

Discussing Tough Subjects

This guide offers you advice on how to discuss underage drinking with your child. Working to prevent underage drinking requires more than one conversation—it requires ongoing communication about your feelings as well as the rules, risks and consequences regarding alcohol use.

Reinforcing and Enforcing Rules

- Tell your children what behavior you expect from them when they are out with their friends.
- Anticipate questions from your children before discussing family rules. Be prepared with honest, firm answers.
- Decide, before a rule is broken, what would be a fair and appropriate consequence; then be sure to communicate that with your children.
- Enforce your rules consistently. Don't look the other way if your children violate the rules.
- Catch your child doing the right thing (for example, calling to check in with you, deciding not to go somewhere that might have alcohol, deciding not to catch a ride with someone older who shouldn't be driving) – and provide positive feedback.

Examples of Ways to Check-In and Monitor What Your Child is Doing

- Ask your child for the address and phone number of any friends' homes they will be visiting.
- Be sure your child knows how to reach you before he/she leaves the house.
- Ask your child to use a land line when calling you to check in, or have a parent talk with you on the phone for confirmation.
- Be aware of the use of cell phone text messages and instant messaging for talking about using alcohol.
- Limit private access to the computer. Keep it in a living space that you'll walk through when your child is online.

What to Do If Your Child Tells You of Plans for Underage Alcohol Use

- First, don't lecture or get angry. Instead, act calm and acknowledge your disapproval of the party in a caring way.
- If your child has come to you with the information, it is because he or she trusts you to do the right thing. Tell him/her you are proud for sharing the information with you, and for giving you the opportunity to explain the reasons you don't want your child to attend.

- If your son or daughter is embarrassed or angry that they cannot go to the place or event where alcohol use is being planned, tell your child that your rules don't necessarily mean that you don't trust him/her. Even if your child went to the party and didn't drink, he/she would still be in a dangerous situation. Your job as a parent is to set limits and keep your child safe.
- Your role as a caring adult includes preventing things like this from happening in the first place – so call the parents of the hosting child if you think they might be unaware of the plans for using alcohol.

Explain That Alcohol Advertising Does Not Show a Realistic Picture of Drinking

- The alcohol industry exists to sell alcohol—they need to produce ads that make people want their product. That is how they make money.
- One way they make people want to buy their product is to make the actors in their ads look like they are having a great time, in addition to being sexy and attractive. They want people to think that if they drink, they will be fun, sexy, and attractive too. Ask your child: Do you believe alcohol can do that for people?
- The alcohol industry would not make as much money if they had to portray the real effects of drinking too much—slurred words, passing out, throwing up, getting addicted, falling down and hurting yourself, getting in trouble with police, alienating friends or doing embarrassing things. Ask your child: What do you think would happen if ads showed the negative effects of alcohol use?

What to Say if Your Child Asks if You Drank When You Were Younger

- First of all, it is important that you not lie to your child. This can lead to a loss of trust between you and your child as well as a loss of credibility.
- However, you are not obligated to answer all of their questions, either. Tell your child that your history is not the issue, their future is, and what you expect of him or her is all you are willing to discuss. Reaffirm that your job as a parent is to keep him or her safe, and therefore your expectations have nothing to do with your history.
- If you do share some of your experiences with your child, spare the details. Do not share wild drinking stories, even as cautionary tales, because they may backfire and glamorize the behavior. Instead, talk to your child in general terms about some of the negative consequences that you faced, including any negative impacts on relationships, friendships, school, work or sports. Explain to your child why it's important to you that he or she not drink alcohol. Children can sometimes learn from their parents' mistakes.

Things to Say if Your Child Asks Why It's Okay for Adults to Drink but Not Youth

- Alcohol affects youth differently than adults and can have more severe consequences.
- Your child's brain is still growing and alcohol can damage growing brains.
- One thing that is known is that the earlier a person starts drinking, the more likely they will have an issue with substance abuse. The older a person is before they start to use, the less likely they will become addicted. Tell your child: I don't want to take a chance with your future health.
- Actually, some adults drink too much and some adults develop addiction or dependence. Many adults who started drinking as teens might have avoided problems if they had waited.

What to Say to a Child Who Has Friends That are Drinking

Tell your child:

- You are your own person, and you need to make your own decisions based on what is best for you. If you lose a friendship because you won't drink, then that wasn't a very good friendship. Real friends will like and respect you for who you are. Have you ever lost a friend because you wouldn't do something that they wanted you to do?
- If you are ever concerned about a friend getting into trouble with alcohol or other drugs, I want you to know you can come to me and together we will figure out what to do. If something terrible were to happen to someone you cared about and you hadn't taken action—that would be tough to live with. It would be better for us to work together to try to help that person. That's what friends do, even when it's hard and even when it's not the fun or popular thing to do. Do you have any friends you are concerned about?

Want more information? We can help. Visit www.parentupvt.org or dial 211 for tools and resources.