

a parent handbook for
**Talking with
College Students
About Alcohol**

Rob Turrisi, Ph.D., Prevention Research Center, The Pennsylvania State University





a parent handbook for

Talking with College Students About Alcohol

*A Compilation of Information from
Parents, Students, and the Scientific Community*

Rob Turrisi, Ph.D.
Prevention Research Center
The Pennsylvania State University

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Dear Parent or Guardian,

We are excited to welcome your student to campus. Our relationship with you is a critical partnership in supporting your student's academic success and fostering a rich and rewarding undergraduate experience.

Drinking on college campuses is an important concern that needs special attention before your student arrives on campus and during their first semester. At UW-Madison, we take alcohol use seriously, and we want to support you in your role in guiding your student as they become a member of our campus community.

We devote significant resources to educate students about the personal, academic, and legal consequences of high-risk drinking. We offer hundreds of involvement and educational opportunities that do not involve alcohol, and we hold students accountable for alcohol-related violations, encouraging them to re-evaluate the choices they are making. Your student may also have an opportunity to help a fellow Badger make healthy decisions around alcohol or to intervene if a student is in need. UW-Madison dedicates resources to teach skills to intervene in risky situations involving alcohol as students navigate their peer-to-peer interactions.

Our role in creating a safe and supportive campus environment is critical. We also need your support. As a parent or guardian, you play an important role in influencing your student's choices when it comes to alcohol. In fact, national studies show* that parents influence how often their students engage in risky behavior, including alcohol use.

Start a conversation with your student about alcohol and keep the conversation going once they arrive on campus – especially during their first semester.

This handbook, brought to you by University Health Services, the Division of Student Life, and the Parent Program, provides a variety of strategies for speaking with your student about alcohol, demonstrates the dangers of alcohol abuse, and gives you tools to recognize if your student is having a problem with alcohol.

We have a responsibility as a community to ensure a safe and welcoming environment for everyone. All students deserve a place to learn, grow, and succeed. Join us in making UW-Madison safer for everyone.

Lori M. Berquam, PhD

Vice Provost for Student Life and Dean of Students

Bill Kinsey, MD, MPT

Medical Director, University Health Services

*Examination of the short-term efficacy of a parent intervention to reduce college student drinking tendencies. Turrisi, Rob; Jaccard, James; Taki, Racheal; Dunnam, Heather; Grimes, Jennifer, *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, Vol 15(4), Dec 2001, 366-372. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0893-164X.15.4.366>

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The Problem of Alcohol Consumption and Binge Drinking in College-Age Students

A recent survey of undergraduate University of Wisconsin–Madison students indicated that 85% reported consuming alcohol and 54% reported binge drinking (five or more drinks in a sitting).

NATIONAL SURVEYS SHOW:

9 out of 10
experiment with alcohol

7 out of 10
drink regularly

3 out of 10
will be problem drinkers

By the time males are 18 years old, one in four are considered to be binge-type heavy drinkers (they drink once a week or more, and have five drinks at one time).

Alcohol is the most misused and misunderstood drug in our society. Although college-age students are under the legal age for drinking alcohol, it is important to remember that alcohol is the most widely used drug by this age group. (See box at left.)

One of the results of the misuse of alcohol in this age group is binge drinking. Sure, we have all heard about “frat parties” and crazy spring break trips and assume that these are just another part of the college experience. Although part of the college experience, binge drinking has been consistently associated with higher incidences of unplanned sexual activity, sexual and physical assaults, date rape, injuries, trouble with campus and local police, and alcohol-related driving injuries and fatalities. For example, consider this account from a college first-year student:

“My friend had a drinking contest with her boyfriend. They each had five shots of Wild Turkey, two beers, and then started a ‘power hour’ or ‘century’ —one shot of beer per minute for 60 minutes. My friend began falling down and looked ill. She laid down to go to sleep and began throwing up for two hours straight. She rolled over and almost choked on her vomit.”

This account from a college student is more common than you may believe. Episodes such as this can be avoided through parent-student communication. Time and time again we have heard some parents say, “There is just no use – they will do what they want anyway and don’t care what we say.” This grossly underestimates the influence that parents can have – **YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE!**

Families are quite different from one another and we have written this handbook to reach a wide audience. Consequently, there may be some sections of the handbook that you can relate to better than others. This is okay. Not all families are the same and we tried to respect those differences.

By reading this handbook and talking with your student, you have the opportunity to reduce the likelihood he or she will experience the negative consequences associated with binge drinking.

Improving Communication in General

In this chapter, we discuss general issues about communicating effectively with your student. In all communication processes there are two important aspects: the style in which the material is presented and the content of the material. You may find that some parts of the chapter apply more to you than other parts.

Beginning a Dialogue

The first step in effectively talking with your student is simply getting the talking started. Such conversations will not necessarily occur in a single sitting, but often will evolve over multiple times. As a parent you must take active steps to establish the dialogue that is so important to both you and your student. When the time is right, you will want to suggest to your student that you would like to talk with her or him. Don't expect your student to agree. In fact, many students will respond with a negative reaction.

Here are some common negative reactions that students have when parents try to open a dialogue about sensitive topics and a few ways other parents find useful in dealing with them:

FEAR OF HEARING A LECTURE

Many students are open to talking, but the last thing they want to hear is a one-way lecture from their parents about right and wrong. *Studies show more drinking goes on in teens who come from homes where parents tend to lecture too much.*

Student Objection:

"I know what you will do if we talk. You'll lecture me like you always do. Then if I argue you will interrupt me."

Parental Response:

"You're right. This time I won't lecture. I will listen to what you think. I want to change things now that you are heading to college."

ANGER ABOUT NOT BEING TRUSTED

Some students interpret a request to talk as a sign that you do not trust them. *Studies show that when teens feel they can trust their parents and are trusted by them they tend to drink less.* You will need to offer reassurance that you are not suspicious and are doing this to help them, not attack them.

Student Objection:

"What's the matter, don't trust me?"

Parental Response:

"I trust you. But this is a very important issue and I think we need to pool the information we know to make sure you deal with everything effectively and that you know what to expect and what to do. To do that, we need to talk to each other."

FEAR OF PUNISHMENT

Another common objection focuses on fear of being punished. *Studies show that when teens fear punishment they communicate less often with their parents.* In turn, these teens tend to drink more often and are more likely to experience alcohol-related consequences.

Student Objection:

"Sure, talk with you and you won't let me go out. Forget it."

Parental Response:

"I promise that I won't be that way. I will listen to you. I'll take what you say seriously. I'll be straight with you and you be straight with me."

THE STUDENT THINKS THEY ALREADY KNOW IT ALL

Some students don't want to talk because they think they already know everything there is to know about a topic. Even though students think they know everything, they often do not. Don't let this objection deter you in your pursuit of communication.

Student Objection:

"I've heard it all before. We don't need to talk."

Parental Response:

"You probably already know quite a bit. It would *make me* feel better if we talked it through. Besides, it would help me to better understand how things are different from when I was your age."

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are other objections that you might get, although these are the major ones. Sometimes you will hear more than one of them from your son or daughter. The central themes in your response should be that of **caring** about the student, wanting to **understand** the student, and wanting to **help** the student, while at the same time **respecting** the student's privacy and desire to be independent. The example parental responses we gave illustrated these themes. They may not work well for your particular student and you may need to adapt them to his or her particular personality. But if you have open communication channels, you are more likely to help your student. Most of all, be constructive in your responses, not defensive or angry.

Some Communication Pointers

Here Are Some Tips That Have Been Shown To Make a Difference in How Students Respond:

LISTEN

Permit the person to speak without interruption. Listen to what they say. Sometimes, it is good to paraphrase. "Let me see if I understand you. It sounds like you feel that..." With paraphrasing, you don't agree or disagree, you interpret.

VERBALIZE RESPECT

Whenever you can and it is appropriate to do so, convey respect to the other individual (e.g., "I admire what you have done and how you are coping"). People want to be respected and will be more willing to talk to those who respect them. Tell your student you are proud of them for being able to handle these tough situations.

CHOOSE A GOOD TIME

Choose an optimal time to bring up and discuss problems. Don't do it when the other person is rushed or has a commitment elsewhere. Wait until you both can have a relaxed, calm discussion. Perhaps you could take your child to lunch or out for some ice cream where you could both sit down to talk and listen to one another.

COMMUNICATE DIRECTLY

Don't talk about important things while absorbed in another activity, such as reading the newspaper, watching television, or doing the dishes.

TRY TO APPEAL TO COMMON GOALS

Students need to be reminded that you are on their side. Whenever possible, common goals should be emphasized and should serve as the basis for your guidance and recommendations (e.g., "You both want them to be healthy and safe").

AVOID COMMUNICATION "STOPPERS"

There are single statements that will close anyone down (e.g., "Anyone who drives drunk is crazy" and "No one in this family would ever consider doing that").

CONFLICT IS NATURAL

Realize that conflict is natural. We are not identical to one another. We all have different beliefs and values, therefore disagreement is a natural thing. We should use conflict as an opportunity for growth and for learning about each other rather than treating it as a negative experience.

AGREE TO DISENGAGE

Agree to temporarily stop if things don't go well. Wait until both individuals can talk in a calm, direct fashion.

USE APPROPRIATE BODY LANGUAGE

How you position yourself as you talk can send important messages about your attitudes or possibly convey something you are not trying to convey.

AVOID DEBATE MODE

Sometimes conversations become structured so that people feel they must "defend" their position. The entire conversation turns to a mini-debate. If you sense the conversation has turned into a debate, try suggesting that you both approach matters from a different angle. Also avoid statements that begin with "you" ("You did this..."). They often make the other person feel attacked.

The Initial Conversation

Most students have heard comments like “kids getting drunk is terrible” from other adults and from the media. You should NOT start your conversation with statements such as this. Keep your comments short and remember that you don’t have to say everything. This is the beginning of a conversation. It probably is best to begin with a statement that conveys open-mindedness and then ask your son or daughter questions and his or her experiences. Talk about your own experiences and opinions about how they have changed over the years. As you tend to open-up, so will your son or daughter. Keep distinctions between facts and opinions: “My opinion is... This opinion is based on facts. This opinion is based on these experiences. This opinion is based on these observations.”

Ask your student what they think. Listen while trying to understand, without defensiveness. Suspend critical judgment. Even if your student says what you want to hear (e.g., “I don’t drink now, let alone drink to get drunk”) don’t think that this means you don’t have to talk. Your goal is not just to reassure the student through talking but to help expand your student’s thinking. You want to help them deal with the range of experiences that your student is likely to encounter in college.

Try to think of thought-provoking questions that can be asked in a supportive, non-threatening way. For example: Do you know kids who drink a lot? How has it affected them? Have you ever been offered alcohol by someone you knew? (If so) what did you say? (If not) what would you say? What if someone really pushed you? What would you say if they said... Is there another side to this view? Do you see any risks? Do you have any concerns? Ask questions; don’t lecture! This is probably the single most important aspect of communication. People like to talk about themselves and their opinions. People like to explore logic and details.

They do not like to be told what to think!

Be Prepared to Answer Questions About Your Own Behavior

If you truly establish a dialogue with your student, then they will probably ask you questions about your past behavior. Did you drink alcohol when you were a student? If it was okay for you to do, why isn’t it okay for me to do? Did you ever get drunk? You need to be prepared to answer such questions and in ways that the student will not decide that it is permissible to drink.

Before initiating a discussion with your student, you should take some time to think about the kinds of questions they are likely to ask you and what your responses will be.

Communication: The Short Response

A number of parents who we have interviewed express frustration at their inability to get their student to talk at length on any issue. They swear that their son or daughter has a vocabulary comprised mostly of “Okay, Mom,” “I dunno,” “Whatever,” “If you want,” “Sure, okay,” “Not now,” when it comes to parental conversation. Some students use these responses when they don’t feel like talking because they are busy, tired, or simply not in the mood. Maybe the student thinks they are just going to hear yet another lecture from the parent. Maybe the student thinks that the parent will start nagging at them, yet again. The student may think the parent just doesn’t understand them.

Parents need to respect this and not force communication at a bad time. Let it drop and bring it up later. Try to structure a time to talk when the student is apt to be open to it. Students are often tired at the end of a hard school day or an athletic event, and this may not be the best time to try to start a conversation. Or the student may be preoccupied with something else. Think about your student’s schedule and how you

can create a time where you will have his or her undivided attention. Perhaps taking him or her out to a quiet dinner or some other place where a “one-on-one” conversation can be effectively initiated will work.



Developing Assertiveness

When your student begins college it is likely that they will form entirely new social groups. The most influential reason why new students drink is because of social reasons. Friends can influence your student in two major ways. First, there is active social influence, which occurs when a friend explicitly suggests that your student engage in some behavior (e.g., "Let's go get drunk"). Second, there is passive influences such as when they think everyone is doing it and that it is an acceptable thing to do. Part of reducing social pressure is not only helping your student resist active influence attempts but also helping your student to put into perspective the fact that (1) not everyone is necessarily doing it, (2) even if people were, this does not make it right or a good thing to do, and (3) friends may respect your student for not drinking.

There may be times when your student may be put in situations where they are pressured by one or more peers to perform behaviors they would rather not engage in. For example, they may be pressured by someone to have a drink when your student doesn't want to. Students need to develop skills to resist such pressure and affirm their own values, beliefs, and attitudes.

COMMON PRESSURE LINES

Students are exposed to a wide range of pressure lines to try to get them experiment with drugs or alcohol. Here are some examples of what they might hear:

Come on, everyone has tried it.

If you won't drink with us, then why are you hanging out with us?

It's all part of growing up and being in college.

We drank once before, so what's the problem now?

You will love it!

You'll have an incredible time if you do.

Come on, take a drink. It will get you in the mood.

Everyone is doing it.

You've been working too hard. You deserve to go party.

You can study tomorrow.

Students need to develop adequate responses to such pressure lines. What they need most are simple but effective "one-liners" that will diffuse the pressure without making a big scene or issue about it. It is difficult for parents to provide such responses to the student because parents usually are not aware of the current language that students use with one another. It is probably more useful for parents to tell their students that they will probably be exposed to pressures to drink and for the student to try to think of short yet effective responses to pressure attempts. Often such simple phrases

as "It's just not for me, it's not what I want" or "I don't drink" will work quite effectively. We have evaluated a wide range of possible responses and students clearly prefer simple, straightforward "outs" to the pressure situation. Encourage the student to think about such "one-liners" beforehand to be prepared if they find themselves in an uncomfortable situation.

Talking About Alcohol

Alcohol is the most misused drug in our society, although most people do not even consider alcohol to be a drug. ***It takes only a single episode of intoxication to experience life-changing consequences, accidents, arrests, etc.*** We are not so naïve that we think that parents talking with their student about alcohol use will put an end to alcohol consumption in college students. However, you should do everything in your power to minimize odds of them being at risk.

PARENTAL RELUCTANCE TO TALK WITH STUDENT ABOUT DRINKING

MYTH	FACT
My student is not interested in drinking.	More than 90 percent of students try alcohol outside the home before graduating from high school.
My student has learned about the negative effects of alcohol in school.	Although most students do learn about alcohol in their classes on health, we have found that many important issues never got covered.
At this point my student should know better.	Unfortunately, the reality is that many students at this point in their lives are still uninformed about how powerful a drug alcohol can be.
My student won't listen at this point.	The results of the American College Health Survey revealed that parents were the number one source that students turned to for important information.

IN YOUR TALKS THERE ARE SEVERAL TOPICS THAT YOU SHOULD BE SURE TO ADDRESS

First, you should talk about how drinking affects the body. Students need to know how drinking on a given occasion will affect them.

Second, you should make clear your own position concerning your student's drinking, exactly what is okay and what is not.

Third, students drink for a variety of reasons. If you address this directly, then he or she will be better able to think through the choices she/he makes when confronted with "positive" motivations.

Fourth, you need to discuss reasons for **NOT** drinking and the many negative consequences that can result from drinking.

Finally, you need to make clear your willingness to help your student find constructive alternatives to drinking.

How Alcohol Works in the Body

Alcohol is a drug that is absorbed into the bloodstream from the stomach and the small intestine. It is broken down by the liver and then eliminated from the body.

There are limits to how fast the liver can break down alcohol, and this process cannot be sped up. Until the liver has had time to break down all of the alcohol, the alcohol continues to circulate in the bloodstream, affecting all of the body's organs, including the brain. Nothing can speed this up. Not exercise, drinking coffee, etc. Nothing.

In the media it is suggested that most individuals can have one drink per hour and maintain sobriety. Unfortunately, this is a dangerous rule. For individuals weighing over 200 pounds this might be true, but for most females and males, even ½ drink per hour could lead to intoxication and the bad things that go along with it (unsafe/coercive sexual experiences, fights, accidents).

As alcohol reaches the brain, a person begins to feel drunk. The exact nature of this feeling can vary considerably from individual to individual and even within the same

individual from situation to situation. What is common to all individuals and all situations is that alcohol depresses the brain and slows down major functions such as breathing, heart rate, and thinking. This is one reason why alcohol is so dangerous. **If an individual drinks too much alcohol, his or her breathing or heart rate can reach dangerously low levels or even stop.**

Physical and Psychological Effects

Alcohol is measured in terms of blood alcohol content. In popular press, you may see reference to terms such as BAC or BAL. A BAC of 0.1 percent means that 1/1000 of the fluid in the blood is alcohol. This may seem very small, but it does not take much to achieve this level. For example, a 150-pound female who consumes 5 drinks in 2 hours will have a BAC near 0.1. A 115-pound female who consumes 4 drinks in 2 hours will have a BAC near 0.1. **At a BAC of 0.1, most students will be very drunk. Their thinking, vision, hearing, reaction time, movement and judgments of speed and distance will be seriously impaired.** It is likely that the brain will not form new memories even though the person is completely conscious

and speaking. This is what is known commonly as a "black-out." The person is awake, but the brain is focusing on other more important tasks such as breathing and keeping the heart and blood going.

Most students **DO NOT** know how drinks influence the blood alcohol level. In fact, they have many misconceptions about how drinking affects BAC. Students tend to think that the impact on BAC of additional drinks is smaller after more drinks have been consumed. This is wrong. Each additional drink adds the same amount of alcohol to the blood whether or not that drink is the first or fifth drink.

People are notoriously bad at estimating how drunk they are. In cases where they are very drunk, it is indeed obvious. But more often than not, people get to the point where they are impaired but do not realize it. Study after study has demonstrated that people are extremely poor at guessing how sober they are.

Many accidental deaths occur from mixing alcohol with other drugs. Even drugs that you can buy without a prescription, such as aspirin or cold remedies, can change the way alcohol acts on the body.

ALCOHOL (<i>beer, wine, liquor</i>) MIXED WITH:	EFFECTS:
Antibiotics	Extreme drowsiness, decreases effectiveness
Antihistamines	Extreme drowsiness, causes temporary depression
Aspirin	Stomach and intestinal bleeding
High Blood Pressure Medicines	Dangerously lowered blood pressure
Narcotics	Extreme slowing of brain activities, breathing slowed down or stopped
Non-Narcotic Pain Killers	Stomach and intestinal irritation or bleeding
Sedatives & Tranquilizers	Extreme slowing of brain activities, breathing slowed down or stopped, heart slowed or stopped

Some parents allow their student to drink a controlled amount on certain occasions, such as holidays and family functions. Still other parents believe it is all right for students to drink small amounts of alcohol, as long as they do so in a responsible fashion. **Your own orientation as a parent is a matter of your own values.** However, if you are going to permit your student to drink alcohol in certain contexts, then you must **be clear** about exactly what these contexts are and what constitutes responsible behavior. **Studies consistently show that when parents permit their student to drink they tend to drink more often and heavier outside the home.**

HERE ARE BELIEFS THAT MANY STUDENTS HOLD WHICH ARE NOT TRUE:

Black coffee will help you become sober

Exercise will help you become sober

Eating food will help you become sober

Taking a cold shower will help you become sober

Fresh air will help you become sober

A quick walk will help you become sober

Going from dark lighting to bright lighting will help you become sober

Drinking milk before drinking will allow you to drink as much as you want

Putting a penny in your mouth will lower your BAC

These myths are important to dispel because students may decide to drive drunk after engaging in such activities, thinking that the activity has “sobered them up.” In fact, the activity only creates a temporary illusion of sobering up and in some instances increases drunkenness.

Reasons Why Students Drink

It is important for parents to recognize that there will be “positive” reasons (at least from the student’s perspective) for why they choose to drink. If parents only choose to focus discussions on the negative aspects of drinking, ignoring the positive aspects, they run the risk of losing credibility in their student’s eyes. Also, you need to help your student put these “positive” motivations in perspective so that they do not start to drink because of them. Here are some of the major ones that research has shown impact drinking behavior.

ADDS TO A CELEBRATION

Some students believe that drinking is one way to celebrate a special occasion. For example, a friend may suggest to your student that they have a few beers after finishing an important assignment. It is important that you talk with your student about alternative ways of celebrating such as: (1) suggesting that your student go shopping for something special (e.g., clothes, music, sporting goods); (2) suggesting an outing, such as dinner, that would include a few special friends; and/or (3) offering to have friends over for a small dinner party (without alcohol). Encourage your student to tell you about significant things that happen in their life and then try to help them celebrate positively.

MAKES YOU FEEL SEXIER, ENHANCES SEXUALITY

Some students believe that drinking alcohol adds to sexual experiences, but it is important to warn your student about the dangers in mixing alcohol and sex. First, because alcohol impairs judgment, students may do things that they may regret later on, such as have sex with someone that, if sober, they would choose not to, or going further

sexually than they are interested. Second, perpetrators of sexual assault use alcohol to render their victims incapacitated and unable to fight back. Alcohol might prevent them from being able to recognize red flag behavior in perpetrators. Finally, there is considerable scientific evidence to indicate that students are much more likely to engage in unprotected intercourse if they have been drinking, thereby increasing the chances of an unintended pregnancy or a sexually transmitted infection.

LOWERS STRESS

Another reason students give for drinking is that alcohol helps reduce worries. Parents should talk with their student to find out about what worries them and help the student directly confront these worries in a realistic fashion. Parents can also point out the need to confront problems directly rather than avoid them and note that the problem does not go away because you drink (and, in fact, it may become worse).

MAKES IT EASIER TO EXPRESS FEELINGS/LESS INHIBITED

Another reason students give for drinking is that they believe that alcohol helps make it easier to express feelings or talk with people to whom they are attracted. Parents need to be sensitive to how difficult it is for students to communicate in a new environment where they are unlikely to know anybody. Parents should point out that while often releasing inhibitions, alcohol actually could cloud judgments, making students think that they are communicating better when, in fact, they are not. Often times alcohol interferes with communication about what is okay and what is not. We know that sexual assault is almost never a miscommunication but a deliberate choice on the perpetrator’s part.

PEER PRESSURE

Another important reason why students drink is the influence of friends. Your student may feel pressured to drink. This pressure can be direct, as in the form of someone handing them a beer at a party, or it can be indirect, such as when they want to be part of a group and that group experiments with alcohol. Parents CANNOT choose their student's friends for them. However, parents can help their son or daughter understand the dynamics of peer pressure and stress the importance of being their own person. Finally, parents and students can talk about situations that could come up, such as a friend introducing alcohol at a party, so that students can anticipate how to react.

FITTING IN

Often the highlight of the day after drinking are the post-party war stories about who drank the most shots, who blacked-out, and who had the worst hangover. Although some students view these outcomes as badges of honor, our findings suggest that hangovers, black-outs, and high-risk drinking are associated with accidents, unsafe sex, arrests, missed work, failed courses, and general victimization. It is important to understand that the data shows that perpetrators of sexual assault target people who are incapacitated by alcohol.

HELPS MOOD

Many students believe that alcohol will help them get in a better mood. They should know that it is normal to feel sad and stressed at times. They should also find alternate ways to regulate their mood without alcohol or other drugs (e.g., caffeine). Exercise is always a good alternative to help improve one's mood. It is also important to explain to your son or daughter that the "high" from alcohol is accompanied by extreme lows as well.

SOMETHING TO DO

Some students get bored and turn to alcohol as a means of getting excitement out of their lives. To confront this, you can offer alternatives that your student can pursue. Some examples include getting involved in sports, hobbies, music, dance, games, reading, and school clubs. Students could also become involved in volunteer activities that are associated with causes they really care about, such as protecting the environment or promoting literacy. This is a good way to meet others with similar interests and also to feel good about themselves. Many students go to parties or have parties as a means of entertainment. Drinking frequently occurs in such settings and it is important that you provide suggestions on how students can enjoy themselves without alcohol.

HERE ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS

1. Try to meet three new people.
2. Try to find individuals who share common interests other than drinking.
3. Try to think about topics for conversation before going to the party to keep the focus of the conversation away from drinking or not drinking.
4. Never drink from a glass that has been out of your sight. Unfortunately, there are some predators who use drugs to facilitate committing sexual assault.

Why Students Do Not Drink

Many students choose not to drink and the reasons they cite for not doing so can form the cornerstone of your conversations about the disadvantages of drinking. Before discussing these, we must interject a word of caution. If you try strong scare tactics with students by inducing a great deal of fear about negative consequences, then your efforts might actually backfire. Research has shown that when faced with highly fear arousing information, some people will often “turn off” to it and not pay as much attention to it. This is because such information and thoughts are anxiety provoking and people are motivated to avoid anxiety. Why think about something when it is unpleasant to do so? In addition, strong scare tactics will often result in a loss of credibility. If you paint a picture based solely on the dire consequences of drinking and a student fails to see such consequences materialize when they, or a friend drinks, then the student will infer that you were wrong or you were exaggerating the consequences. Discuss the negative consequences in a matter of fact, honest, and straightforward fashion.

DRINKING IS ILLEGAL

Students generally know that drinking alcohol under the age of 21 is illegal. However, the general perception is that they will not get caught by the authorities and suffer any legal consequences. The fact is there is some truth to this perception. If, as a parent, you try to convey to your student the idea that there is a high probability of being caught when in fact there is not, then you will probably lose credibility. Instead of taking such a position, we have found it useful simply to remind students about the many ways that they may get caught.

What happens if authorities catch a student? This varies from community to community and judge to judge. However, there generally will be substantial costs in legal fees. There will be family embarrassment, since many such arrests are routinely reported in newspapers (not as headlines, of course, but in smaller sections labeled “Police Reports”). The student will also probably experience embarrassment, as they are publicly associated through the newspapers with getting caught for alcohol consumption. Prosecution in court may require the parent to take time off from work, thus costing the family money. Our experience has shown that students rarely have thought about even half of the above consequences and that making them more aware of the implications of an arrest may have deterrent value.

DRINKING MAKES YOU SICK OR PASS OUT

Alcohol is an irritant to the lining of the digestive system. If too much is consumed, an individual will vomit and the effects on the system can be felt for days (frequently referred to as a “hangover”). Nobody at a party or a social function likes being around someone who is sick. This is complicated by the fact that the sickness one experiences often happens suddenly and with little warning.

DRINKING CAN LEAD TO PREMATURE DEATH

Excessive alcohol consumption can have serious negative physical effects. Among other things, it causes damage to the liver, kidneys, brain, and cardiovascular system, which are all long term in nature. There are however, countless instances of students that have had fatal accidents or unsafe sex and contracted a sexually transmitted disease following a single night of heavy drinking. Unfortunately, it is also not uncommon for individuals who vomit from heavy drinking to choke to death.

DRINKING MIGHT LEAD TO BEING AN ALCOHOLIC

Most students have negative images of alcoholics and most do not want to become alcoholics. Most students are also convinced that they can control their drinking and will not become alcoholics. Experts distinguish between three types of drinkers: social drinkers, problem drinkers, and alcoholics.

EXAMPLES OF SIGNS THAT MAY BE INDICATIONS OF A DRINKING PROBLEM INCLUDE:

Needing a Drink to Have Fun

Forgetting What Happened While Drinking

Drinking to Feel Better About Oneself

Bragging About Tolerance

Drinking Fast or "Guzzling" Drinks

Drinking in the Morning

Using Alcohol to Help Solve Problems

Sneaking Drinks

Finding Reasons to Continue Drinking

Having Difficulty Stopping

Ability to Socialize Only When Drinking

Some individuals pass through stages from social drinking to problem drinking to alcoholism. For others, the addiction may occur after only a few drinks. Some students are genetically disposed towards alcoholism and can become problem drinkers relatively easily. Many students cannot articulate the differences between a social and problem drinker.

Binge Drinking: Drinking to Get Drunk

Binge drinking refers to individuals who set out to get drunk on a given occasion by drinking five or more drinks in the course of a short period of time (e.g., over the course of two hours). Binge drinking is quite common in both high schools and colleges. Almost 30 percent of high school students have engaged in binge drinking. Many colleges report rates as high as 60 percent. There are times when individuals will plan to binge drink (e.g., "Let's go out and get hammered!"). However, there are numerous occasions where individuals will only plan on having a drink or two, but get carried away by drinking games, parties that get out of hand or someone buys a round of drinks, etc. **Binge drinking has serious risks. Consider these quotes from a sample of college students:**

"I have only told a handful of people about what happened. The guy who raped me was one of my closest friends. We were hanging out in his room, drinking. I was drunk and flirting with him. It wasn't too long before my pleading voice was so easily ignored. When he raped me, my body, I, was nothing to him. I had every aspect of power taken away from me when I was raped, and I felt helpless and scared, and alone, and shamed."

"I was having a great night. I drank at least 15 beers. Then I blacked out. This is not unusual for me. Another time, I became violent, smashed bottles and got in tons of trouble."

"A girl I know got so drunk that a friend and I had to carry her for several blocks, trying to keep her from burning us with a cigarette. Since then, she has gotten as drunk every weekend. It has gotten her into some bad situations."

"In a crowded party, I accidentally nudged someone. I apologized but the guy hit me anyway, making my mouth bleed."

These accounts sound shocking, but chances are they have happened to your student or someone they know. These experiences alone should convince you of the potential risks of binge drinking. Binge drinkers are more likely to have been insulted by others, been in a serious argument or quarrel, been pushed, hit or assaulted, had one's property damaged, put themselves in situations where they are more susceptible to sexually transmitted infection, been injured or had life threatening experiences, driven while intoxicated or rode in a car with an intoxicated driver. We also know that perpetrators target individuals that are incapacitated by alcohol. No one deserves to be sexually assaulted no matter how much they drink.

You need to emphasize to your student how powerful a drug alcohol can be and how quickly binge drinking can lead to dangerous results. By discussing the reasons why students drink, why students choose not to drink, and the basis of good relationships, and by providing your student with skills on how to resist pressures from others, you will be helping your student develop the foundations that are necessary to reduce the probability of binge drinking.

RESEARCH SUGGESTS THAT INDIVIDUALS TEND TO BINGE DRINK FOR MANY REASONS. SOME OF THESE INCLUDE:

Binge drinkers tend to have generally positive expectations about the types of activities where binge drinking is more likely to take place (e.g., bars, fraternity/sorority parties). Some of the more commonly held beliefs include: "I will be able to meet new people, I might meet potential sexual partners, and I will get to hang out with my friends."

Binge drinkers tend to agree with many of the reasons why students drink indicated earlier (e.g., drinking adds to a celebration, improves mood).

Binge drinkers tend to disagree with many of the reasons why some students do not drink indicated earlier (e.g., drinking makes you sick).

Binge drinkers tend to believe that there is nothing else to do, but go get drunk on weekends and associate with others who hold the same belief.

Binge drinkers tend to associate with others who tend to binge drink (e.g., Everyone at my age is doing it, My friends will think I am strange if I do not drink, It can't be that bad if everyone is doing it).



Did You Drink When You Were a Student?

It is highly likely that in the course of your discussions with your student, you will be asked if you ever drank as a student. The fact is that most parents did drink in their youth, which creates a dilemma. If you answer no, then you are not being honest with your student. If you answer yes, then you are being hypocritical. At the same time you are telling your student not to drink, you admit that you did. You are, in an indirect way saying it is permissible to drink because you did it. And if you drank as a student, how can you turn around and punish your student for drinking? How should you answer questions about your own drinking as a student?

We believe that honesty is important and that you should not lie to your student. Ultimately, this can undermine effective communication. Some parents establish a “ground rule” at the start of their discussion: They will talk about anything but will not answer questions about their own use of drugs or alcohol as a student. The parent tells the student that this rule does not mean that the parent drank alcohol as a teenager nor does it mean that the parent did not. Rather, the parent’s behavior as a student is not relevant to a careful consideration of the issues surrounding the student’s current use of alcohol. This strategy works well in some families but not others.

Students may be convinced that their parents are hiding something and resent the fact that the parent won’t talk about it. How can the parent expect the student to talk about his or her behavior when the parent refuses to talk about the parent’s behavior as a student?

While this strategy may work for some families, it may prove to be ineffective for others. An alternative approach is to admit use, but to state in unambiguous terms that it was a mistake. Use your experiences as an opportunity to discuss some of the negative things that happened. Relate how drinking led to an embarrassing moment or an unpleasant consequence for the parent, making salient the fact that drinking has negative consequences that the parent has personally experienced. Stress that just because the parent behaved foolishly and was lucky enough to escape serious consequences does not mean that the same fortune will befall the student.

Unfortunately, there is no good scientific data about how best to handle this issue and psychologists are divided on what they recommend. You should use your own judgment about what you think will work best given your own past and your knowledge of your student.



WARNING SIGNS OF A POTENTIAL PROBLEM

Most parents underestimate the drinking activity of their student. If you think your student might have a drinking problem, here are some suggestions for ways in which you can help:

- **Do not turn your back** on the problem.
- **Be calm** when discussing the problem.
- Let your student know that you are **concerned and are willing to help**.
- **Do not make excuses** or cover up for your student.
- **Do not take over your student's responsibilities**, but provide them with the means to take responsibility for themselves.
- **Do not argue** with your student if he or she is drunk.
- If your student stays out late, **stay awake for them when possible** to show you care and are interested in what they are doing.

RIDING WITH A DRUNK DRIVER

Even if your student never drinks, they may be faced with a situation where a decision must be made whether or not to ride with someone who has been drinking. This is just as dangerous as driving drunk. As a rule, your student should not get into a car with someone who has been drinking and should be knowledgeable about effective alternatives (e.g., calling a taxi, asking someone else for a ride home). You should develop an explicit agreement with your student that he or she never rides home with someone who has been drinking. Again, it is almost impossible to judge how drunk or sober someone is once the person has been drinking, so it is best not to ride with someone regardless of the number of drinks that person has had or how sober the person seems to be. The student should be aware that the techniques for "sobering up" (e.g., drinking coffee) do not work (see our earlier discussion) and that they should not rely on these to make a friend a "safe and sober" driver. Make sure your student always has enough money for a taxi ride or for public transportation. Encourage them to ride with other non-drinking friends or call home.

PREVENTING A FRIEND FROM DRINKING AND DRIVING

Your student may also be faced with a situation where his or her best friend has been drinking and intends to drive. In these cases, your student should try to stop their friend from driving. Many students are reluctant to do so because they feel that it might prove to be embarrassing or that an argument might ensue, or even a physical confrontation. Our research suggests that less resistance will result if:

- Students do not try to take their friends keys away
- Students try to arrange for a friend to drive
- Students arrange for their friend to stay over
- Students try to reason with their friend

ALCOHOL AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

Talking to your child about alcohol use is also a good time to have a conversation about sexual assault. Over half of all college sexual assaults involve alcohol and alcohol is the number one drug used to facilitate sexual assault. Perpetrators use alcohol as a weapon to incapacitate potential victims and intentionally target people who have been using alcohol. We often teach our children to avoid strangers in alleys, however 85% of all assaults are committed by someone the victim knows. Talk to your kids about consent. Make sure to emphasize that consent must be asked for and received before sexual activity occurs and consent is not valid if someone is intoxicated or incapacitated by alcohol.

More Information

If you would like more information about alcohol and drug use in young adults, you can contact the following organizations for many useful materials:

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism
niaaa.nih.gov

NIAAA College Drinking Changing the Culture
collegedrinkingprevention.gov

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence
ncadd.org/index.php

Alcoholics Anonymous
aa.org

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
findtreatment.samhsa.gov

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON RESOURCES & SERVICES

Dean of Students
students.wisc.edu/doso

University Health Services
uhs.wisc.edu

UW-Madison Police Department
uwpd.wisc.edu

Parent Program
parent.wisc.edu

Center for the First-Year Experience
newstudent.wisc.edu

AlcoholEdu Information
uhs.wisc.edu/prevention/substance-abuse/alcholedu/

BASICS Program
students.wisc.edu/alcoholinfo/basics.html

Responsible Action Guidelines
students.wisc.edu/alcoholinfo/resp_action_guide.html

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Journey Mental Health Center
journeymhc.org

Tellurian Substance Abuse Services
tellurian.org/services/individual-basics

Connections Counseling
connectionsounseling.com



University Health Services
333 East Campus Mall, Floors 5-8
Madison, WI 53715
608-265-5600
www.uhs.wisc.edu

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