

The Spring Break Conversation

Why is This Important?

After a long semester, your student is looking forward to spring break as a time to relax, catch up on work, or have some fun. There are many different options that your student can choose from to enjoy their time off. While many students travel locally, visit friends, or go home, some students go on trips that are centered on alcohol.

No matter what they choose to do for spring break, many students might feel that having this time to “unwind” gives them permission to drink even though they are underage or if they are of legal age, to drink a lot more than usual.

For students who vacation with friends, spring break is often associated with high-risk drinking, risky behaviors, and a lack of supervision. These trips are often focused on the use of alcohol as students travel to destinations in the U.S. where attitudes about underage drinking may be more relaxed or access to alcohol may be easier. Some trips may involve travel to other countries where underage students can drink legally or they can drink cheaply.

Students who travel with their friends tend to drink more heavily and more often, compared with students who stay home or vacation with their families.¹ There might be heightened pressure to engage in excessive drinking and unsafe alcohol use. As a family member, it’s natural to be concerned about these trips and the safety and well-being of your student. You might be told by your student that you don’t have permission to be concerned because they are not a minor anymore. But give yourself permission to be concerned!

It is important to engage in conversations before your student makes decisions about spring break so that you and your student will be comfortable with decisions regarding spring break. Start asking your student about spring break several weeks ahead of time. With the exception of needing financial assistance for their trip, students might not volunteer information about their plans without being asked.

Whether or not your student knows how they want to spend spring break, you should set up a time to speak with your student about this topic only. Before you speak with your student, you should be aware of the risky behaviors that sometimes occur on spring break and be able to suggest some non-alcohol focused alternatives. Many schools organize alternative spring break trips and these can be found on school websites, email lists, or through specific campus organizations.

✓ SAY THIS

“I was looking at the academic calendar and noticed that your spring break is between <insert dates here>. Have you thought of any plans for it?”

An easy way to start a conversation about spring break is by inquiring about their plans. Make sure to do this early on, before your student has any definite plans.

“What are your friends doing this spring break?”

“Have you thought about going on a _____ trip with your friends?”

You can ask your student what their friends are doing and suggest that they do something as a group that wouldn't be focused on alcohol.

“The family is looking forward to having you home for a week!”

“I heard that the _____ club is organizing a cool trip to _____.”

“We could go as a family to _____ for a few days.”

During this conversation, work out a plan with your student and encourage them to make a decision about a spring break trip that is comfortable for the both of you.

“Just because you can legally drink in that country, doesn't mean it's a good idea.”

Talk About Trip Safety: If your student is going on a trip and you are uncomfortable with the location or events that will be occurring, it is important to start talking about safety.

Other countries might have a different, lower drinking age making them appealing locations for spring break trips. Discourage your student from taking advantage of this fact.

A primary concern when students travel abroad is their safety. Having even a few drinks can lower their “situational awareness”, meaning that they won't be as keen on noticing or even caring about a potentially dangerous situation. An example would be being befriended by a person who they just met who offers to take them to a party somewhere.

You can also emphasize that the purpose of their trip abroad should be to soak up all the sights, the chance to try new foods, and to immerse themselves in the culture in the short time that they are there. Spending time finding ways to drink, getting drunk and sleeping through the morning because of a hangover distracts from taking advantage of these opportunities.

*For students who are 21 or older, you can say:
“Just because other kids are drinking a lot, it doesn’t mean you have to drink a lot, too. The safest approach is not to drink at all; beyond that, the federal government recommends no more than a drink a day for females and two drinks for males. Risks of serious impairment for most adults after three or four drinks within two hours, and that’s when it gets much more difficult for you to stay safe. I don’t care how drunk your friends are, I expect you to stay in control. Even if you think you feel fine—trust me—no one is “fine” after that much alcohol. And that’s a biological fact, not my opinion.”*

Many locations in the U.S. that have become traditional spring break locations might have more permissive attitudes about underage drinking even if it is illegal. And alcohol availability and access varies a lot across and within states. A concentrated atmosphere of student intoxication encourages drinking to excess.

“You and your friend should make sure each of you knows where the other is at all times.”

Encourage the use of a buddy system—making sure your student has contact with a friend while they are traveling.

“Did you know that <insert country> has strict open container laws?”

If your student is traveling internationally for spring break, make sure your student knows the laws in the country they are traveling to.

“I don’t think you will have to ever use these words, but memorize these key words just in case.”

Teach your student some key words in the language of where they are going such as “help”, “I need a doctor”, and “police”.

“Save these numbers in your phone just in case of an emergency.”

Provide your student with emergency contact information in the place they are traveling. Examples are the U.S. Embassy, local hospitals, and the police.

“I don’t want to bug you during your vacation, but we should talk at least <insert frequency here that makes you feel comfortable—for some families it might be daily, for others, every two to three days>. A quick text, picture message, or phone call letting me know about your trip would be great.”

Before your student goes on spring break you should develop a communication plan with your student so that you can be updated on their location and status. Set up planned check-in times for phone calls, or, if they don’t respond well to that suggestion, then ask if they can send text messages at planned times.

X NOT THIS

"No, you're absolutely not going."

Don't completely shut down when your student talks about going on a trip. You want to keep an open line of communication.

If you say, "No, you're absolutely not going," your student will most likely not tell you about their plans and you will be left in the dark.

"You're doing something stupid."

If you say, "You're doing something stupid," your student might feel as though you are not respecting their decisions. It is important to establish a sense of trust and respect if you want your student to openly communicate with you about their plans.

Don't accuse your student of anticipated poor behavior on their intended trip.

"I don't want you going on a trip to waste your time drinking."

If you say, "I don't want you going on a trip to waste your time drinking" your student will most likely not be receptive of your concern and will proceed to make plans without your approval or knowledge. It is important that your student tell you what their plans are and what they are doing so you can encourage them to be responsible and safe.

Don't tell "war stories."

Do not tell "war stories" about your own experiences with drinking or wild times where there was drinking to excess. This destigmatizes, glorifies, and encourages excessive drinking behavior.

Scientific References

Grekin ER, Sher KJ, Krull JL. College spring break and alcohol use: Effects of spring break activity. J Stud Alcohol Drugs. 2007;68,681-688.

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.