

# The Hazing Conversation

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## *Why is This Important?*

Clubs, athletic teams, and student organizations provide students with opportunities for exploring interests, building new friendships, leadership, and preparing for life beyond the classroom. While joining new organizations can be an exciting part of your student's college experience, sometimes new members are exposed to hazing as part of their joining process. Although states and college campuses might have slightly different legal definitions of hazing, a generally agreed-upon definition among prevention professionals is "any activity expected of someone joining a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses, or endangers, regardless of the person's willingness to participate."<sup>1</sup> The last part of the definition, "regardless of the person's willingness to participate," is key, because students might not think something is hazing, and might even be hesitant to report a harmful activity because they don't feel they were "forced" to take part in it.

Unfortunately, hazing is not an uncommon college experience. More than half of college students involved in an extracurricular club, team, or organization reported that they had experienced hazing and 69% of students belonging to a student organization acknowledged that they were aware of hazing occurring among other student groups.<sup>2</sup> While hazing can involve a variety of different harmful activities, two of the most common hazing behaviors reported by students include participation in drinking games and drinking large amounts of alcoholic beverages.<sup>2</sup> It's important to discuss with your student that their personal choice to not drink or to not drink excessively should not be sacrificed for membership in any organization.

### **Hazing can occur in any group setting or organization**

While there have been more publicized incidents involving fraternities and sororities, similar hazing behaviors can and do occur in groups you might not normally consider—such as a college's band, club sports team, or groups that celebrate specific cultures and identities. Although these groups might be more informal and focused on offering social activities rather than housing together, they are not immune from hazing incidents. Hazing has even occurred among honor societies or groups interested in the same major or career field. We share these examples to emphasize that any time your student is thinking about joining a new group, it is worth having a conversation about hazing, even if it doesn't sound like an organization where hazing would typically occur.

### **Membership in fraternities and sororities increases risk for excessive drinking and other drug use**

Given the history of hazing incidents in some organizations, it is worth exercising extra caution when you know your student might be going through a group's recruitment processes. While there are certainly benefits to joining fraternities and sororities such as the opportunity to form great friendships and get involved in the community through service projects, research indicates that membership is also associated with an increase in risky behaviors, including excessive drinking and other drug use,<sup>3</sup> hazing,<sup>2</sup> and even sexual assault.<sup>4</sup> It is important to discuss substance use with your student if they are interested in joining a fraternity or sorority, because in addition to possible short-term consequences, behaviors developed during college might impact their substance use behavior for the long term. According to the Monitoring the Future

study,<sup>3</sup> adults who were in residential fraternities reported the highest levels of binge drinking compared with non-members and adults who did not attend college. Women in residential sororities had higher odds of alcohol use disorders when compared with their peers who did not attend college.<sup>3</sup> Though these outcomes are not inevitable and not all members of these organizations drink or drink heavily, you can prepare your student by discussing with them how they plan to handle any potential pressure to drink or take part in any behavior that might deviate from their personal values. Talking about this ahead of time is important, as it can be hard in the moment to resist the peer pressure.

### **What to look for and how to respond**

When you learn that your student will be joining a new organization, even if it isn't one that has a formal recruitment process, assure your student that they can discuss any activities with you that make them feel uncomfortable. If your student has joined a group, some red flags for parents and families to look out for include, but are not limited to, overwhelming time commitments, declining grades, mental or physical fatigue or harm, and purchases of unusual items, which might come in the form of asking you for more financial help than usual.

It's also important to check in routinely as sometimes the onboarding or initiation process can take longer than you think. When asked who students talk to about hazing experiences, the third most common answer, after friends and other group members, were family members (26%)—outranking coaches, advisors, police, or other college staff.<sup>2</sup> This means that you are likely a trusted source for your student; you might just need to prompt them. Familiarize yourself with the resources that the school provides around hazing prevention and response, and if your student ever feels uncomfortable with organization activities or expectations, help them think through how to discuss their experience with a staff member that works with student organizations or who is in the Office of Student Conduct. If your student discloses suspected hazing to you, it's important to listen to their experiences without judging or shaming their decision to join or be involved in the organization. The person at fault is the person doing the hazing, always. It is incredibly difficult to say “no” in the high-pressure situations where hazing occurs, and it's important to reassure your student that it is still hazing, regardless of whether they feel they “consented” to the activity or not.

### **Policies to protect students**

After years of advocacy from national organizations and families of students impacted by hazing incidents, the Stop Campus Hazing Act was passed by Congress in 2024.<sup>5</sup> This requires institutions of higher education to include hazing incidents in their Annual Security Report, to implement hazing prevention practices and education across campus, and perhaps most pertinent to parents and families—to publish publicly online the school's hazing prevention policies and which organizations have violated them. These requirements give students and families an important opportunity to make informed decisions. Encourage your student to review this information about any organization they plan on exploring or pledging, and talk about why it matters that they are informed. If an organization has a demonstrated history of hazing-related behaviors, they should strongly consider joining a different one.

### **From hazed to hazing**

Beyond the harm that could come from being on the receiving end of hazing, students who commit acts of hazing (as they move up through the organization in the future) face serious consequences as well, including expulsion. At the end of the day, there are many opportunities and different ways of getting involved on campus. Joining an organization should enrich a

student's college experience and help them create positive memories, not jeopardize their future or their physical or mental wellbeing.

## ✓ SAY THIS

*"I know you are excited about joining \_\_\_\_\_. What are you most looking forward to about being a member?"*

Start the conversation by exploring which things they are looking forward to about joining the organization and what the onboarding process might be like.

*"What kind of things are they expecting of you and other new members this semester?"*

*"I know you know this, just remember that your first obligation is to your classes. Being involved in other organizations is important, I get that. I just don't want you to accidentally let your involvement go so far that it starts to distract you from your studies."*

Remind them of their personal goals outside of the organization in a way that re-affirms that you know how important those goals are to them. This is a nice way to remind your student of their purpose at school without sounding accusatory, which could shut down the conversation.

*"I heard about a hazing incident on the news the other day, and I was upset to learn how prevalent hazing is on college campuses. I want to make sure that you are safe in the groups you are joining. Have you heard about hazing at your school?"*

You can bring up the prevalence of hazing at other schools to see if your student has heard of hazing activities at their school or is aware of the issue generally.

*"Has anyone shared with you what the college policies are on hazing? What happens to you or the organization if hazing occurs?"*

Encourage your student to know and understand what the hazing policy is at their college and if there are staff members that support the organizations they are joining. It is important that your student knows the policy and resources that are available to them if they experience or witness hazing. Many schools have a form online or other similar way to report hazing incidents.

*"Does the organization have an advisor? What's the relationship that the organization has with them?"*

*"What types of educational activities does the university require that you do as a member of a fraternity or sorority?"*

Most institutions have minimum expectations around the education fraternities and sororities must receive on topics such as alcohol, other drugs, sexual assault prevention, and hazing prevention.

*"I can't wait to meet your brothers or sisters. Does the organization have an event for parents and family?"*

Most fraternities and sororities have an event where parents and families can come together to learn more about the organization.

*"Remember, I'm always here to talk about what's going on. If the organization is asking you to do something you don't feel comfortable with or that you know I wouldn't approve of, I hope you know you don't have to participate, even if it feels awkward to say "no". I am happy to brainstorm ways that you could handle a situation like that."*

It's important to remind your student that you are there to support them if they do experience or witness hazing. You can also empower them to intervene or report any hazing that they know about to ensure the safety of themselves and others.

*"If you see hazing happening, intervening or speaking out against that activity helps others know that you care about them. More than likely, you aren't the only one who is concerned or uncomfortable. If you speak up, others might follow."*

## X NOT THIS

*"I know you are joining \_\_\_\_\_. I expect you to go to all the new member activities."*

Don't tell your student they should participate in all the activities of organizations they join. Your student should be able to make decisions about which activities they want to participate in.

*"I don't think that's really hazing. You weren't really in danger, were you?"*

Don't minimize behaviors that your student thinks might be hazing. Hazing has many different forms, and organizations that participate in lower-level hazing may be further emboldened to participate in more harmful hazing activities.

*"I know you are joining \_\_\_\_\_. In my day, members had to do all sorts of things to join. What you'll experience probably is nothing compared to back then."*

Avoid sharing stories about times in your college days where you might have engaged in risky behaviors. Don't minimize or dismiss any potential hazing they could be experiencing. Encourage them to speak up if they are uncomfortable with anything the organization asks of them.

*"You've already spent so much money/invested so much time. You should just stick it out."*

Let your student know that they can quit or leave the organization if it doesn't align with their values. Students can find additional opportunities for campus involvement in other organizations by visiting the student activities or organizations office at their college or university.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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**Stop Hazing** works to promote safe and inclusive school and campus environments through research, prevention workshops, and trainings as well as developing evidence-based prevention initiatives.

**The Timothy J. Piazza Center for Fraternity and Sorority Research** is dedicated to addressing issues within Greek communities. The center works in honor of Timothy Piazza, a student at Penn State University who tragically passed away in 2017 due to hazing activities.

**The Gordie Center** at the University of Virginia is dedicated to ending hazing and substance misuse among college students through sharing the story of Gordie Bailey, a University of Colorado student who tragically passed away due to alcohol overdose after a fraternity hazing event.

**HazingInfo.org** is a partnership between the University of Maine, the University of Washington Information School, and StopHazing.org that aims to end toxic hazing culture through making hazing-related information accessible to families and students.

*We would like to extend a special thanks to Tyler Scott Huddleston, who provided valuable contributions to the creation of this page through his work with the Center on Young Adult Health and Development.*

### Scientific References

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2. Allan EJ, Madden M. *Hazing in view: College students at risk*. 2008. University of Maine, College of Education and Human Development. Orono, ME.
3. McCabe SE, Veliz P, Schulenberg JE. How collegiate fraternity and sorority involvement relates to substance use during young adulthood and substance use disorders in early midlife: A national longitudinal study. *J Adolesc Health*. 2018;62(3S):S35-S43. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.09.029
4. Porta CM, Elmquist S, Martin L, Sampson K, Stack K, Hill A, Lee A, Driessen MC. "It could bring down Greek life as a whole": Greek life members' perspectives on party culture, safety, responsibilities and consequences. *J Am Coll Health*. 2023;71(5):1486-1496. doi:10.1080/07448481.2021.1942004
5. StopHazing. Federal anti-hazing law: The stop campus hazing act. StopHazing Consulting. Accessed June 16, 2025. <https://stophazing.org/policy/stop-campus-hazing-act>

Disclaimer: Unfortunately, even with the "best" parenting practices, there is no guarantee that students will refrain from starting to use drugs or alcohol, developing a drug problem, or even worse, experiencing serious drug-related consequences. Conversely, the worst of circumstances does not necessarily predispose one to a life of addiction.