



Kids and alcohol don't mix.

# How to Talk to Your Adolescent About Alcohol



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THE  
**CENTURY COUNCIL**  
FIGHTING DRUNK DRIVING & UNDERAGE DRINKING



## WHAT YOUR CHILD NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT ALCOHOL

They're growing up. Your 9-year-old wants to pack his own suitcase for the family vacation. Your 11-year-old doesn't want you to open her dresser drawers. And don't even think about picking out a CD for a 12-year-old.

Not yet teenagers but no longer little kids, young adolescents—or tweens—love their increasing independence. But happily for parents, 9-to-12-year-olds still look to you for direction on important decisions. This is a time to give it your *ALL*—Ask, Listen, Learn—so that you'll be better prepared to understand and respond to the changes your child is experiencing. And, most important, remember to have an open dialogue—to talk, talk, talk—and together you'll be able to meet the challenges.

## WHAT PARENTS THINK

- 92% of parents say the Ask, Listen, Learn™ brochure helped facilitate a conversation about alcohol.
- 88% of parents said the brochure made them think about alcohol and their child.

## NOW'S THE TIME TO TALK ABOUT ALCOHOL

One of the big decisions your child may face, even at this age, is how to say no to alcohol. The statistics make it clear that your involvement is essential. Why? Government data indicate that underage drinking continues to be a troubling issue:

*About 10.8 million Americans ages 12 to 20—almost a third of underage kids—say they consumed alcohol in the past month, according to the 2005 National Survey on Drug Use and Health.*

What's worse, 65 percent of kids under the age of 21 who say they drink claim they get alcohol from family and friends—in other words, from their parents, their friends' parents, or older

friends and siblings. Make no mistake: Tweens know what's going on, and they're more than just a little curious about alcohol. So before they're presented with the opportunity, it's critical to give them the information they need to make the right decision.

"They see it as something exciting," explains Dr. Anthony Wolf, a clinical psychologist and author of *Get Out of My Life, But First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?* "They're at an age where they're prepared to take more risks. They have an internal mandate not to see themselves as little kids."

Not all kids take such risks, of course. But fitting in with their peers is becoming paramount. As your budding adolescent gets older, the chances that she'll be exposed to alcohol increase. What to do?

- Give her the information and support she needs to avoid it. Right now she's developing her self-image and long-term habits, so you want her to feel positive about herself and make healthy choices.
- Let her know she can talk to you about anything. When she does, try to Ask, Listen, Learn.
- Give her lots of love and praise.
- Plan family activities.
- Make sure she's not left bored and unattended.

## WHEN AND HOW TO DISCUSS IT

Whether your child raises it or you broach the subject of drinking, when it does come up, make your views utterly clear. Your tween still very much cares what you think.

- Take advantage of daily opportunities to talk.
- Use a current newspaper article or recent event about alcohol as a way of raising the issue.
- Give your reaction to these examples. Ask your child for his. Listen carefully,

and don't criticize his answers. Make it a discussion, not an argument. Learn from each other.

"Kids need to know that if they speak openly, they won't regret it," says Dr. Paul Coleman, a psychologist and author of *How to Say It to Your Kids*. "They don't want to be talked down to. Eliminate comments like 'How could you think that way? What made you say such a thing?'" If your child thinks you're interrogating him, he'll clam up. But if he knows that it's okay to talk—even disagree—about difficult issues, he'll be less likely to tune out your opinion.

Tweens are undergoing many emotional and physical changes, and they're fascinated by how their bodies and minds operate. So, without delivering a science report, give your child plenty of information about how alcohol affects them:

1. In some cases alcohol reduces inhibitions, leading to a wide range of risky situations.
2. In larger amounts, it can act as a depressant, potentially leading to sleep, comas, and even death.
3. Alcohol affects many of the body's organs and systems. It can irritate the stomach lining and make people lose their balance, throw up, and become unable to focus or speak clearly.
4. In rare circumstances, an overdose—known as alcohol poisoning—can kill.
5. Emotionally, alcohol can make young people stressed, angry, and violent.
6. Alcohol affects learning and memory, slows reactions, and often makes kids lose interest in getting good grades and staying in school.



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"You need to have these conversations over and over," says Coleman. True, your child's eyes may glaze over, or she may accuse you of harping. "It's okay to admit to your child that you may not be saying the right things," he says. "Tell her that alcohol

use among kids is scary for parents. And if your child is open to these talks, tell her how great that is, and how mature she's sounding." The bottom line: Study after study shows that parents have the most influence over teens' decision to drink—or not. So it's critical that parents exercise their influence.

## ESTABLISH YOUR VALUES BEYOND ANY DOUBT

Kids can be very literal, and your child may not know how you feel about underage alcohol consumption until you make it perfectly clear. Tell him, "I'm completely against it for kids." Then explain exactly why.

What if you discover that your child has experimented with alcohol? If you catch her red-handed: "There should be consequences," says Coleman. Curfews, grounding, or limits on phone use are some possibilities.

On the other hand, if your child comes to you with an admission, you don't want to squash that impulse. "If he tells you something and then gets in trouble for it, that's the last time your child will tell you anything," emphasizes Wolf. Instead, praise his honesty, but don't let the subject drop without weighing in. Repeat firmly that you disapprove, that it's highly dangerous, and that you expect it never to happen again.



At some point your child will be confronted with making the decision not to drink, and he may be caught off guard. He may be trying hard to fit in with a cool crowd. He'll have trouble thinking up good responses

## help them say

from scratch. That's why he needs to have some answers at the ready.

"Kids shouldn't go into lengthy or weak-sounding explanations," says Dr. Paul Coleman. "Answers like 'I don't think that's a very good idea' or 'My parents wouldn't like it' invite a debate, and your child's resolve may weaken if the other person keeps trying to talk him into a drink."

The best strategy, says Coleman, is to practice short, direct replies: "No way! That's crazy. My parents

will ground me for a month." If a child keeps saying no, according to Coleman, he's not as likely to be pressured as much or as regularly.

Dr. Anthony Wolf points out that saying no makes kids different from many of their peers—exactly what most adolescents don't want. "Drinking or not drinking is one of the things that separates kids once they get into adolescence," he says. If your child does turn away from kids who drink, realize that he may need extra emotional support from you.

# ALL-IMPORTANT ANSWERS

Your goal is to help your child feel comfortable talking to you about alcohol, even if some of her ideas make you shudder. Be ready to answer some common questions.

## WHY IS ALCOHOL SO BAD FOR ME ANYWAY?

It interferes with your judgment. You might make really dangerous decisions, like going places you shouldn't or getting into a car driven by a drunk driver. There are long-term effects, too. Most important, you're young and your body and brain are still growing. Alcohol dangerously interferes with that growth. Drinking too much over a long period of time can damage many organs in your body.

## GROWN-UPS DRINK ALCOHOL, SO WHY CAN'T I?

First, it's against the law—for good reason. Alcohol can be misused, and people must be old enough to make responsible decisions about drinking. It's not just a fun thing. Statistics show that people who drink alcohol are highly prone to accidents and dangerous situations. Also, privileges—like driving and voting—come with age. So do responsibilities, such as working, paying taxes, and providing for the family.

## JUST BECAUSE YOU DRINK DOESN'T MEAN YOU'RE DRUNK, RIGHT?

Many factors affect whether you're drunk, including your gender, your weight, how fast you're drinking, and whether you've had water and a meal with your drinks—regardless of whether it's beer, wine, or liquor.

## SO WHY ISN'T ALCOHOL ILLEGAL?

It's a long-standing part of our culture, and most adults who drink are able to enjoy it responsibly as part of a healthy lifestyle.

Launched in 1991, The Century Council is a national not-for-profit organization dedicated to fighting drunk driving and underage drinking. Funded by America's leading distillers, The Council's mission is to promote responsible decision-making regarding drinking or non-drinking of beverage alcohol and discourage all forms of irresponsible consumption through education, communications, research, law enforcement and other programs. For more information on The Council, log onto [www.centurycouncil.org](http://www.centurycouncil.org).

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Help Your Child **Say**  
**"No"** To Alcohol