

Talking about Alcohol & Sexual Assault

Why is This Important?

In this website, we encourage you to talk with your college student about scenarios where they might have to make choices about alcohol. Through the feedback we've received, families have told us that they want to know more about talking with their college student about how alcohol relates to sexual assault. You might find it hard or uncomfortable to talk with your college student about sex, much less sexual assault. Like many families of college students, it is probably on your mind, and it is important for your college student to think about it too.

When you're ready to talk about it, we hope you'll find some useful starting points here. Your college student might not agree with you on everything, but this is a chance to break the ice on the topic. Like we've said before, your voice matters.

Important Terms to Know

A person who commits a sexual assault is often called a **perpetrator** or **offender**. A person who is sexually assaulted is often called a **survivor** or **victim**.

1 in 5 women and **1 in 16 men** are sexually assaulted during their time in college.

Did you know? April is [Sexual Assault Awareness Month](#). The teal ribbon is the symbol of sexual violence prevention.

What is sexual assault?

The simplest way of describing it is any unwanted sexual touching or activity. Sexual assault is a broader term than rape. Examples include when someone tries to rape, forces someone to do a sexual act, or touches someone in a sexual way when they don't want to be touched. Sexual assault is a crime and an act of violence, not a sexual misunderstanding. It can happen to anyone regardless of gender, age, race, or sexual orientation. **No one deserves to be sexually assaulted. When an alcohol-involved sexual assault happens, it is never the survivor's fault. The only person responsible for a sexual assault is the perpetrator.**

How common is sexual assault, and how often is alcohol involved?

During their time in college, one in five women and one in 16 men are sexually assaulted. **Alcohol is the number one drug used to facilitate sexual assault.** About half of all college sexual assaults are alcohol-involved. Survivors of alcohol-involved sexual assault often do not seek help because they fear being blamed. When anyone experiences a sexual assault, it is important not to judge or blame them for what happened.

How will this information help me talk with my college student about alcohol and sexual assault?

As family members of college students, your number one concern is safety. Being able to explain how alcohol and sexual assault are connected is part of your job to help your college student stay safe. It's a difficult job, like many of the things you do as a family member, but it's

important. This webpage includes facts to help you learn more about alcohol and sexual assault, scripts to guide you on what to say and to avoid saying, and a list of organizations related to sexual assault and assisting survivors. Although alcohol is the most common drug linked to sexual assault, this information could be used for talking with your college student about sexual assault and other drugs as well.

What should I know about alcohol and sexual assault before I talk with my college student?

Fact: Most survivors of alcohol-involved sexual assault knew their perpetrator before the incident.

Most of the time, alcohol-involved sexual assault happens between people who know each other casually. It does not typically happen between strangers or people in romantic relationships.^{1, 2, 3, 4}

Fact: About half of college student sexual assaults are alcohol-involved.

Research tells us that about 50 to 74% of sexual assaults among college students involve alcohol use, either by the perpetrator, the survivor, or both.^{3, 5, 6, 7, 8}

Fact: Parties and bars are common places for being assaulted.

Perpetrators often go to these places to find people who seem vulnerable. Perpetrators use alcohol as a tool to make it easier to assault someone.⁹

Fact: Less than 5% of sexual assaults among college students are reported to authorities. Alcohol-involved sexual assaults are even less likely to be reported.¹⁰

Survivors of sexual assault who were drinking before the assault often feel upset and blame themselves. They also worry about being judged by others.^{4, 5, 11, 12} Feeling this way can prevent survivors from reporting the incident or getting help.

Fact: Drinking alcohol can increase aggression and cause perpetrators to act without thinking.

Heavy drinking often goes hand in hand with fights or getting hurt. Research has found that perpetrators of sexual assault have tendencies toward being violent.^{2, 9} For them, alcohol adds “fuel to the fire.” Perpetrators might also use alcohol as an excuse for their actions.² Even people who aren’t typically aggressive or violent can have their judgment clouded by alcohol.

Fact: Drinking alcohol lowers inhibitions and makes it harder to know what’s going on.

Sometimes it’s hard to tell if you are being taken advantage of, particularly if you have been taught to be polite. Alcohol affects how you think, act, and speak. It can make it harder to know someone’s true intentions.² This might mean someone will not notice if a situation or person is unsafe—especially if the person is someone they already know.

✓ SAY THIS

When you're ready, you can start the conversation like this.

"What have you heard about sexual assault and alcohol at school?"

"How concerned are you about sexual assault on your campus?"

"There's a lot of talk about sexual assault in the media these days. What do you think about that?"

"Does your campus have any events or activities for sexual assault prevention?"

Start by asking open-ended questions rather than yes/no questions. Doing this is a sign that you want to talk and not just lecture. It is a good way to show that you care about the opinions and experiences of your college student.

If the conversation steers into your college student's sexual history or experiences, let them talk to you. Try your best to be a good listener. Try not to pass judgment.

You can bring up the link between alcohol and sexual assault.

"How do you think sexual assault and alcohol are connected?"

"I read that alcohol is involved in about half of sexual assaults among college students. What do you think of that?"

It helps to know what your college student thinks about this topic. It could be that they never thought about it at all. Or, it could be that they thought about it a lot, or maybe even helped a friend deal with an assault.

"How do you think alcohol could make a person more likely to commit a sexual assault?"

"How do you think alcohol could make sexual assault more likely to happen?"

Use your new knowledge from the **Fact section** on page 2 to bring up different topics. For example, you could point out that alcohol use often plays a part in fights and other types of injury and violence.

You can talk about scenarios when an alcohol-involved sexual assault could happen.

“Both people need to agree before hooking up, whether that means making out or something more. How do you think alcohol affects that?”

“No matter how long you’ve known or been with someone, if they have been drinking or using drugs they might not be able to give a clear “yes” to any sexual activity.”

“Let’s say you’re out at a party or bar and a friend looked like they were getting taken advantage of by someone else because they were drinking or really drunk. What would you say or do?”

“What would you do if you saw a friend taking advantage of someone else because they were really drunk?”

Start by saying that drinking alcohol can make it hard to give or get a clear “yes” to sex or sexual activity.

Alcohol affects how you think, act, and speak. It can make it harder to know someone’s true intentions, or to notice if something seems unsafe.

If you are not comfortable talking about your college student’s drinking or sexual history, you can also talk about being a responsible bystander. Many colleges offer training to help students be responsible bystanders. You can find out more about this in the **Additional Resources section** on page 9.

Some tips could include:

- Finding a RA or security guard, or calling 911
- Creating a distraction to give the person a chance to get to a safe place
- Directly asking the person who might be in trouble if they’d like someone to stay with them

You can talk about common myths around alcohol-involved sexual assault.

“You might have heard the saying ‘Watch what’s in your drink,’ but think about it...alcohol by itself can be used to take advantage of someone.”

Alcohol is the number one drug used to facilitate sexual assault. About half of sexual assaults among college students are alcohol-involved.

“If a person drinks alcohol or gets drunk, it does not imply they want to hook up.”

Your college student might argue that alcohol makes social or sexual situations easier or more fun. You can point out that drinking alcohol actually makes it less likely for you to be able to give or get a clear “yes.”

“How do you think drinking alcohol might make it harder to agree to sex?”

Even if both people are drunk, a sexual assault can still happen. For perpetrators, being drunk is not an excuse for sexually assaulting someone.

“Do you think a person is more likely to be sexually assaulted by a stranger or someone they know?”

Sexual assaults are more likely to occur between people who know each other than between strangers. Although assault from a stranger can and does happen, it is far less common.

“Where do you think sexual assaults are most likely to happen?”

Research tells us that parties and bars are the places where sexual assault is more likely to happen. These are both places where there is a lot of alcohol being consumed.

You can share ideas and safety tips.

“How do you make sure you and your friends stay safe when you go out?”

Some tips you can give are:

- Make a plan to stick together with friends you trust if you go to a party.
- Don't leave someone stranded in an unfamiliar or unsafe place.
- Never stay somewhere that makes you feel uncomfortable, pressured, or in danger.
- Know that it is ok to make up something to get out of an unsafe place. You could say you're not feeling well, or have to be somewhere else by a certain time.
- Arrange your own ride or bring taxi money in case you need to leave quickly.
- Trust your instincts. If you notice something that doesn't feel right, it probably isn't.

“How could you tell if someone is trying to take advantage of you? How do you think alcohol affects your being able to notice this?”

Remember that alcohol lowers inhibitions and can make perpetrators more aggressive. Alcohol can make you less aware of unsafe people or places.

“I know that you are strong and independent but being buzzed or drunk makes it harder to notice if someone is being creepy, or is trying to hurt you.”

“Regardless of whether you're drinking or not, I want you to be careful and watch out for yourself and friends.”

These are all good points to make if your college student argues that they don't drink, or that they drink but are always in control.

“No matter how in control you feel, you can't always predict or control other people – especially when there's a lot of drinking going on.”

You can help empower your college student by talking about resources.

“What are some important numbers, apps, or resources that would be helpful to have on hand when you go out?”

“If you or someone you know were sexually assaulted, what would you do?”

“If anything ever happened to you, or if something happened to one of your friends, I want you to know that you could talk to me about it. I’d want you to feel ok bringing it up with me.”

This will prompt your college student to think about what to do if they or a friend experience a sexual assault. There are organizations that they can call if they need help after a sexual assault. Learn more about these places in the **Additional Resources section** on page 9.

“No matter what happens, remember that sexual assault is never the victim’s fault. It is up to them if they want to report it. If they do, it’s really important to know the people and places around campus that can help them.”

Remember that sometimes people do not report an assault or get help because they are upset or blame themselves. Saying something like this can help your college student know it is ok to report a sexual assault if they want.

“What are the health or counseling services offered on your campus?”

Most campuses have a place or person students can call or go to if they are hurt or need help after an assault. It might be a campus safety office, a health clinic, or a counselor.

“Every campus has something called a Title IX (Title Nine) office. What do you know about the one on your campus?”

It is now a law that colleges have to provide education about sexual assault prevention resources and reporting options through a Title IX office, though keep in mind that some campuses might use a different name for it. Colleges are responsible for looking into all reports of sexual assault and making sure that students can get medical care and help from the police if they wish.

If your student tells you that they or a friend experienced a sexual assault and they wish to report it to their school, they can contact their Title IX office. This information usually appears on the school’s website and in student handbooks.

X NOT THIS

You should avoid saying things like this.

“Getting drunk at a party or a bar can cause you to be sexually assaulted, and you should know better.”

There are a lot of myths about sexual assault. Some of these are very hurtful and can make it seem less serious.

“A person who is sexually assaulted when they are drunk is at least partly responsible because they put themselves in that position.”

Remind your college student that no matter what, the perpetrator is the only person at fault.

“What did you think was going to happen if you go out and get drunk?”

Let’s say that during this conversation, your college student has just recently opened up to you about a sexual assault experience. Or maybe they know someone who was assaulted. However, this is not the best time to talk about alcohol or how the situation might have been prevented. You might make them feel bad for telling you about it. They might feel they can’t come to you for help.

“If someone is drunk at a party then they are asking for whatever happens.”

Instead, let them know you love them. You can also ask them what they want to do next. If they or a friend was sexually assaulted, let them know you believe them and that it’s not their fault.

“Sexual assault can happen by accident if you’re drunk.”

This is not true. Most states have laws stating that a person cannot agree to sex if they are too drunk or high. Even if a perpetrator is drunk or high, they are still responsible for their actions.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following places are a great starting point if you want to learn more about sexual assault prevention. They also provide help to people who have been sexually assaulted.

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN): This national organization runs a help hotline and online chat that is open 24 hours, free, and confidential. They have a number of programs to help survivors or prevent sexual assault.

- [Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network Website](#)
- Phone: 1-800-656-4673
- [RAINN Online chat](#)

Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MCASA): This statewide organization provides training to people working in sexual assault prevention and response. Their website has information about sexual assault and local resources for survivors. This includes where to find the closest rape crisis and recovery center in Maryland.

- [Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault Website](#)
- Phone: 301-328-7023

Sexual Assault Legal Institute (SALI): SALI provides direct legal services to sexual assault survivors in Maryland. They can provide confidential help with a wide range of legal needs, including issues related to employment, housing, education, immigration, family law, and the enforcement of victims' rights.

- [Sexual Assault Legal Institute Website](#)
- Phone: 301-565-2277

[Learn more about Title IX.](#)

[Learn more about programs for bystanders to help prevent sexual assault.](#)

Scientific References

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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.