

A parent/guardian handbook for

Talking with College Students About Alcohol



UC San Diego

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Introduction

At the University of California, San Diego we encourage you to talk with your student about their expectations regarding alcohol and other drug use. Alcohol is the most misused drug on college campuses and having this conversation with your student can make a great deal of difference regarding their drinking and drinking related consequences.

College is a very exciting time for parents/guardians and your students. They are away from home and with this newfound freedom comes the challenge of balancing academics, extra-curricular activities, finances, and their well-being. The increased stress that comes along with these new opportunities as well as social pressure can exacerbate alcohol related problems. The first six weeks of school is a particularly risky time for first-year students. They are at a higher risk for alcohol-related problems than almost any other population, so talking to your student prior to them coming on campus is crucial.

Some parents may feel ill equipped to talk with their students about alcohol issues on college campuses. This handbook is meant to help ease your fears and give you pointers on how to have effective conversations. By talking with your student, you have the opportunity to reduce the likelihood they will experience the negative consequences associated with drinking.

Student Health and Well-Being
Health Promotion Services

Improving Communication in General

Alcohol abuse can have serious consequences, including missing a class, getting behind in school work, unplanned sexual activity, damaged property and trouble with campus or local police. Even if your student is not likely to bring up the topic, they will listen if you talk. You may not get a response, but research shows that students pay attention when their parents talk about alcohol and drugs.

In this publication, you will find some suggestions for how to start the conversation and some facts that may help guide your discussion. We appreciate your involvement and your support on this critical issue.

The prevalent view is that college students are old enough to leave home and be on their own. We have heard parents say, "What can I say now? They are grown adults." or "There is just no use. They will do what they want anyway and don't care what we say." Such statements grossly underestimate the influence parents can have in providing information that can shape the behavior of their children at this point in their lives. In fact, 80 percent of students take their parents' rules and expectations about alcohol use seriously

Communication

When the time and setting seem appropriate, suggest to your student that you would like to talk with them about the topic. Do not be surprised if your student initially responds negatively. Give them some time and bring the issue up again when the time is right.

• Possible Reactions by Young Adults

- Suspicion about your sudden interest
- Doubts they will be understood
- Fear of hearing a lecture
- Indifference or lack of concern
- A fear you are invading their privacy

• Central Themes Your Response Should Include

- Caring about your student
- Wanting to understand your student
- Wanting to help your student
- Respecting your student's privacy and desire to be independent

- If you have had communication difficulties in the past, be prepared for some objections and think through the kinds of responses you might make to your student. Don't force the issue of having a discussion; the willingness to back off shows you are going to be respectful. Structure the time of discussion so that neither person will be distracted by other activities.

The Conversation

- Beginning with a statement that conveys open-mindedness and then asking your student about their experiences probably is best. Talk about your own experiences and opinions (while being careful to avoid glamorizing any past use of alcohol or other drugs) and how they have changed through the years. As you tend

Improving Communication in General cont.

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to open up, so will your student. Ask questions rather than lecture.

- Try not to get angry at your student if you hear things you don't like. The ways in which people deal with anger and how they react to it can have a large impact on the relationships they form. These reactions can close down communication and impair your ability to help your student effectively solve problems and deal with difficult situations.

Additional Pointers

- Avoid exaggerations and blanket statements.
- Be specific about the behavior you want your student to change (for example: "I expect you to wait until you are 21 years old to drink." Or, "I expect you will call me rather than get into a car with someone who has been drinking.")
- Criticize the behavior, not the person.
- Use "I" statements such as "I feel scared when I hear that you are drinking to get drunk. I worry that you will get hurt or into trouble."
- Don't assume that everything has to be discussed in a single sitting.

- Be a role model. Set an example of appropriate drinking behavior with your own life. Although any amount of drinking alcohol carries at least a moderate risk, some ways to minimize risk and model appropriate use of alcohol include never driving after drinking, spacing drinks to no more than one per hour and not exceeding a BAC (blood alcohol content or concentration) of .05.

Assertive Tactics for Saying "No"

Talk with your college student about ways to say "No." A prepared response can be helpful in saying "No."

- Turn the pressure around: This strategy involves questioning the other person about pressure. Effective phrases include: "Why are you trying so hard to make me do something when I told you I don't want to do it?" "Why do you keep pressuring me when I've told you no?" or "But I've told you no. I'm not going to do that. Didn't you hear what I said?"
- Get out of the situation: This strategy involves leaving the situation or threatening to leave: "That's it. I'm going home." "You haven't heard what I have been saying. I'm leaving."

Improving Communication in General cont.

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- Simple, straightforward “outs” are helpful in pressure situations: Encourage your student to think about such “one liners” beforehand to be prepared for finding themselves in an uncomfortable situation. For example, “I don’t feel like it.” “I have to get up early tomorrow.” “I’m trying to cut back.”

- Encourage your student to examine how their friends may be influencing the decisions they make. Being around individuals who regularly consume alcohol is a subtle pressure that can increase the likelihood of your student consuming alcohol.

Discuss the reasons why college students drink alcohol (for example, to ease social interactions, to fit in, to test newfound freedom).

- Talk about risks associated with binge drinking (for example, legal risks if under age 21, sexual assault, accidents, reduced academic achievement).

- Make clear your willingness to help your student find positive and fun alternatives to drinking.

Discussion Topics

- Talk about how alcohol and other drugs affect the body (for example, lowered inhibitions, blackouts, hangovers and long-term effects of chronic use).

- Make clear your own position on your student’s drinking.

- Remember that consumption of alcohol while under the age of 21 is illegal

- . – Model appropriate behavior concerning alcohol use. Research shows that young people who have seen one or both of their parents drunk are more than twice as likely to get drunk in a typical month.

Reasons Why Students Drink

Most parents underestimate their college students' drinking activity. You have several behavioral indicators to look for if you are concerned that a serious drinking problem has developed. Many of these indicators are quite common and a natural part of transitioning to the adult world. What distinguishes a drinking problem is that these signs occur suddenly, in combination with each other, and are extreme in character.

Here are some signs of a problem:

- Drop in grades
- Switching friends
- Defiance of rules and regulations
- Mood changes
- Trouble in school
- Lack of motivation
- Reduced self-esteem or self-confidence
- Quitting or getting fired from a job
- Reduced self-discipline
- Never available or reluctant to talk with you
- Unwilling to talk about activities with friends

- Incidents resulting from a high BAC.

Many factors affect your BAC when you drink. These include: your size, gender and physical condition; what you have had to eat; how much sleep you have had; what medications you are taking; and, most importantly, the actual alcohol content of your chosen drink. A BAC of .08 or higher is past the legal limit for driving in California.

If you think your student might have a drinking problem, here are some suggestions for ways you can help:

- Do not turn your back on the problem
- Be calm when discussing the problem with your student.
- Let your student know you are concerned and willing to help.
- Do not make excuses or cover up for your student.
- Do not take over your student's responsibilities, but provide him or her with the means to take responsibility for himself or herself.

For more information about alcohol and drug abuse prevention, visit our website at <https://studentwellbeing.ucsd.edu/>.

Addressing an Alcohol Abuse Problem

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 child’s eyes. Also, you need to help your child 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 child that they have a few beers after finishing an important assignment. It is important that you talk with them about alternative ways of celebrating such as: (1) suggesting that they 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 his or her life and then try to help him or her celebrate positively.

LOWERS STRESS

Another reason students give for drinking is that alcohol helps reduce worries. Parents should talk with their students 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).

PEER PRESSURE

Another important reason why students drink is the influence of friends. Your son or daughter may feel pressured to drink. This pressure can be direct, as in the form of someone handing him a beer at a party, or it can be indirect, such as when he or she wants 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 his or her 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

FITTING IN Often the highlights 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 heavy drinking are associated with accidents, rapes, unsafe sex, arrests, missed work, failed courses, and general victimization. It is important to understand that the data shows that both males and females who black-out from drinking are victims of sexual coercion.

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 them 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.

Resources

UCSD Resources

Student Health and Well-Being
<https://studentwellbeing.ucsd.edu/>

Health Promotion Services
Phone: (858) 534-2419
Email: hps@health.ucsd.edu

Counseling and Psychological Services
Phone: (858) 534-3755

Student Health Services
Phone: (858) 534-3300
Email: studenthealth@ucsd.edu

UCSD Collegiate Recovery
Email: collegiaterecovery@health.ucsd.edu

Additional Resources

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

NIAAA College Drinking Changing the Culture
www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence www.ncadd.org

Alcoholics Anonymous
www.alcoholics-anonymous.org

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

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