

# Mixed Messages About Alcohol

## Age 9 Summary

---

### Why Mixed Messages About Alcohol?

Children receive many mixed messages about alcohol consumption and its role 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. These outside messages may have an impact on your child. Still, as a parent or those in a parenting role, what you model and the messages you send related to alcohol in your child's early years will be the most significant influence. It's never too late to become more aware of the messages your child 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 child are not tired or in a rush.

**Tip** Intentional communication and a healthy parenting relationship support these steps.

**STEP**

**1**



### Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their Input

- Ask questions to make the connection between what your child eats and drinks, how it impacts their body, and how they feel.
  - *“What have you noticed about how foods and drinks affect your body? How do various foods and drinks make you feel?”*
  - *“How does our family make healthy choices with foods and drinks?”*
- Ask your child about alcohol.
  - *“What do you know about alcoholic beverages?”*
  - *“When do you see alcohol, and how is it used?”*
  - *“Do you have any ideas on why alcohol might only be appropriate for grownups?”*
- Listen carefully to what your child understands and their gaps in understanding. This will help you formulate future teaching and practice opportunities.

**Tip** Your child may have different impressions about your attitudes and values toward alcohol based on their observations. Listen carefully to their understanding of the role of alcohol in your family's life and how they perceive your values. Their impressions may surprise you!

**Trap** Don't get caught up in feeling defensive about your drinking practices. Keep focused on the fact that your child is just at the start of understanding alcohol. It's a brand new chance to offer essential guidance. Focus on the impacts you can have today and in the future.

**STEP**  
**2**



## Teach New Skills

- Examine family messages around the role of alcohol and think about what they're teaching your child. Some questions you can ask yourself include:
  - Where do you take your child where alcohol is present?
  - Is drinking alcohol a part of your daily life? Weekly life?
  - When is alcohol present when your child is around?
  - Is alcohol typically consumed in moderation?
  - Do individuals drink to the point of intoxication (more than 1-2 drinks)?
  - Do children sip or have a taste of alcohol at any events?
  - Are children 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?
  - Are there relatives that are dealing with alcohol use disorders like alcohol addiction? How does the family treat them? How are they spoken about when they are not around?
- Talk about your family history with alcohol.
- Promote empathy and understanding as family members deal with challenges in life. This is the ideal time to teach your child about the reasons behind alcohol use and misuse. This does not mean supporting the unhealthy behaviors of a family member with a substance use disorder but communicating to your child that the family member has an illness they must treat, just as you might view a family member dealing with diabetes, asthma, or other chronic diseases. This is a family value worth communicating.
- Become a strong advocate. If you are in a circumstance in which relatives become intoxicated, trust your gut. When people become unsafe, it's your responsibility as a parent or those in a parenting role to get you and your child to safety.
- Talk about the feelings someone might have that would cause them to resort to unhealthy means of coping. Ask your child if they have ever felt that way. Reassure your child 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 child will increasingly need to find ways to deal with stress and social pressures. Ask: “When you are upset, what makes you feel better?” Brainstorm a list together.
- Discuss values. Consider the following questions:
  - How do you keep healthy (diet, exercise, preventative doctor visits)?
  - How do food and drinks fit into keeping your body healthy?
  - 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 your child?
  - What do you want your child to learn?
  - How can you align your actions with those values?
- Set goals that demonstrate your values.
- Create a family ritual out of expressing gratitude in your lives.

STEP  
**3**



### Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- If you’ve set a goal to leave unsafe situations, for example, set your family’s expectations ahead of time. Find specific ways you and your child can take small steps to work on the healthy choice goals you’ve set.
- Reflect on feelings when your child comes to you with an interpersonal problem, whether with a friend or a teacher. Ask what choices your child might have in communicating with this other person.
- Practice empathy. You could ask questions like, “*Why would she have chosen to be mean to her friend when they’ve been friends since kindergarten?*”
- Tell stories of your own or your child’s ability to empathize and be kind to others.
- Encourage leadership. Talk about social situations and opportunities for decisions. Give your child plenty of chances to decide where they fall on various social issues (thus exercising their sense of responsibility and right and wrong).

**Tip:** When your child comes to you with a peer pressure challenge, reflect on their feelings. Ask open-ended questions to prompt their thinking. Show your trust and support that they can solve their problems with reflection.

STEP  
**4**



### Support Your Child’s Development and Success

- Ask key questions like: “*How are you feeling about your friends? Do they treat you well? Do they pressure you? Are there times when your friends or classmates want you to do something you don’t want to do?*”

- Reflect on outcomes. *“Seems like you are worrying about your friends and their impressions of you today. Often, it helps if you talk about it. What’s going on?”*
- Stay engaged. Be ready to talk when your child is eager.
- Engage in further practice.

STEP
5



## Recognize Efforts

- No matter how old your child is, your positive reinforcement and encouragement have a significant impact.
- There are many ways you can reinforce your child’s efforts. It is essential to distinguish between three types of reinforcement – recognition, rewards, and bribes. These three distinct parenting behaviors have different impacts on your child’s behavior.
  - **Recognize** even small successes to promote positive behaviors and expand confidence: *“You were able to set a healthy boundary with a friend- I 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 child knows what to expect, like *“If you make a healthy choice for your after-school snack, we will go for a bike ride together.”* (if you XX, then I’ll XX) The goal should be to help your child progress to a time when the reward will no longer be needed. If used too often, rewards can decrease a child’s intrinsic motivation.
  - Unlike a reward, **bribes** aren’t planned ahead of time and generally happen when a parent or those in a parenting role is in a crisis (like in the grocery store checkout line and a child is having a tantrum. To avoid disaster, a parent or those in a parenting role offers to buy a sucker if the child will stop the tantrum). 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, if your child works hard at a physical activity, make a healthy smoothie to enjoy together.

This content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Tools for Your Child's Success communities, financial supporters, contributors, SAMHSA, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

© 2023 Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University