

COUNSELING DEPARTMENT

It's Never Too Soon to Start the Conversation: Talking to Your Child About Alcohol Use



April is Alcohol Awareness Month, and though it may be winding to a close, the issue of underage drinking continues to be a concern among parents. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism notes that by the age of 15, over one-third of teens have had at least one alcoholic drink, a number that roughly doubles by age 18. Binge-drinking is also a big risk among this age group- a behavior that can lead to injury, memory and learning problems, and chronic conditions like heart disease. How can you approach this tough but necessary topic of underage drinking with your children? The answer is: to start the conversation early and have it often. Parents frequently think the best way to tackle heavy “adult” issues is to have a formal sit-down talk where they lay down the rules. Having a more casual conversation throughout their childhood will allow for a more open discussion. Children often develop their own ideas about alcohol early based on their observations of family behavior, internet exposure, media, and peer influence.

The frequency and age to start these talks really depends on the family. A parent’s approach is equally as important. It is imperative you don’t overreact to any questions or comments your children make. Remember to keep your child’s developmental level in mind during these discussions. If you wait to have these tough talks until they are teenagers you may have missed the window and they may have formulated their own skewed ideas about drinking. Little kids will ask questions - don’t shut them down and be sure to have answers ready. Parental instinct is to try to postpone answering them rather than respond to them immediately simply because they aren’t ready to talk about it. However, if you don’t know how to answer their questions it is very appropriate to tell your child that you will look into it and resume the discussion at a later time. It is also important to model positive behavior centered around your own drinking. As an adult, how can you show that alcohol can be consumed safely and with self-control?

Another topic of discussion is the physical impact that alcohol can have on the developing mind. Alcohol is a depressant that affects the brain by causing the brain to slow down. This can result in slurred speech, confusion, poor vision, poor muscle control and judgement, slower reactions, lack of coordination, and sleep disruption. For these reasons, it is recommended that for children under the age of 18 “no alcohol” is the safest choice and that they delay the initiation of drinking for as long as possible. Alcohol can affect your child’s brain which continues to develop until their early twenties. Alcohol can have a negative impact on your child’s problem-solving skills and performance at school as well as potentially affecting their body, mood and mental health.



What Are the Warning Signs Your Child May Be Drinking?

Although the following signs may indicate a problem with alcohol or other drugs, some also reflect normal growing pains. Experts believe that a drinking problem is more likely if you notice several of these signs at the same time, if they occur suddenly, or if some of them are extreme in nature.

- Mood changes: flare-ups of temper, irritability, and defensiveness
- School problems: poor attendance, low grades, and/or recent disciplinary action
- Rebellion against family rules
- Increase in lying and sneaky behaviors
- Friend changes: switching friends and a reluctance to let you get to know the new friends
- A “nothing matters” attitude: sloppy appearance, a lack of involvement in former interests, and general low energy
- Alcohol presence: finding it in your child’s room/backpack or smelling alcohol on his or her breath
- Physical or mental problems: memory lapses, poor concentration, bloodshot eyes, lack of coordination, or slurred speech
- Increase in spending time with friends and staying away from the house
- Repeatedly breaking curfew