

The Housing & Roommates Conversation

Why is This Important?

Living in a residence hall is a huge adjustment for college students. It's most likely your student's first exposure to being independent and living with people outside of your family. As your student prepares to move into their residence hall, assure them that it's going to be a life-changing experience (in a good way!) and that they will make memories that last forever. Living in a residence hall can teach college students about diversity and tolerance.

They'll encounter students of different backgrounds, and each will have a different expectation of what their college experience should be like.

A commonly held belief is that college is a place for drinking, but many other students will not share that expectation and realize that college is a huge investment. Roughly 1 out of 4 college students report that they have experienced academic consequences as a result of their drinking including missing class, falling behind in classes, doing poorly on exams or assignments, and receiving lower grades.¹ Talk to your student about what they might encounter in the residence halls and with roommates. Remind them that drinking can get in the way of what they want to achieve during college.

Many students DO realize that drinking can interfere with the investment they've made to get into college.

Resident Assistants or Resident Advisors (RAs) are student peer leaders that help supervise the students living on campus. They promote healthy and safe environments in residence halls by planning events, helping out distressed students, solving disputes, and enforcing policies. If you have questions concerning housing, you should reach out to your student's Office of Residence Life. Most residence life websites have information about policies and procedures, safety measures, and services offered to students. There is often a specific section of the website for family members where relevant information can be found. If you are curious about the policies in the residence halls, check out the residence hall website. This resource typically provides information about your student's living arrangements, often including a handbook or guide for students living in the residence halls. Often these include policies that you can talk to your student about when discussing living arrangements.

Is your student in recovery?

Many colleges today offer [collegiate recovery programs](#) to provide on-campus support to students in recovery. For some colleges, this includes **substance-free housing options** or other types of dedicated substance-free spaces. Talk to your student about whether this might be the best option for them.

✓ SAY THIS

"What do you enjoy about living in a residence hall?"

"What are the biggest problems you've had getting used to life in a residence hall?"

"I am sure that living on your own has been quite the adjustment. In what ways has it been hard for you?"

"Tell me about your roommate. What are they like?"

"What kinds of people are living on your hall?"

Start the conversation with some general questions about living in a residence hall.

"Have you been surprised by anything?"

"Do people on your hall go out at night?"

"What do people on your hall do for fun?"

"How often have you seen other people drinking alcohol in your residence hall?"

"How have you been sleeping?"

"How OK are you with all of that?"

A way to transition the conversation toward alcohol use in the residence halls is to ask about other residents.

“I saw that there is a residence hall handbook. Did you get one or have you seen it?”

“I know you are living on your own now, but I want you to remember that just like there are rules at home, there will be rules in the residence halls. It is important that you find out what the rules are and stick to them. I want to make sure you are making the most out of your college experience and not finding yourself in any trouble.”

“Have you met your RA yet? Have they talked to you about safety and policies in the residence halls?”

“What is your RA like?”

“Is there anything about your living situation that makes you feel unsafe?”

“What are they like?”

“Do you two get along?”

“How compatible are you and your roommate?”

“How is living with another person?”

“I know things might be a little tough with your roommate, but you shouldn’t give up. See if things get better if you two work at it.”

“Sometimes it is best if you look at it this way—you don’t have to be best friends; you just have to be able to live with each other.”

“It’ll help if you don’t let problems pile up; address every issue with a calm and honest conversation and be ready to compromise.”

“Have you spoken to your RA about these difficulties? They might be able to help you figure out a solution.”

Regardless of whether or not your student is using alcohol, the school should have residence hall policies and procedures. Your student might be unaware of these policies. By talking to your student, you can help them be informed and avoid trouble in their residence hall.

Having an incompatible roommate can make living in the residence halls very stressful. If your student and their roommate don’t see eye to eye on certain key issues, their room can feel as tense as a war zone. If your student is upset with their roommate, you should talk to them about taking appropriate actions to navigate the situation.

You can start the conversation by asking about your student’s roommate.

These questions will help you understand how your student feels about their living situation. If they are unhappy, assure them that things sometimes get better with time and if not, there is always a way to switch roommates.

“You should talk to your RA about how to switch roommates.”

“Your housing director should be able to help you find housing that’s comfortable for you.”

“Switching roommates might be better for you, but make sure you don’t end on bad terms. You two may be incompatible roommates, but could be great friends.”

If your student is certain that they need to switch roommates, there is a process to do so.

“If your roommate’s alcohol use is an issue, you need to let your roommate know. You should sit down with your roommate and address the issue one-on-one.”

“Let your roommate know that something bothers you and give them a chance to change.”

“Tell your roommate what’s going on and how it affects you.”

“Drinking heavily isn’t normal and could be dangerous. Maybe your roommate can get some help. The Health Center or Counseling Center on campus could be a good resource.”

“If you want to help your roommate, you can. Talk to them in an honest and open way about how alcohol can affect them negatively and let them know that their drinking is also affecting you.”

Alcohol can cause problems between roommates. If your student’s roommate uses alcohol, there is a chance that your student has experienced some harms or “second-hand” consequences from the roommate’s drinking. According to the Maryland College Alcohol Survey, 54% of students had to take care of another student, 54% lost sleep, 42% had their studying interrupted, and 22% got into a serious argument during the past year as a result of other students’ drinking.²

“I really like being roommates with you, but I need to focus on school, and your alcohol use is distracting me.”

“I know you want to drink, but alcohol use in the dorms is against the rules, and I don’t want to get in trouble. Please don’t bring it into our dorm room.”

“Your alcohol use is bothering me. Please be respectful of how I feel about alcohol.”

These are some things you can suggest to your student to say.

If your student is still struggling with their roommate’s alcohol use after talking to them, have them seek out an RA who can help them navigate this situation.

X NOT THIS

"I know they are doing <insert activity> in your residence hall. I expect you to go to it."

Don't tell your student they have to go to everything/do every activity that the residence hall has to offer.

If you say, "I know they are doing <insert activity> in your residence hall. I expect you to go to it," your student will feel like you are interfering too much. Let your student get involved in activities in the residence halls that they feel comfortable doing.

Don't give in to the belief that college is all about partying. If you believe it, your student will think you approve, and then your student might grab hold of this notion and believe it as well.

Scientific References

1. Wechsler H, Lee JE, Kuo M, Seibring M, Nelson TF, Lee HP. Trends in college binge drinking during a period of increased prevention efforts: Findings from four Harvard School of Public Health study surveys, 1993-2001. *J Am Coll Health*. 2002;50(5):203-217.
2. Maryland Collaborative to Reduce College Drinking and Related Problems. (2014). High-risk Drinking among College Students in Maryland: Identifying Targets for Intervention. Center on Young Adult Health and Development, University of Maryland School of Public Health, College Park, MD; and the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD.

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.