

## Have Clearly Stated Rules

While children need facts, they also need their parents' opinions to help the facts make sense. Which facts are important? And why? Parents need to answer these questions.

Once children hear both the facts and your opinions and beliefs about them, it's easier for you to make rules and enforce them.

Unfortunately, many parents simply say, "Drinking is bad for you, and I don't ever want to catch you doing it...or you'll be in big trouble."

That's because many parents may not have thought about how to express their opinions and beliefs about drinking. So right now, take a moment to answer these questions for yourself. What are the positive reasons you have for drinking responsibly, if you drink? What are your own family traditions about drinking? What are your opinions about drinking by others? What do you feel is appropriate concerning drinking, and what is not appropriate?

Finally, what is appropriate behavior for your child? Some parents allow their children to drink a little at home on traditional occasions, such as religious activities or holiday celebrations. For other parents, whether they drink or not, drinking by children is strictly forbidden. If you do not drink, and want your children to follow that example, you should explain why — at the same time realizing that they will best accept that option if they come to that decision for themselves.

Thinking through these questions will help you have a meaningful conversation with your child about drinking. From the very beginning, children are very curious about grown-up practices, including drinking, and about why parents act a certain way or have a certain opinion.

It follows logically that the next step is to make clear to your children what your rules are about not drinking...and why.

### **How and when to talk**

Again, the "teachable years" of 9 to 11 are the best time to start talking with your kids. To begin the discussion, you might pose a question based on an imaginary or hypothetical situation: "What would you do if one of your friends offered you something to drink?"

Then let your child know what your opinions and rules are about drinking. You might stress your concern for your child's personal safety and explain how alcohol affects children differently than grown-ups. It's important not to talk "down" to your children or to give them the idea they're "second-class citizens" without the rights of adults.

As your child gets older, expand on your beliefs and rules...and your expectations. Explain your reasons for rules and, if possible, make rules together about all sorts of things — chores, homework, and later, parties, dating, and driving.

And remember, it's important that you not only talk with your child, but that you also listen and ask for his or her opinion and feelings. Talking by parents can all too soon become lecturing, particularly when it comes to teens. Most of all, teens want to know that you care about them and trust them — but they will continue to test whether you are paying attention to what they are doing.

For teens, in addition to your discussions about drinking, it's especially important to discuss the rules when it comes to drinking and driving. The rules are simple: no drinking, no driving after drinking, and no getting into a car with a drinking driver, whether the driver is a teen or an adult.

### **Expectations**

Once a parent has asked a child to obey the law — and the family rules — regarding underage drinking, there should be a clear understanding of the consequences if the rules are violated. But if your daughter breaks a rule by drinking, she should understand that a second mistake, such as driving after drinking, could be fatal to her or her friends.

Many parents, in fact, have an agreement in advance that a son or daughter will call them for a ride rather than drive while intoxicated or get in a car with someone else who has been drinking. There will be "no questions asked" at that time if the young person calls Mom or Dad for a ride. Of course, no parent wants his or her child to drink illegally. However, fear of reprisal could cause a teen to compound one bad mistake with another potentially dangerous one.

Parents should have a "game plan" in mind for these types of situations. If you find that your son or daughter has been drinking or has been involved in a drinking-and-driving situation, it's important to talk about it and set a firm punishment. However, try not to lose your temper and react too harshly while your emotions are high and your teen is not in the best condition to hear what you have to say. You still need to communicate.

Send your son or daughter to bed and talk about the situation the next morning. State your position calmly and firmly and enforce your family rules with a punishment that fits the crime.

Many parents punish by taking away privileges — but another effective technique is to impose an undesirable task, such as cleaning out the garage or pulling weeds in the garden. It's often better to earn one's way back into favor by doing something constructive than to have privileges taken away.

*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](http://www.familytalkonline.com).*

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