

Making Smart Choices About Alcohol

College is all about choices. And some of the most important choices your student will make this semester involve alcohol.

Many students believe that their peers are drinking like crazy, going out every Wednesday through Sunday, no matter if they're of legal drinking age. This myth often makes students feel like they have to "drink up" to meet peer standards. Yet, the real story is that many students *don't* choose to drink or they drink responsibly. It's important for students to know the real deal so they can make their choices based on self-responsibility and what feels right, not perceived peer pressure.

Parents' Role

Parents play a key role in helping students make smart decisions about alcohol. You remain a key influence in your child's life, believe it or not. So, consider having a proactive conversation about alcohol. Here are some tips on how to do just that...

Make it an Ongoing Conversation. This initial discussion will likely be the toughest to get started. Instead of lecturing, take this opportunity to open the lines of communication between you and your student so that you can keep talking about this important topic. Find out how he feels about alcohol and the peer pressure he faces on campus. Let him know that you are always there to talk things through.

Set Clear Expectations. Since college is a privilege—and a large financial undertaking for any family—let your student know that you expect her to focus on her personal development as well as her academic pursuits. And you want her to set solid goals for herself. Alcohol use/abuse should not derail any of these plans. And participating in illegal behaviors is unacceptable.

Help Them Learn to Say "No." The desire to fit in can be mighty strong, even if it means saying "yes" to behaviors that you don't agree with. Arm your student with some ideas about how to deflect alcohol pressures. If he's involved in community service, classes and other extracurricular activities, he'll have a ready-made "excuse:"

"Sorry I can't join you... I have to do this..." Or he can hang with friends and just drink water or soda – no one has to know. Plus, saying "no" can come in a variety of forms: "I'd love to go dancing with you guys—just know that I won't be drinking tonight because I have an early meet/study group/activity tomorrow morning." Or "I don't have much spare cash this month so why don't we go see the free comedian on campus instead of going out?" When students feel like they have options to use in different settings, saying "no" is that much easier!



Offer Practical Tips. Encourage your student to never accept a drink from an unknown person or to leave her drink unattended. It's too easy for someone to slip a colorless, odorless "date rape drug" into the drink. Walking around with open containers in public places isn't smart – it's illegal in many states. More and more places have tools in place to spot fake IDs so, it's not worth the risk, especially since criminal records can impact future employment. And colleges always have transportation options so, don't even think about drinking and driving. Life can change in an instant if you do.

Don't Talk When a Student is Intoxicated. You may want to grab hold of a teachable moment yet having a discussion when your student is intoxicated can get messy and be a waste of your time. Wait until the next day to talk when you're both more level-headed.

Talk with Other College Parents. How do they handle alcohol-related conversations with their students? What have they learned the hard way? What has worked? This source of info can be invaluable!

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