

KNOW! TO HAVE “THE ALCOHOL TALK”

Big Moments, Real Conversations

As prom and graduation season approaches, many parents and caregivers of teenagers are celebrating these important milestones alongside their teens. At the same time, these events can bring new situations where alcohol may be present, making it a good time to have “the alcohol talk.”

Your Influence Matters More Than You Think

These conversations matter. Adults are often the biggest influence on whether teens choose to drink. Open, honest conversations help young people understand that you care about their well-being and that you don't support underage drinking.

What Not to Do (Even if It Feels Right)

It's not always easy to know what to say about underage drinking. Unfortunately, some common approaches that seem logical can actually backfire.

The Problem with Scare Tactics

Many adults rely on extreme warnings, or “scare tactics”, but research shows that these messages are often dismissed. Teens don't see themselves as at risk for worst-case scenarios, so they dismiss these messages or even find them appealing. Scare tactics can also imply that “everyone is doing it,” which isn't true & can unintentionally normalize underage drinking.

Why Allowing Alcohol Isn't the Answer

Allowing teens to drink under supervision may seem like it teaches responsibility, but it can actually signal approval and lead to increased curiosity and experimentation. It also overlooks the real risks of underage drinking, including impacts on brain development, increased likelihood of risky behavior, and potential for addiction.

SO WHAT STRATEGIES DO WORK?

Answer Teens' Questions

Teens need reliable, trustworthy information about alcohol. Learning about the [risks of underage drinking](#) and creating space for open conversation allows them to ask questions and get answers from someone they trust. Clear, balanced discussions can shape how teens' think and make choices about it.

TALKING TIP

Make it relatable. Instead of focusing only on long-term effects, connect alcohol use to what matters to your teen, like school, sports, friendships, and health. For example: “Alcohol can affect your body and decisions in ways that could negatively impact your grades, activities, and relationships.”

Show That You Care

Teens are more likely to take risks if they feel like no one is paying attention. Let your child know that you care and be clear about your expectations. Communicate that you don't want them to drink, while also offering your support if they feel pressured or unsafe.

TALKING TIP

Lead with care. “I love you and want to make sure you stay safe and healthy—that's why talking about alcohol matters to me.” Reassure them that they can always come to you, no matter the situation.

Provide Alternatives

Helping teens find fun, alcohol-free activities can reduce the appeal of drinking. Events like after-prom parties are great examples, but if those aren't available, you can work together to come up with other ideas. Hosting a gathering, attending community events, or getting involved in clubs or activities allow young people to socialize without the influence of substances.

TALKING TIP

Ask open-ended questions to start the conversation. For example, "What do you think about people your age drinking?" or "What would make an event fun without alcohol?" Exploring these ideas together helps teens feel involved and supported.

Make a Plan

You won't always be there to prevent your child from drinking, but you can prepare them for real-life situations. Talk through scenarios they might encounter and work together to come up with responses that feel natural and realistic to them if offered alcohol. You can also create a plan for how they can leave a situation if they feel uncomfortable.

TALKING TIP

Ask about their experiences and listen without judgment. Questions like, "What are the parties that you go to like?" or "What would you say if someone offered you a drink?" can open the door to meaningful discussion. Come up with a code word or have a no-questions-asked ride available from a trusted adult.

Be A Good Role Model

Teens pay close attention to what adults do. Modeling responsible behavior with alcohol is an important part of the message you send. Never serve alcohol to teens, and if you drink, exercise moderation, and make healthy, low-risk choices. Be clear that you also follow safety rules like never drinking and driving.

TALKING TIP

Be prepared for tough questions, like "You drink alcohol, so why can't I?". Use this as an opportunity to explain that alcohol has different risks for youth. Try saying "Alcohol affects young people differently because your brain is still growing. Drinking can change the way your brain works now and into the future. The rules are there to protect you, and I want to make sure you stay safe."

Sources:

- [Make a Difference: Talk to Your Child About Alcohol - Parents | NIAAA](#)
- [Underage Drinking: How To Talk With Your Child About Alcohol Use | Healthy Children](#)
- [Get the Facts About Underage Drinking | NIAAA](#)

Resources:

- [What You Can Do To Prevent Your Child From Drinking | SAMHSA](#)
- [Small Talks: Get the Facts on Underage Drinking | Wisconsin Department of Health Services](#)
- [Alcohol Misuse Prevention Toolkit | Prevention Action Alliance](#)
- [Alcohol: What Families Need to Know to Help Protect Young People | Partnership to End Addiction](#)
- [Make a Difference: Talk to Your Child About Alcohol - Parents | NIAAA](#)
- [Underage Drinking: How To Talk With Your Child About Alcohol Use | Healthy Children](#)
- [Get the Facts About Underage Drinking | NIAAA](#)

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