



HOPE Newsletter - Issue 68

Talking To Your Child About Alcohol: What To Ask & What To Say

"Last summer a teen in my community died in a car accident after a drinking party. Can you give tips on how to talk to my kids about alcohol? They're 7 and 11."

-Dan

Smart dad! Parents are the most important influence on whether kids drink alcohol, and the earlier you start these conversations, the better. Kids whose parents teach them the risks of using drugs and alcohol are half as likely to use them. Don't wait until your kids are teens before you have these conversations. This is a topic you'll want to revisit over the years as your child reaches new levels of understanding -- and temptation.

1. Start talking about alcohol early, whenever it's relevant.

When there's an accident in your community, talk to your child about it, even if he's only seven. "It's so tragic...alcohol is not for high school students...their bodies and brains are not ready to handle it yet. That's why it's against the law for kids to drink alcohol."

2. Answer their questions.

"But why are grown-ups allowed to drink? They get in accidents, too!" your 11 year old might say. *"You're right, Sweetie. No one should drink and drive. And some grownups can't handle alcohol, so they choose not to drink it. Like Aunt Jenny -- you notice she doesn't drink wine when she comes to dinner? She's making a responsible choice that's right for her. When kids try alcohol before their brains are ready, they are much more likely to not be able to handle drinking as adults. That's one of the reasons it's so important to wait until you're older."*

3. Set clear expectations.

For a 7 year old: "When is it okay to drink alcohol? That's right, when you're a grown-up!"

For an 11 year old: "It's my job to help you stay healthy. I know that lots of kids around you will try alcohol and you'll naturally be curious about it. You can always tell me and ask me anything you want, and we can brainstorm what you can say to your friends, but I don't want you drinking. It's bad for you in so many ways."

For a 15 year old: "When you are a grown-up, whether you drink is up to you. Right now, though, it is up to me to help you protect yourself. Drinking alcohol is against the law and it's dangerous for you. I want you to take care of yourself so you have the best life possible now and in the future."

4. Give your kids facts before you think they need them.

"A lot of kids drink...Why do I have to wait until I'm grown up?"

- Because your brain is still developing, so using alcohol actually changes the way your brain works and makes it less smart and less happy -- for the rest of your life.
- Because kids who try alcohol before age 15 are four times more likely to develop alcoholism than those who begin after age 20.
- Because being a teenager is hard, and making good choices requires all your best thinking. Teens can't think as well when they drink, so you're more likely to do things you'll be sorry about later.
- Because it's bad for your body. (For kids who play sports or worry about their weight, this can be especially convincing.)
- Because it's against the law.

5. Keep communication open.

Kids often test you to see if you'll over-react, before they trust you with their biggest concerns. So when you hear "Oliver snuck vodka into school today in a Starbucks cup," take a deep breath and stay calm so you can listen. Instead of "That's terrible! I hope he got in big trouble!" -- which shuts down the conversation -- you might get your child talking and thinking with questions like:

"Wow! How could you tell he was drinking?What did the other kids do?...Did other kids try it?...How did they act?... What did you think?...Did you want to try it?....Why or why not?.... Why do you think Oliver did that?...What ended up happening?...Do you think other kids will try this now?....Would you ever do something like that?....Why or why not?...Did any of the kids handle this incident in a way you admired?"

6. Coach instead of trying to control.

You can't actually control your child when she's out of your sight. But you can help her become a person who has good values and good judgment. You do that by modeling and by talking. Ask questions to help your child reflect on what's important to her and who she wants to be. Then listen hard. You'll learn a lot from her answers.

- Why do you think it's illegal for kids and teens to drink alcohol?
- What would you do if you were in a car and the driver had been drinking?
- What about if the driver was a grown-up, like the parent of a friend?
- Do you know any adults who drink too much? What do you think of them?
- Have you ever thought that I drank too much? Acted differently when I drank alcohol?
- Do you know any kids who have tried alcohol or drugs? Do you think that's a problem?
- Why do you think kids try alcohol?
- When do you think kids are ready to try alcohol?
- What do the kids at your school do at parties? Have you been to a party like that?
- Have you ever been offered a drink? How did you handle it? Were you tempted? Why or why not?
- What could you say if you were offered a drink and you didn't want to look foolish?
- What could you do at a party if you were feeling a little nervous, besides drinking?
- What would you do if you were at a party and someone passed out from drinking alcohol?
- Would you be worried about becoming addicted to alcohol or drugs? Why or why not?

7. Have practice conversations with your child

...about the various scenarios he might encounter and the decisions he might have to make. What might he do or say? For instance, if someone offers him a drink:

No, thanks, I'm the designated driver.

No, thanks, I want to keep a clear head tonight.

No, thanks, I don't drink.

No, thanks, my playing on the team is too important to me.

No, thanks, I'm allergic to alcohol.

No thanks, I love my cokes plain.

No, thanks. My parents would ground me forever if they found out -- and they always do!

8. Make sure your teen has other opportunities for extreme fun.

Teens need excitement and to test themselves in new situations that involve excitement and risk. Encourage your teen to meet these needs safely, whether through physical activity like skateboarding or rock climbing, or through a passion like acting.

9. Raise a child who can say No.

When kids are raised to obey authority without question, they sometimes can't assert themselves when other teens act like authorities. When she says no, listen, and when possible, try to find win-win solutions. You'll raise a child who WANTS to cooperate, and follows her own moral compass. When you wish your child would just obey without asserting her side of things, remember the saying: *"Obedience is doing what you're told no matter what's right. Morality is doing what's right no matter what you're told."*

10. When your child DOES try alcohol, be there to talk about it.

Like it or not, most kids will try alcohol before they're 21. Your goal is to postpone that day as long as possible, AND to keep good communication with your child so that when she does start drinking, you know about it. Then you can help her think through how to keep herself safe.

"I hear that you're curious and want to try drinking. But you don't know how your body will react. What would you do to be sure you're safe? How would you be sure that you have a friend with you who isn't drinking, who you can count on? How would you be sure you can take care of yourself if some guy you're not interested in gets forceful? How would you get home?"

11. Be your child's backup.

Don't let a momentary lapse become a tragedy. *"Never hesitate to call me if you're in trouble or one of your friends is in trouble. I will be there if you need me, no matter what, and no punishment."*

12. Model healthy living.

Research shows that kids are influenced by their parents' drinking. So if you drink heavily, your child is more likely to start drinking earlier and to drink more heavily. Model a responsible relationship with alcohol. Equally important, model handling your own emotions responsibly, which gives kids the foundation they need to manage their own emotions, so they don't self-medicate.

13. Foster emotional intelligence.

Help your child learn to notice her own moods and work through her feelings. Help her find positive ways to deal with stress. Drinking is one way that teens "self-medicate" when they don't have healthier ways to process their feelings.

14. Above all, stay connected with your child, at every age.

Every bit of influence you have with your child derives from your relationship.

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