

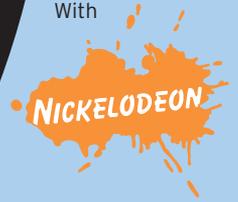


Kids and alcohol don't mix.

How to Talk to Your Adolescent About Alcohol



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THE CENTURY COUNCIL
Fighting drunk driving and underage drinking



WHAT YOUR CHILD NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT ALCOHOL

They're growing up. Your 9-year-old wants to pack his own suitcase for the family vacation. Your 11-year-old doesn't want you to open her dresser drawers. And don't even think about picking out a CD for a 13-year-old.

Not yet teenagers but no longer little kids, young adolescents—or tweens—love their increasing independence. But happily for parents, 9-to-13-year-olds still look to you for direction on important decisions. This is a time to give it your ALL—ask, listen, learn—so that you'll be better prepared to understand and respond to the changes your child is experiencing. And, most important, remember to have an open dialogue—to talk, talk, talk—and together you'll be able to meet the challenges.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO TALK ABOUT ALCOHOL NOW

One of the big decisions your child may face, even at this age, is how to say no to alcohol. The statistics make it clear that your involvement is essential. Why? Government data indicates that underage drinking continues to be a troubling issue:

About 10.7 million Americans aged 12 to 20—almost a third of underage kids—say they consume alcohol, according to the 2003 National Survey on Drug Use and Health.

That same study found that older teens are more likely to drink: 36 percent by the time they're 17.

MORE HELPFUL IDEAS

- We've created some information and activities to help your child learn more about why alcohol and kids don't mix. Have your child log on to www.asklistenlearn.com.
- You'll find a list of resources that will provide lots of additional information about kids and alcohol by logging on to www.asklistenlearn.com/parents.

What's worse, 65 percent of kids under the age of 21 who say they drink say they get alcohol from family and friends. That means they get it from their parents, their friends' parents, or older friends and siblings. Make no mistake: Tweens know what's going on, and they're more than just a little curious about it. So before they're presented with the opportunity, it's critical to give them the information they need to make the right decision.

"They see it as something exciting," explains Anthony Wolf, a clinical psychologist and author of *Get Out of My Life, But First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?* "Alcohol is forbidden. It's a new experience. They're at an age where they think they're prepared to take more risks. They have an internal mandate not to see themselves as little kids."

Not all kids take such risks, of course. But fitting in with their peers is becoming paramount. As your budding adolescent gets older, the chances that she'll be exposed to alcohol increase. What to do?

- Give her the information and support she needs to avoid it. Right now she's developing her self-image and long-term habits, so you want her to feel positive about herself and make healthy choices.
- Let her know she can talk to you about anything. When she does, try to Ask, Listen, Learn.
- Give her lots of love and praise.
- Plan family activities.
- Make sure she's not left bored and unattended.

At this age, adolescents begin to get their first taste of unsupervised time, which means they may have opportunities to experiment with alcohol at home or at a friend's house. But studies show that when families are involved in their children's lives—providing consistent rules and supervision—adolescents feel more emotionally supported and are significantly less likely to drink.

WHEN AND HOW TO DISCUSS IT

Whether your child raises it or you broach the subject of drinking, when it does come up, make your views utterly clear. Your tween may no longer parrot your opinions the way he once did, but he still very much cares what you think.

- Take advantage of daily opportunities to talk—without clobbering your child with your opinions.
- Use a current newspaper article or recent event about alcohol as a way or raising the issue.
- Give your reaction to these examples. Ask your child for his. Listen carefully, and don't criticize his answers. Make it a discussion, not an argument. Learn from each other.

"Kids need to know that if they speak openly, they won't regret it," says Paul Coleman, a psychologist, family therapist, and author of *How to Say It to Your Kids*. "They don't want to be talked down to. Eliminate comments like 'How could you think that way? What made you say such a thing?'"

If your child thinks you're interrogating him, he'll clam up. But if he knows that it's okay to talk—even disagree—about difficult issues, he'll be less likely to tune out your opinion.

Tweens are undergoing many emotional and physical changes, and they're



"You need to have these conversations over and over, because kids meet new situations as they get older," says Coleman.

fascinated by how their bodies and minds operate. So give your child plenty of information about how alcohol affects her physiologically. You don't have to deliver a science report, but tell her about alcohol's impact on a young person:

1. In some situations alcohol reduces inhibitions, leading to a wide range of risky situations.
2. In other cases, usually in larger amounts, it can act as a depressant, potentially leading to sleep, comas, and even death.



It's almost inevitable that at some point your child will have to say "yes" or "no" to alcohol. He may be taken by surprise when it happens. He may be trying hard to fit in with a cool crowd. He'll have trouble thinking up good responses from scratch.

help them say

That's why he needs to have some answers at the ready.

"Kids shouldn't go into lengthy or weak-sounding explanations," says Paul Coleman. "Answers like 'I don't think that's a good idea.... My parents wouldn't like it....' invite a debate, and your child's resolve may weaken if the other person keeps trying to talk him into a drink."

The best strategy, says Coleman, is to practice short, direct replies: "No way! That's crazy. My parents will ground me for a month." If a child keeps saying no, according to

3. Physically, alcohol affects many of the body's organs and systems. It can irritate the stomach lining, make people lose their balance, throw up, and become unable to focus or speak clearly.

4. In rare circumstances an overdose—known as alcohol poisoning—can kill.

5. Emotionally, it can make young people stressed, angry, and violent.

6. Mentally, it can interfere with normal brain development.

7. It affects learning and memory, slows reactions, and often makes kids lose interest in getting good grades and staying in school.

8. Drinking too much over a long period of time can damage major organs, including the liver, pancreas, kidneys, and bone marrow.

Never assume that one "big conversation" will do the trick. Studies show that while 76 percent of parents say they've discussed the dangers of underage drinking with their kids, just a little over a third of kids—only 36 percent—remember these talks.

"You need to have these conversations over and over, because kids meet new situations as they get older," says Coleman. True, your child's eyes may glaze over, or she may accuse you of harping. "It's okay to admit to your child that you may not be saying the right things," he says. "Tell her that alcohol use among kids is scary for parents, and

Coleman, he's not as likely to be pressured as much or as regularly.

Anthony Wolf points out that saying no immediately makes kids different from many of their peers—exactly what most adolescents don't want. "Drinking or not drinking is one of the things that separates kids once they get into adolescence," he says. "None of the things they say will completely work, if their aim is that those words *won't* set them apart." If your child does turn away from kids who drink, realize that he may need extra emotional support from you. ■

when parents are scared they don't always say things in the best way. And if your child is open to these talks, tell her how great that is, and how mature she's sounding." The bottom line is that study after study shows parents have the most influence over teens' decision to drink—or not. So it's critical that parents use it.

ESTABLISH YOUR VALUES BEYOND ANY DOUBT

Kids can be very literal, and your child may not know how you feel about underage alcohol consumption until you make it perfectly clear.

- Tell him, "I'm completely against it for kids." Then explain exactly why.

What if you discover that your child has experimented with alcohol? If you catch her red-handed:

- "There should be consequences," says Coleman. Curfews, grounding, or limits on phone use are some possibilities. Emphasize that drinking is illegal at her age. Remind her that if the police catch her, she could face much more severe penalties, such as being thrown out of school, having a permanent criminal record, or being summoned to court.

On the other hand, if your child comes

to you with an admission, you don't want to squash that impulse. "If he tells you something and then gets in trouble for it, that's the last time your child will tell you anything," emphasizes Wolf. Instead:

- Praise his honesty, but don't let the subject drop without weighing in.
- Repeat firmly that you disapprove of his behavior, that it's highly dangerous for him, and that you expect it never to happen again. ■



ALL-IMPORTANT ANSWERS

Your goal is to help your child feel comfortable talking to you about alcohol, even if some of her ideas make you shudder. Be ready to answer some common questions.

WHY IS ALCOHOL SO BAD FOR ME ANYWAY?

It interferes with your judgment. You might make really dangerous mistakes, like going to places you shouldn't. There are long-term effects, too. Drinking too much over a long period of time can damage just about every organ in your body. What's most important is that you're young and your body and brain are still growing. Alcohol dangerously interferes with that growth.

GROWN-UPS DRINK ALCOHOL, SO WHY CAN'T I?

First, it's against the law. And there's a reason for that. Alcohol can be misused, and people must be old enough to take responsibility for drinking. It's not just a fun thing. Statistics show that adolescents who drink are highly prone to accidents, and dangerous situations. Plus you're young and your body and brain are still growing. Also, privileges come with age. Parents not only get to drink, they get to go to bed later, drive cars, and vote. They also have increased responsibilities: They must work, pay taxes, and provide for their families.

JUST BECAUSE YOU DRINK DOESN'T MEAN YOU'RE DRUNK, RIGHT?

No. Many factors affect whether you're drunk, including your gender, weight, how fast you're drinking, and whether you've had water and a meal with your drinks—regardless of whether it's beer, wine, or liquor.

SO WHY ISN'T ALCOHOL ILLEGAL?

It's a long-standing part of our culture, and most adults who drink are able to enjoy it responsibly as part of a healthy lifestyle.

THE CENTURY COUNCIL wishes to thank its Middle School Program Core Development Panel, including representatives from the following organizations: American Academy of Family Physicians • American School Counselor Association • Centers for Disease Control and Prevention • Eastern Michigan University/The Century Council Education Advisory Board • National Association of Secondary School Principals • National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism • National Latino Children's Institute • National Middle School Association • Superintendent of Schools (Kennebunk, Maine)/The Century Council Education Advisory Board • United States Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration • United States Department of Education

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