

# Making Smart Choices About Alcohol

College is all about choices. And some of the most important choices your student will make this semester involve alcohol.

Many students believe that their peers are drinking like crazy, going out every Wednesday through Sunday, no matter if they're of legal drinking age. This myth often makes students feel like they have to "drink up" to meet peer standards. Yet, the real story is that many students *don't* choose to drink or they drink responsibly. It's important for students to know the real deal so they can make their choices based on self-responsibility and what feels right, not perceived peer pressure.

## Parents' Role

Parents play a key role in helping students make smart decisions about alcohol. You remain a key influence in your child's life, believe it or not. So, consider having a proactive conversation about alcohol. Here are some tips on how to do just that...

**Make it an Ongoing Conversation.** This initial discussion will likely be the toughest to get started. Instead of lecturing, take this opportunity to open the lines of communication between you and your student so that you can keep talking about this important topic. Find out how he feels about alcohol and the peer pressure he faces on campus. Let him know that you are always there to talk things through.

**Set Clear Expectations.** Since college is a privilege—and a large financial undertaking for any family—let your student know that you expect her to focus on her personal development as well as her academic pursuits. And you want her to set solid goals for herself. Alcohol use/abuse should not derail any of these plans. And participating in illegal behaviors is unacceptable.

**Help Them Learn to Say "No."** The desire to fit in can be mighty strong, even if it means saying "yes" to behaviors that you don't agree with. Arm your student with some ideas about how to deflect alcohol pressures. If he's involved in community service, classes and other extracurricular activities, he'll have a ready-made "excuse:"

"Sorry I can't join you... I have to do this..." Or he can hang with friends and just drink water or soda – no one has to know. Plus, saying "no" can come in a variety of forms: "I'd love to go dancing with you guys—just know that I won't be drinking tonight because I have an early meet/study group/activity tomorrow morning." Or "I don't have much spare cash this month so why don't we go see the free comedian on campus instead of going out?" When students feel like they have options to use in different settings, saying "no" is that much easier!



**Offer Practical Tips.** Encourage your student to never accept a drink from an unknown person or to leave her drink unattended. It's too easy for someone to slip a colorless, odorless "date rape drug" into the drink. Walking around with open containers in public places isn't smart – it's illegal in many states. More and more places have tools in place to spot fake IDs so, it's not worth the risk, especially since criminal records can impact future employment. And colleges always have transportation options so, don't even think about drinking and driving. Life can change in an instant if you do.

**Don't Talk When a Student is Intoxicated.** You may want to grab hold of a teachable moment yet having a discussion when your student is intoxicated can get messy and be a waste of your time. Wait until the next day to talk when you're both more level-headed.

**Talk with Other College Parents.** How do they handle alcohol-related conversations with their students? What have they learned the hard way? What has worked? This source of info can be invaluable!

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**Be Upfront About Your Concerns.** While solely using generalized scare tactics (i.e. “So many kids die at college because they drink!”) can turn students off, hearing your concerns directly can have an impact on students. “I’m afraid that if you get arrested for drinking, it will be on your record and could show up on a background check when you’re going for your dream job” has a very different tone—it uses the “I” voice and speaks directly to a real-life concern.

**Don’t Glorify Your Own Alcohol Use.** If you made it through college or your young adult life abusing alcohol without any negative consequences, congratulations. You’re lucky. Glamorizing tales of your own alcohol abuse sets a poor example for your student, though, and can make him feel invincible (“If nothing happened to Dad, I’ll be fine, too.”). Be a strong role model for good decision-making instead.

**Encourage Smart Decision Making.** Talk about how, if an event is known for high-risk drinking, it’s best to steer clear—the peer pressure is bound to be high, dangerous situations will likely arise and the possibility of the police stopping by is almost a given. Same holds true for being alone with someone you don’t know well, especially if one or both of you have been drinking, because that’s where many sexual assaults begin.

**Have a Calm, Open Conversation.** When speaking with your student about alcohol, stay calm and be open. Encourage him to express his fears and concerns, and try to understand where he’s coming from. Don’t interrupt your student in the quest to get your point across. And try not to use “Yes... but...” sentences as the word “but” can invalidate anything you were saying beforehand.

**Stay in Touch with Your Student.** Keep up the communication so that your student feels comfortable sharing college happenings with you. Instead of passing judgment, help your student examine her choices and make responsible decisions for herself.

Students who let the campus alcohol culture just “happen” to them by buying into campus myths and buckling to peer pressure will likely have a tough time at college. Those who talk with their parents and think about their decision making ahead of time will likely make smarter choices. And they’re the ones who have a better chance of finishing college and coming out stronger on the other end.

## The Effects of Others’ Drinking

Your student may be negatively impacted by others’ alcohol abuse in instances such as:

- taking care of an intoxicated roommate or other student
- experiencing an unwanted sexual advance
- having a loud hallway on weekend nights when intoxicated residents return
- getting into an argument with an intoxicated individual
- becoming a victim of sexual assault or date rape
- being hit, pushed or assaulted
- being insulted or humiliated
- not getting enough uninterrupted sleep or study time
- having property damaged

Encourage her to talk with residence hall staff members or other advocates (coaches, advisors, etc.) about the best way to handle such scenarios. Those folks are there to help *all* students enjoy their right to a safe academic and living environment.

Sources: “Alcohol, Other Drugs, and College: A Parent’s Guide” from *The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention*, [www.higheredcenter.org](http://www.higheredcenter.org); “How to Talk to Your College Age Child/Student About Alcohol & Other Drugs from the Substance Abuse Prevention & Health Enhancement Office at Syracuse University,” <http://sumweb.syr.edu/health/parents.htm>; “A Message to Parents About High-Risk Drinking at College” from the Ohio College Initiative to Reduce High Risk Drinking, [www.higheredcenter.org/parents/ohio.pdf](http://www.higheredcenter.org/parents/ohio.pdf)