Tools for Your Child's Success.org

Mixed Messages About Alcohol

Age 17 Summary

Why Mixed Messages About Alcohol?

Teens receive numerous mixed messages about alcohol consumption and its place in their lives and communities. They may see commercials or alcohol products in a glamorous context on television shows. They may encounter drunk adults at weddings, festivals, or concerts. Perhaps teens in these encounters view those others as having fun, or maybe they view them as scary and out-of-control. These outside messages may have an impact on your teen, but as a parent or those in a parenting role, what you model and the messages you send related to alcohol will be the most significant influence in your teen's life. It's never too late to become more aware of the messages your teen is receiving, their impacts, and how you can shape the messages you send going forward to promote healthy choices.

Tip These steps are best done when you and your teen are not tired or in a rush.



- Ask open-ended questions.
    - *"What have you noticed about how we use alcohol in our family?"*
    - *"What are some of the mixed messages you hear about alcohol?"*
    - *"What are some mixed messages you receive about alcohol in our family?"*
- As your teen attempts to assert their independence while still dependent on your household, the paradox can be frustrating and confusing for parents or those in a parenting role and teens. Seeking their input is critical because it offers valuable practice in thinking through decisions they might approach when they are on their own.

Trap Avoid lecturing your teen when they are honest with you. Lecturing may result in your child/teen not sharing truthfully in the future for fear of your response.



Teach New Skills

- Examine family messages around the role of alcohol and think about what they're teaching your teen. Reflect on these questions.
    - Is drinking alcohol a part of your daily life? Weekly life? When is alcohol present when your teen is around?
    - Is alcohol consumed in moderation typically? Or do individuals drink to the point of intoxication (more than 1-2 drinks)?
    - Do teens sip or have a taste of alcohol at any events? Are teens given their alcoholic beverages (under 21) at a certain age?
    - When someone becomes intoxicated, how do other adults react to that person?
        - Are they laughed at?
        - Are they the source of ridicule?
        - Are they a source of shame?
        - Do people reject them?
        - Do they become more popular?
        - How is that person treated?
    - If there are relatives who are dealing with alcohol use disorders like addiction, how does the family treat them? How are they spoken about when they are not around?
    - The answers to these questions formulate the modeling your teens witness and what they are taught about alcohol. Understanding what challenges you face can better position you to teach your teen about alcohol in healthy, constructive ways.
- Talk about your family history with alcohol.
- Create empathy and compassion through understanding. Promote empathy and understanding as family members deal with challenges in life.
- Address your past drinking behavior or current alcohol use.
- Explain why you want your teen to abstain from drinking and drug use. Some reasons include the increased risk of experiencing negative consequences. Their brain is still developing. Alcohol is an addictive substance and a family history of alcohol or drug problems.
- Invite your teen to ask questions.
- Be clear about your expectations about alcohol and drug use.
- Talk about the feelings someone might have that would cause them to resort to unhealthy means of coping. Ask your teen if they have ever felt that way. Reassure your teen that it's normal to feel overwhelmed by your problems at times, and yet using alcohol and other substances does not solve the issue and can instead lead to medical problems.
- Take the learning further because your teen must find ways to deal with their stress and social pressures. *"When you are upset, what makes you feel better?"*
- Instead of discussing alcohol, think first about health and healthy development.
    - How do you keep healthy (diet, exercise, preventative doctor visits)?
    - How do food and drinks fit into keeping your body healthy?
    - What about the role of medicine? Do you take medication? For what and why? What is your attitude about medicine? When is it important to take it? When do you want to avoid taking it? If you take medication, what side effects have you experienced?

    - What substances alter your body and brain, like coffee, tea, over-the-counter medicine, prescription medicine, alcohol, energy drinks, and others? How do those altering substances fit into a healthy lifestyle?
    - What do you or your partner or other family members believe should be the role of alcohol in family life and with teens?
    - What do you want your teens to learn?
    - How can you align your actions with those values?
- Create a family ritual of expressing gratitude in your lives.
- Set goals to demonstrate values. Now that you have articulated your family's hopes and values for what you want to teach your teen, consider what goals you can set for yourself and what goals you can encourage your teen to set to align actions with values.
- Discover opportunities to serve in your local community together. What social issues does your teen care about? Pursue their interest and volunteer your time and energy in your community as a family.

Tip Did you know that giving children/teens at any age under 21 sips of alcohol sends a clear message to them that authority figures feel drinking is acceptable for them? These children/teens are more likely to experiment with alcohol or drugs younger and more frequently with friends than those whose families did not permit sipping.[1] Researchers advise not allowing drinking even on special occasions for those under 21.



Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Take the first small step. If you've set a goal to leave unsafe situations, set your family's expectations beforehand.
- Practice empathy. When your teen comes home with reports of a conflict between friends or a mistake a friend made, talk about that friend's perspective. You could ask questions like, "*Why would she have chosen to be mean to her friend when they've been friends since kindergarten?"*
- When your teen comes to you with a peer pressure challenge, reflect on their feelings. Ask open-ended questions to prompt their thinking.
- Tell stories of your or your teen's ability to empathize and be kind to others.
- Encourage leadership. As you build your teen's social and emotional skills - the very ones that are also key leadership skills - they will have an opportunity to influence the decision-making of their friendship group.

Tip: When your teen comes to you with an interpersonal problem, whether with a friend or a teacher, reflect feelings. Ask what choices your teen might have in communicating with this other person. Offer supportive language that will help them broach the topic. Then, show your confidence that they can manage their communications and work through their problems.



- Ask key questions.
    - *"How are you feeling about your friends? Do they treat you well? Do they pressure you?"*
    - *"Are there times when your friends or other classmates want you to do something you don't want to do?"*
- Reflect on outcomes. *"It seems like you are worrying about your friends and their impressions of you. Often, it helps if you talk about it. What's going on?"*
- Stay engaged. Be ready to talk when your teen is eager.
- Use any opportunity to talk about the mixed messages regarding alcohol in society, in the media, or at home.
- Engage in further practice. Help build your teen's leadership and assertive communication skills by discussing when you set healthy boundaries and maintained relationships.



- No matter how old your teen is, your positive reinforcement and encouragement have a significant impact.
- There are many ways you can reinforce your teen's efforts. It is important to distinguish between three types of reinforcement – recognition, rewards, and bribes. These three distinct parenting behaviors have different impacts on your teen's behavior.
    - **Recognize** even small successes to promote positive behaviors and expand confidence: *"You shared your concerns about the party with your friend. Love seeing that!"* Recognition can include nonverbal acknowledgment such as a smile, high five, or hug.
    - **Rewards** can be helpful in certain situations by providing a concrete, timely, and positive incentive for doing a good job. A reward is determined ahead of time so that the teen knows what to expect, like *"If you talk with your friend about not going to the party, I will let you have your friends over to hang out at our house instead."* (if you XX, then I'll XX) The goal should be to help your teen progress to a time when the reward will no longer be needed. If used too often, rewards can decrease a teen's intrinsic motivation.
    - Unlike a reward, **bribes** aren't planned and generally happen when a parent or those in a parenting role is in a crisis (like a teen arguing and refusing to leave a social gathering. To avoid disaster, a parent or those in a parenting role offers to stop for ice cream on the way home if the teen stops arguing and leaves the event). While bribes can be helpful in the short term to manage stressful situations, they will not grow lasting motivation or behavior change and should be avoided.
- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, after hearing that your teen did the right thing rather than going along with the crowd, stop for a treat on the way home from school to celebrate their positive choices.

Reference

1. Donovan, J.E., & Molina, B.S. (2014). Antecedent predictors of children's initiation of sipping/tasting alcohol. Alcohol Clinical Experimental Research. 38(9): 2488-95.

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