>
- ***8 Tips for Talking to Your Teen About Alcohol and Other Drugs, Drug Policy Alliance***
  - <https://www.drugpolicy.org/sites/default/files/SafetyFirst-8-Tips-for-Talking-Tip-Sheet.pdf>
- ***The Power of You(th), Mothers Against Drunk Driving***
  - <http://www.powerofyouth.com/#toolkits>