

7 Tips for Good Communication

1. Don't be afraid to start the conversation.

Talking about drinking need not be taboo. “Detoxify” the topic. You can assume that your student has experience with high-risk drinking situations. Even if your student doesn’t drink, they most likely know people who do and/or they have been offered alcohol. This website provides you with ideas on “starting points” for conversations, but it is OK to be more direct and ask about opportunities they might have had to drink or situations where drinking occurred. By asking open-ended questions, your student will be prompted to give more information in their answer rather than a simple “yes” or “no”. This is a great way to keep the conversation flowing. They’ll be more likely to disclose what happened if you don’t interrupt them or react with shocked facial expressions. By paraphrasing what they say, you show that you are really listening and want to hear and understand what they have to say. Be willing to accept without argument when they correct your paraphrased version or “justify” or “minimize.” That’s your opportunity to ask for clarification. You’re just trying to get a conversation going and learn more.

2. As a parent, you are allowed to disapprove of drinking. Give yourself permission to disapprove.

Research has shown that parents who communicate zero-tolerance expectations around alcohol are much less likely to have a student who drinks excessively during college than parents who have permissive attitudes. Therefore, it’s OK to be a parent and take a stand—and not be “chummy” around this issue. It’s important that your student clearly understands where you stand, even if they might not agree with you. It’s your voice—and your words—that will replay in their head when they are faced with a tough situation around high-risk drinking. And they can use your message when they refuse to drink. In other words, it’s OK for you to be the “bad guy” if it helps your student save face when they refuse a drink. Your message should be clear: no alcohol is best, and certainly not excessive amounts even when they are of legal age to drink.

3. Banish any fear that your disapproval is naïve.

There is nothing naïve about disapproving of your student’s drinking—although it might be naïve to expect that your student won’t ever drink (or ever drink too much) just because you’ve stated your disapproval of them drinking. Many college students do experiment with drinking, but your stance on the matter can still have a powerful impact on when, where, and how it happens. And if they do have negative experiences along the way, your warnings make you look like a genius without ever having to say “I told you so...” Furthermore, you can have it both ways—that is, you can both say they shouldn’t drink and keep the door open for future discussion about drinking experiences, because you know that, most likely, they will have opportunities to drink anyway (at least eventually). Follow-up debriefing conversations are very powerful, as you can show that even if they don’t always follow all of your advice all the time, you still want to hear honestly how things are going.

4. Focus on one message during the conversation.

This is also known as the “pick your battles” principle. When you are having a conversation about something related to alcohol, it’s not a good idea to let the conversation wander to a different topic. Now is not the time to remind them to call their grandmother, or to check their schedule for their sister’s birthday celebration. Don’t allow your message to get lost in the blur of “laundry list” demands. Stick to your message. Choose a time and place that lets you minimize potential distractions from other family members or work. Silence your mobile devices—better yet, leave them in another room. Focus on talking to your student only. Otherwise, they won’t be getting the full impact of the conversation, and you might skip important things you want to say.

5. Reject the myth that discouraging drinking is useless because everyone is doing it.

We hear frequently from family members and students: “... all the kids drink ... that’s what everyone does.... all the time...” Some family members believe that discouraging drinking is naïve, old-fashioned, or pointless, since drinking is such an established part of the college culture. They might say that arguing about drinking is like arguing about revealing clothing or inappropriate lyrics in popular music—what’s the point since the cat is already out of the bag? But the idea that “everyone drinks all the time” is simply false. On the contrary, although most college students do experiment with drinking, most do not drink regularly or excessively. The view of the crazy college party scene as “normal” is a myth. It exaggerates—and sometimes even glorifies—behaviors that only a small group of students actually participate in. Your goal is to steer your student away from that crowd.

6. Make communication a regular activity.

College students have a lot on their plate. They’re juggling classes, work, a social life, and other responsibilities. It’s better to schedule a time to talk with them, rather than having a conversation when they are multi-tasking or unwilling to talk. Setting up a regular phone call, such as calling every Sunday afternoon, can be a good way to establish consistent communication and ensure that your student can focus on the conversation.

7. Recognize the power of your influence.

Some family members say, “They’re 18, I can’t tell them what to do anymore.” True, they’re not little children anymore, but your attitudes and directions still matter enormously. Families play a major role in influencing their college student’s behavior. Reiterate that your job as an adult family member is to keep them safe and healthy, and to provide guidance that will help them get where they want to go in life. When we asked a group of fourth-year college students, “What were the most important influences in helping you achieve what you have in college,” their number one answer was “My parents.” So family members take heart: your voice still matters, perhaps more than you realize.