

Why is This Important?

The Impaired Driving Conversation:

You've probably heard someone say "Don't drive if you've had too much to drink!". Seems like a pretty good thing to say, right? Well, if you think about it a bit more, that common warning really doesn't make sense. Why? People have a really hard time judging their own level of intoxication. Ironically, intoxicated people are the worst judge of how drunk they really are, because the alcohol is impairing their judgment!

Also, a lot of things can cloud your judgment of your own impairment or exacerbate your level of impairment, even if you are at or below the "legal limit" to drive. For instance, if it's really late at night and you're tired, or if you haven't eaten, or if you've consumed a caffeinated energy drink—all of these things can mask or compound your true level of impairment. So our best advice is to avoid any level of drinking and driving. Period. But how can you convey this message to your college student?

It's important to have this conversation because college students are at high risk for impaired driving and car crashes for two main reasons. First, they have relatively little driving experience, and second, they tend to engage in a lot of risky activities related to drinking.^{1,2} National statistics show that 29% of college students between the ages of 18 and 24 drove under the influence of alcohol, and of the 8 million U.S. college students, 3 million rode with a drinking driver during the past year.³

NOT driving after consuming any amount of alcohol—or being the passenger in a car with a driver who consumed alcohol—is an important message for college students.⁴ The basic message is that whenever you get into a car, make sure the person behind the wheel has NOT been drinking—especially if it's you! If they allude to driving at all when they go out, this is the time to flex your muscles as a parent. Drunk driving is a serious issue with life-threatening consequences, and you shouldn't be scared to emphasize it.

Having conversations about impaired driving with your child will not only be germane to their college experience, but also help them learn how to be a safe driver for life.

SAY THIS

"When you go out with your friends, how do you usually get home?"

Conversations about impaired driving can happen any time. One way to start this conversation is to ask about how your child gets home when they go out.

"I'm glad you don't get in a car with someone who has been drinking."

"I really hope you aren't driving after you drink or riding with someone who has been drinking. This is a serious matter, and I expect you never to do it."
"Driving after drinking is totally preventable. There is absolutely no good reason ever to drink and drive. There are many alternative options."

If they say walking or taking the bus, then you should encourage that and tell them it makes you proud that they don't drive drunk or ride with someone who has been drinking.

“Do you ever worry about your friends driving after drinking? How have you or would you talk to them about your concern?”

A conversation about friends can be a useful icebreaker.

“Have you ever worried about being in a car where the driver has been drinking even if you haven’t been drinking? How do you manage that situation?”

“Getting a DUI is no joke. DUIs can create a multitude of legal problems that cost thousands of dollars and can ruin future employment opportunities.”

In the state of Maryland people younger than 21 may not drive a motor vehicle with a blood alcohol concentration above .02.⁴ For many people, that would translate into one or two drinks!

“I don’t want you to drink and drive. Remember, any amount of alcohol can impair one’s driving capabilities. Even if you only feel tipsy you should not operate a vehicle.”

Ever overhear your child bragging about how much s/he can drink? Students who think they can handle 4 or 5 drinks without getting drunk are at especially high risk for drunk driving.⁵

“Does your campus have a “Safe Ride” program? You should keep that number on your phone just in case.”

Many campuses have “Safe Ride” programs for students who have consumed alcohol. Encourage your child to keep the number for this program handy, or in their phone.

“Public transportation is a great way to get from point A to B.”

Talk to your child about taking buses and subways if they plan to drink. Let your child know that it is okay to pay for a taxi. While many students feel strapped for money, spending a few dollars on a safe ride home is worth it.

“Mixing caffeinated energy drinks with alcohol is never a good idea. You won’t realize how impaired you really are.”

Mixing energy drinks with alcohol can be particularly dangerous because it can mask feeling drunk.⁶

“I’m worried that you are getting in a car after you (or your friend) have been drinking. Your safety is important to me and I think we should talk about this.”

If you think or know that your child is drinking and driving, it is very important that you address the issue with them before they or someone else causes serious harm.

“I expect you never to get behind the wheel or be a passenger when you or the driver has been drinking.”

Be straightforward with your child and discuss negative consequences.

“Drinking and driving is a serious thing. Please think about your safety, your friend’s safety, and the safety of others.”

If your child still won’t listen to you, you have the option to take away his/her car or stop paying for their car insurance, so that they can’t drive at all.

“You are gambling with your life when you drink and drive.”



NOT THIS



“In an emergency, it is okay to drink and drive.”

Don't encourage drinking and driving in any situation.

If you say, “In an emergency, it is okay to drink and drive,” your child will not realize the real danger associated with drinking and driving.





"It's okay to drive if you have only had a few drinks."

If you say, "It's okay to drive if you have only had a few drinks," your child might be putting him/herself and others at risk by getting behind the wheel when they are impaired and not even realize it. There is no standard to say how many or how few drinks will impair a driver's ability, and any consumption before driving should be discouraged.

If you know your child is drinking and driving, it is understandable that a parent would be angry or upset. However, don't yell at your child as they will not be receptive and might shut you out completely. It is important to help them. Having the ability to communicate effectively is an important step towards that goal.

Don't just discourage drinking and driving because it's illegal. That suggests that your child's safety isn't a concern. Emphasize both safety and legal consequences.

Scientific References

1. Hingson RW, Heeren T, Zakocs RC, Kopstein A, Wechsler H. Magnitude of alcohol-related mortality and morbidity among U.S. college students ages 18-24. *J Stud Alcohol*. 2002;63(2):136-144.
2. Wechsler H, Lee JE, Kuo M, Seibring M, Nelson TF, Lee H. Trends in college binge drinking during a period of increased prevention efforts: Findings from 4 Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study surveys: 1993-2001. *J Am Coll Health*. 2002;50(5):203-217.
3. Hingson R, Zha W, Weitzman ER. Magnitude of and trends in alcohol-related mortality and morbidity among U.S. college students ages 18-24, 1998-2005. *J Stud Alcohol Drugs Suppl*. 2009;16:12-20.
4. State of Maryland, Code of Maryland Regulations 11.17.15.02
5. Arria AM, Caldeira KM, Vincent KB, O'Grady KE. Subjective drunkenness: Relation to drunk driving risk and possible utility as a novel screening item for alcohol-related consequences in college students. APHA Presentation.
6. Arria AM, Caldeira KM, Kasperski SJ, Vincent KB, Griffiths RR, O'Grady KE. Energy drink consumption and increased risk for alcohol dependence. *Alcohol Clin Exp Res*. 2011;35(2):365-375.

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.