



# HOW DO I TALK WITH MY TEEN ABOUT ALCOHOL?

Talking to teens about drugs and alcohol can be difficult, yet it's an important conversation to have. These tips are designed to help make this conversation easier.

## BEFORE THE TALK.

Spend some time learning about alcohol and the risks for teens.

## START THE CONVERSATION NATURALLY.

Be calm and relaxed. A more natural discussion, rather than a lecture, will increase the odds that your teen will listen. Rather than saying, "we need to talk," you might ask your teen what he or she is encountering with their friends. Ask open-ended questions to elicit a conversation rather than just "yes" and "no." It's okay for your conversation to take place over time, in bits and pieces.

## BE PATIENT AND READY TO LISTEN.

Do your best to keep an open mind and ask questions. Your child is more likely to be receptive this way. Should you suspect that your child has been drinking, share your concerns without sounding accusatory. For example, "I have noticed your grades are dropping, and that you are hanging out with a new crowd." Focus on concerning behavior and why it worries you.

## LET YOUR TEEN KNOW THEY'RE BEING HEARD.

Use active listening and reflect back what you are hearing. For example, you might say, it sounds like you are feeling anxious, and that you think drinking helps you relax and fit in with your friends. Is that right?

## IF YOUR CHILD IS INTERESTED IN DRINKING, ASK WHY?

And, ask what might happen if they do. This gets your teen to think about their future—and some of the possible negative consequences of drinking. For example, they may be late to practice, do something stupid in front of their friends, or miss out on developing the skills needed for social settings.

## OFFER EMPATHY AND COMPASSION.

Let your child know you understand. The teen years can be tough. Acknowledge that everyone struggles sometimes, but alcohol is not a useful or healthy way to cope with problems. Let your child know that they can come to you for support and guidance.

## SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS REGARDING DRUGS AND ALCOHOL.

Youngsters are less likely to drink when they know that parents and other important adults in their lives have strong feelings about it. Make sure your teen knows your rules and the consequences for breaking those rules—and, most importantly, that you really will enforce those consequences if the rules are broken.

## TALK OPENLY ABOUT YOUR FAMILY HISTORY.

If there is a history of addiction or alcoholism in your family, then your child has an elevated risk of developing a problem. Discuss this risk with your child, as you would with any disease.

# ANSWER THEIR QUESTIONS ABOUT ALCOHOL.

Here are some questions and comments you might get from your teen about alcohol and some ideas on how you can answer them.



**“DRINKING UNDER 21 IS NOT A BIG DEAL. THERE’S NO REASON TO WORRY.”**

The age limit for alcohol is based on research which shows that young people react differently to alcohol. Teens get drunk twice as quickly as adults, but they have more trouble knowing when to stop. Your body takes much longer to process alcohol and you may put yourself in risky situations since being intoxicated interferes with good judgment. I don’t want this for you.

**“I ONLY DRINK ONCE IN A WHILE. WHAT’S THE BIG DEAL?”**

Thank you for your honesty. I appreciate that you can be open with me about this. Right now, your brain is completing some important development. Drinking during this time can actually interfere with this process and make you more prone to addiction. While you are young, it’s much easier to learn new things and addiction is a learned behavior. Alcohol can cause permanent damage to your brain, particularly as it relates to memory, motor skills, and coordination. I am not saying this to scare you. I want you to have the facts about alcohol’s effects.

**“I KNOW A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO DRINK AND THEY SEEM TO BE FINE.”**

I am hoping you will make your own choice and I am here to help you with that. Research shows that taking your first drink in your early teens puts you at greater risk of developing a dependence on alcohol later in life. In fact, studies show that teens who start drinking before age 15 are 5 times more likely to develop a serious problem with alcohol than those who begin drinking after the age of 21. This is not a risk I want you to take.

**“DID YOU DRINK WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG?”**

I made some unsafe choices that I am hoping you won’t repeat. My parents were not very open and honest about the risks involved, so I am hoping we can have a more open conversation. There’s a lot more information available today that shows that drinking is more harmful during the teen years as your brain is still developing. I want you to make choices to protect your growing body.

**“YOU DRINK ALCOHOL, SO WHY SHOULDN’T I TRY IT?”**

I am of legal drinking age and I choose to be responsible when drinking alcohol. If I do drink, I make arrangements for a ride home, so that I do not drink and drive. Even when you do become 21 years old, I want you to understand the risks associated with drinking.