

Be Factual

Young people are better equipped to make proper decisions about any issue, including drinking, if they have the facts. Trying to scare them about drinking or presenting alcohol or drinking as evil may backfire. That's partly because children have many sources of information, and exaggeration or unfounded stories can damage parents' credibility.

In discussing drinking with children, it is always best to stress immediate consequences or effects because young people have the tendency to believe that they are indestructible and will live forever.

Alcohol's effects

Alcohol beverages have been enjoyed for thousands of years. But like many things in life, they can also be abused.

From a medical standpoint, alcohol is a depressant that, when consumed in excess, leads to intoxication and loss of control, along with impaired coordination, reflexes and judgment. Alcohol abuse has many well-known risks, one of the greatest of which is drunk driving and its consequences.

Many factors, such as a person's height, weight and whether or not they have eaten food, influences the way alcohol is metabolized by the body. It's a myth that black coffee or a cold shower or anything else will sober up a drunk person. Only time brings sobriety.

Why young people shouldn't drink

While in some cultural settings young people drink at meals or on religious occasions, the public consumption of alcohol beverages by those under the legal drinking age is unlawful throughout the United States.

According to experts, young people lack the judgment, experience and coordination to drink alcohol beverages. Their smaller size means that smaller amounts of alcohol beverages can be intoxicating. And even for teens who may be "grown-up" in size, their bodies are still developing.

How and when to talk

When you share information with your son or daughter about why they shouldn't drink, it's important to do so matter-of-factly. Telling a teen "you can't handle it" may come across to them as a dare or cause them to rebel.

That's why it's important to start the discussion early. If your 6-year-old asks a question about drinking, be prepared to respond simply and factually to lay the groundwork for more dialogue later.

Ages 9 to 11 are ideal for talking about drinking. A child is probably most receptive to discussion if he or she asks a question. But if not, you should bring up the topic in brief "learning moments" that may naturally become longer discussions. A newspaper or television story, a family occasion that includes drinking by adults, or a school discussion may be a good reason for opening the dialogue.

While many schools today include lessons on alcohol, no one has greater authority or responsibility for children than parents. And most importantly, no one has more influence on children's drinking decisions than parents.

The teen years

If talking about drinking at ages 9 to 11 seems young, it may help to know that parents of teens say it is more difficult to start discussions during the teen years. However, it is never too late for parents to open a dialogue. And regardless of the child's age, listening by parents is always important.

For teens who are approaching driving age, one of the most important discussions parents should have with them is about drinking and driving. Here are two specific ideas for providing detailed facts about the issue.

Every state has strict laws against, and penalties for, drunk driving. Find out from your police department what the penalties are in your area for driving while intoxicated, and share the information with your son or daughter. Some states have adopted "zero tolerance" laws that prohibit youth from driving after consuming any or a very small amount of alcohol. Typically, the penalty is suspension of the youth's driver's license. Visit your insurance agent with your son or daughter just before he or she gets a driver's license to talk about the responsibility of driving an automobile. Your insurance agent can explain the consequences if a youngster is arrested for driving while intoxicated.

This article was derived from the Family Talk guide for parents, developed by an advisory panel of authorities in the fields of education, family therapy, and alcohol treatment, and through conversations with parents and teens. The full guide may be read online or downloaded by clicking on Document Library on www.familytalkonline.com.

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