

## Talking with your college student about alcohol

College is a time when both parents and adolescents look forward to a future filled with new opportunities. These opportunities begin to develop as your student takes on the responsibilities of academic life, extra-curricular activities, personal growth, and decision making.

Parents need to recognize that college students, especially first-year students, are at a significantly higher risk for alcohol-related problems than almost any other population.

AVAILABILITY OF ALCOHOL +  
ABSENCE OF PARENTS +  
DESIRE TO FIT IN =  
POTENTIALLY RISKY DRINKING DECISIONS

While many students are informed of some of the physical risks associated with alcohol, very few are aware of the legal, academic, and social consequences of high risk drinking. Pay attention to your student's experiences and activities during the crucial first six weeks on campus, as making poor choices regarding alcohol and drug use can negatively impact your student's success at college.

Some parents may feel reluctant, or ill equipped to talk with their students about alcohol issues on college campuses. Campus cultures have changed considerably since you were in college, and many studies have shown that college students greatly overestimate alcohol consumption among their peers.

We would like to offer parents some suggestions for beginning a discussion about alcohol with your college student:

**1. Ask the hard questions about alcohol use and abuse.**

Starting a conversation about alcohol can be difficult. Here are some questions you can use as a guide.

How will you decide whether or not to drink at college?

What will you do if you find yourself at a party with only alcohol to drink?

What will you do if your roommate only wants to drink and party?

What will you do if you find a student passed out in the bathroom?

How will you handle it if you are asked to baby-sit someone who is very drunk?

**2. Set clear and realistic expectations regarding academic performance and the use of alcohol.**

Stay in close contact with your student during the first six weeks of classes when your student is most vulnerable. This is when first-year students are often introduced to the drug and alcohol scene. Partying has a direct impact on a student's academic work and students don't want to disappoint their parents. If your student knows you expect sound academic work, he or she may be more likely to devote time to daily studies, and less time getting in trouble with alcohol.

3. **Make sure your student knows the legal penalties for underage drinking, using a fake ID, public intoxication, and DUI. In addition, make sure your student understands the academic consequences of underage drinking and alcohol use on campus.**
  
4. **Stress to your student that drinking alcohol to the point of impairment or intoxication is risky.**

You may want to discuss the difference between low-risk and high-risk drinking and abstaining.

**Low Risk Drinking is:**

- Thinking about whether you will drink, what you will drink before the party
- Being 21 or older
- Eating a meal before drinking
- Abstaining is the safest choice
- Drinking no more than one drink per hour; maximum 1 for women, 2 for men
- Always knowing what you are drinking
- Alternating alcohol-free drinks throughout the evening
- Knowing how you will get home safely before you go out

**High Risk Drinking is:**

- Chugging, drinking games, shots (drinking anything out of a punch bowl, trough, hose or funnel)
- Drinking to get drunk (intoxicated)
- Driving after drinking or riding with someone under the influence
- Drinking too much too fast
- Going to parties where people drink too much
- Not knowing what is in your glass or leaving it unattended
- Mixing alcohol with medications or illegal drugs

Emphasize that high risk drinking is neither admirable nor funny, and that many students suffer unexpected and unwanted consequences.

Discourage participation in drinking games. Help them understand that college drinking has resulted in:

- Injury: 500,000 students annually, ages 18-24 are unintentionally injured under the influence of alcohol
- Assault: Students who has been drinking assaulted more than 600,000 students age 18-24. More than 70,000 students have been victims of alcohol related assault or date rape
- Vandalism: About 11% of students report that they have damaged property while under the influence.

- Unsafe Sex: 400,000 students ages 18-24 have unprotected sex, and 100,000 report having been too intoxicated to know if they consented to having sex

5. **Examine your own values and behavior and the messages you send regarding alcohol and other drugs.** Examine your family history and the messages your family sends. Refrain from “glorifying” alcohol related stories from your college days.
6. **Encourage them to stand up for their right to a safe academic environment.** Students who don't drink can still be affected by students that do. Encourage your student to deal with alcohol related problems like interrupted study time or unwanted sexual advances by directly confronting the person or the problem. They can also enlist the help of Residence Hall staff.
7. **Encourage them to intervene when classmates or roommates are in trouble with alcohol.**  
If they see someone passed out or unconscious, they should get help by calling 911, or contacting residence hall staff immediately. Many students fail to seek help due to lack of experience or lack of familiarity with the signs of alcohol poisoning
8. **Know the scene at your student's college or university and talk to them about it.**  
Students tend to exaggerate the use of alcohol and other drugs by their peers. Encourage your student to get to know the myths and misperceptions about the use of alcohol or drugs at on their campus. Help them realize it is "ok" to resist the peer pressure to get involved with drugs or alcohol. Tune in to your student's environment. Their favorite TV show, movies, and music will provide unlimited opportunities to discuss alcohol and substance abuse issues.
9. **Stay in touch.**  
The challenges don't end once they're at college. Since the first six weeks of college are a very high-risk time for first year students you may want to call, write, or e-mail frequently and be supportive. Here are some other questions you may want to ask.

How are you doing?

Do you like your classes?

What is the party scene like?

What kinds of activities are available?

Are you enjoying living in the residence hall? Why?

Do you see others making friends or just being drinking buddies?

How are you getting along with your roommate?

Are you feeling overwhelmed?

What can we do to help?

**10. Know where to go for help**

Let your student know that you may not have all the answers to their questions about alcohol and other drugs, but you will be willing to find out.

**If you suspect that your student is having problems at college, please encourage them to seek help at the following on-campus locations:**

Counseling Center

Health Center/Services

Alcohol Education/Health Promotions Office

Housing Office/Hall Director's Office

Your student may also talk to his or her academic advisor for assistance.

**11. Signs of that may indicate Alcohol or Drug Use Problems :**

Missing or skipping classes (or classroom assignments) or a drop in academic performance.

Frequent requests for more money to cover expenses, or taking a second job.

Moodiness, defensiveness, or silence when you try to talk to him/her about school.

### Resources

Facts on Tap. Information available at <http://www.factsontap.org/>.

The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention. Information available at <http://www.edc.org/hec>.

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism. **College Drinking: Changing the Culture**. Available at <http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/>

O'Connell, Kathy (2004). **Talking to your student about alcohol**. Bloomington, IL: Chestnut Health Systems.

SAMHSA's Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. Information available at <http://www.prevention.samhsa.gov/>

Truman State University. **Most Dogs Don't**. Available at <http://mostdogs.truman.edu/parents.htm>

University of San Francisco **Information for Parents**. Available on the web at [http://www.usfca.edu/shep/parent\\_alcohol1.htm](http://www.usfca.edu/shep/parent_alcohol1.htm)

Virginia Tech's **College Years and Alcohol... What Every Parent Should Know**. Available on the web at <http://www.hokiehandbook.vt.edu/parentalcohol.html>