

Talking to your college student about alcohol

A parent/guardian guide

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A Brief Introduction to Alcohol Use at Stanford

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A Brief Introduction

Though normalized, and sometimes even glorified in movies and media detailing college life, alcohol is the most widely misused drug among college students. Many students feel that drinking alcohol is part of the college experience and that they will miss out on social aspects of college if they do not drink. However, the results of misuse can be devastating.

Binge drinking, a pattern of drinking four or more drinks in a two-hour time period for women, and five or more drinks in a two-hour time period for men, has consistently been associated with higher instances of negative consequences such as law enforcement involvement, alcohol poisoning, assaults, and injuries due to drinking.

The Office of Alcohol Policy and Education has created this PDF guide for you to use as a resource when talking to your student about alcohol. Sometimes parents believe that their child will not listen or that their messages go unheard, but research shows that parents have significant impact on their children's decisions regarding alcohol and other drug use.

We have written this guide to reach a wide audience, understanding that there may be sections that you and your family can relate to better than others. This is okay. Families differ and we want to respect those differences, while at the same time provide as much helpful information as possible. Here you will find information, conversation starters, guided questions, and helpful tips for talking to your child about your expectations around substance use while they are in college.

Alcohol is the most widely misused drug among college students

Stanford is no different from other universities when it comes to risks associated with alcohol misuse

Between 36-38% of undergraduates

While a minority, hundreds of Stanford students each year experience negative consequences from drinking - from receiving police citations to alcohol poisoning.

The Student 'Knows It All Already'

Your student might feel like s/he knows everything already. Sometimes this is based in a little

Communicate the “why”

Communicate the “why”. Why is this important to you, and where does it fit into your hopes for your student's college experience? Whether it be your values, beliefs, personal experiences etc., connect the topic of substance use to other conversations you have had with your child about transitioning into college life.

Listen

Allow your student to speak without interruption. Listen to what s/he has to say. Sometimes a way to show you are listening is to paraphrase what you think s/he has said, “Let me see if I am understanding this. It sounds like you feel..”

Ask Questions

Ask open-ended questions and encourage your student to talk about feelings, thoughts, and any anxiety/worries about starting college.

Verbalize Respect

Whenever you can in the conversation, affirm your respect for your student. People who feel respected are often willing to talk more. Tell your student you are proud of him or her for being able to handle situations in the past around alcohol and drugs, or let your student know that you respect his or her thinking about these things ahead of time.

Choose a good time

It is best to find a time when your student is not going to feel rushed or trying to go elsewhere. Wait until you are both calm and have enough time to have a discussion. It could be over dinner, or you could take your student out for lunch or some other activity so you have him or her alone to sit and talk and listen to each other.

Eliminate distractions

Make sure there are not a lot of distractions. It is okay to talk over a meal. However, if someone is watching television or reading or doing dishes, it becomes more difficult to talk without being distracted.

Try to appeal to values and common goals

Show that you care about your student's health, wellness, and success. Discuss how alcohol and drugs may impact these things. Young adults are more likely to listen when they know you are on their side. Remind your student that you want him or her to get the most out of his or her college experience and that includes happiness and safety.

Be balanced

Show that you are a reliable source of information about alcohol and drugs. In order to make responsible and informed decisions about alcohol, you want your student to know s/he can come to you and ask questions. Showing that you can be impartial by providing unbiased information encourages students to take responsibility for their own decisions while acknowledging facts. One way to show that you can be impartial is to acknowledge the reasons why people choose to use alcohol and drugs, as well as the reasons that people choose not to.

Roll with resistance

Recognize that your student might disagree with you and that some conflict is natural. You are not identical to each other. Reframe conflict as an opportunity to listen to each other about your experiences and learn from each other.

Agree to take a pause if needed

You do not have to keep pushing through if the conversation becomes unproductive or defensive in nature. You can agree to temporarily stop the conversation and say that you want to think things over a bit more and have the conversation at a later time.

Body language is important

Even positioning yourself in a more open stance can help your student feel like you are open to his or her thoughts and ideas. Sometimes we have gut reactions to things and that is okay, but being aware of what your face or body language is telling your student is important.

Avoid a debate

Sometimes these conversations can become debates. If you sense that your student is getting defensive, try suggesting that you want to approach this from another angle. Use "I" (I am worried about. .) statements instead of "you" ("you did this. .) statements to prevent putting him or her on the defensive.

Be ready to answer personal questions

Your student may ask you questions about your experiences. "Did you drink alcohol when you were my age? If it was okay for you to do, why is it not okay for me to do? Did you ever get drunk? Did you ever smoke marijuana?" You will need to be prepared to answer these questions in ways that your student will not decide that it's permissible to misuse alcohol.

Talk about any relevant family history

Talking about a family history with alcoholism or drug addiction can be very difficult. However, it is important for your student to know. Studies show that there are some genetic influences when it comes to addiction. This is not the only factor, but students who know about a family history will be better prepared to make informed decisions about alcohol and drugs.

Common Misperceptions

Sometimes parents and guardians can be reluctant to talk with their student about drinking. Common myths that may make them more reluctant include:

Myth	Fact

9Y°ndj ~ cdl

Stanford has a thriving substance free community that is growing larger every year! 1 in 4 undergraduates abstain from alcohol and drugs.

I de°GZVhdch°H°Vc[°dg°°hij YZci h°X] ddhZ°id°Ygc°

- To have a good time
- To celebrate
- To feel connected to people around me
- To get drunk

I de°GZVhdch°H°Vc[°dg°°hij YZci h°X] ddhZ°CDI °id° Ygc°

- I don't want to lose control
- I don't have to drink to have a good time
- I have other things to do
- I'm worried about the negative effects on my health

: neadgc°\°g°ZVhdch°i] n°ndj g°hij YZci °b °^] i° X] ddhZ°id°Ygc° °XVc°] Zæ°Vj/°'°ndj g°Xg°ZY°W°t°n° Vc°Y°] Zæ°] °b °°dg°] Zg°g°V°t°b°Z°i°] Vi °ndj °XVc°°h°ZZ°V°li°] ° h°YZh°#: neadgc°\°g°ZVhdch°i] n°h°\$] Z°b° Vh°X] ddhZ°° cdi °id°Ygc° °°h°Z°f°j° Van°°b° edg°Vci °id°g°Z°b° °c°Y°ndj° g° hij YZci °i°] Vi °i°] Zg°°Vg°Z°°cdi °dcan°\°dd°Y°°g°ZVhdch°id° W°h°i°V°c°!°V°ji° °i°] Zg°°Vg°Z°°V°hd°°V°a°Zg°°V°i°°k°Zh°id° Ygc° °c°\°#

How Alcohol Works in the Body

If an individual drinks too much, the central nervous system begins to shut down, and an individual's breathing or heart rate can reach dangerously low levels and even stop. Not only do these survival functions slow down, but alcohol impairs all other parts of the brain as well. Most notably, alcohol impairs the memory center of the brain (the hippocampus) and at certain levels, can prevent the brain from forming new memories – typically called a "blackout". During a blackout, the person is awake and often responding to other people, but the brain is not recording memories. Blackouts can be particularly risky because people vary in the amount of alcohol that it takes to blackout. For most people, blacking out is likely anytime after reaching a blood alcohol content of 0.10% or higher.

Alcohol intoxication is measured by blood alcohol content (BAC) or blood alcohol level (BAL). You might recall that a BAC of 0.08% is the legal limit for driving under the influence (a DUI). See the following chart for typical effects of different BAC levels.

Conversation Starters

Try to begin with a statement that conveys open-mindedness and then ask your child about his or her experiences.

Be willing to talk about your own experiences and opinions, but most importantly about how they have changed over time. Showing that you can be open will encourage your student to do so. Try to avoid sweeping generalizations about alcohol and drug use.

It is OKAY to share your opinion. In fact, you SHOULD. But try to distinguish between facts and opinions (e.g. "My opinion is that...and I have based that on personal experiences...and I have based that on facts that I have learned...and I have based that on these observations...")

Use the AlcoholEdu course as an excuse to talk about it.

"Have you completed the online courses about alcohol and drugs that you are supposed to do? What have you learned so far?"

"I know you have been doing some online education about alcohol and drugs, how has that been going?"

Start by talking about the excitement of going to college.

"Are you getting excited to start school? College can be a stressful time, both academically and socially. Some people party a lot to try to fit in, or feel like they need to in order to have a social life. What has been on your mind as you think about the possibilities of parties and your social life?"

Use a natural segue, like a commercial advertising alcohol. At dinner if you have an alcoholic beverage you might bring it up, or during a movie or TV show when alcohol is mentioned.

6 Overarching Goals for the Conversation

1

Be explicit about your expectations

Depending on how you feel about alcohol and drugs, your family history and personal experiences, this may look like a discussion about abstinence or harm reduction. Either way, let your student know that you expect him or her to be responsible about his or her decisions. Some parents and guardians allow their children to drink a small amount of alcohol on special occasions. Others believe teaching their child how to drink alcohol responsibly at home will ensure that their child drinks responsibly outside the home. You must decide as a parent what fits into your values and beliefs. Again, whatever you decide, you should outline what responsible drinking looks like. Studies consistently show that when parents permit their children to drink, they tend to drink more often and heavier outside the home.

2

Show that you care about your student's health, wellness, and success

Discuss how alcohol and drugs can impact the body, overall health, well-being, and academics. Young adults are more likely to listen when they know you are on their side. Remind them that you want them to get the most out of their college experience and that includes happiness and safety.

3

Show that you are a reliable source of information

In order to make responsible and informed decisions about alcohol, you want your student to know they can come to you and ask questions. Showing that you can be impartial by providing unbiased information encourages students to take responsibility for their own decisions while acknowledging facts. One way to show that you can be impartial is to acknowledge the reasons why people choose to use alcohol and drugs, as well as the reasons that people choose not to.

4

Help your student think through the kinds of situations they might face in making decisions around alcohol and drugs.

Talk about why you made the decisions you did around alcohol and drugs and how that impacted you. If you could go back in time to give advice to yourself at your student's age, what are the things you would say? What kinds of things would have resonated with you?

5

Talk about any important family history with substance use

Students who know that they have a family history involving addiction will be better prepared to make responsible decisions when it comes to alcohol and drugs.

6

Let your student know about Stanford on-campus resources

See the resource section later in this guide

Ask your student what they think! Asking questions can be a supportive way to help him or her sift through thoughts and ideas. It also helps your student feel like it's not a lecture.

4 Ways to Discuss Social Pressure to Drink

MAKE IT CLEAR THAT NOT EVERYONE IS DRINKING

For More Information

www.niaaa.nih.gov

www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov

www.ncadd.org/index.php

www.samhsa.gov

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org

Sources

This guide was written using the sources above, and draws heavily from an evidence-based 'Parent Handbook' written by Rob Turrisi, PhD from the Prevention Research Center at Pennsylvania State University. All Stanford specific data or references to Stanford norms are unpublished and managed by Institutional Research.