

The 21st Birthday Conversation

Why is This Important?

Birthdays are a joyous time for everyone involved in the celebration. Because the 21st birthday marks a change in legal drinking status, more than 80% of college students report drinking alcohol while celebrating their 21st birthday.¹ A popular trend among college students to commemorate this day is to drink 21 alcoholic drinks.¹

Another trend is to make “shot books” that encourage taking a shot with 21 friends who are each commemorated with pages in the book. One study reported that 35% of female and 49% of male 21st birthday drinkers had a BAC of .26 or higher.¹ Almost half of 21st birthday drinkers drank more than they ever had before. Drinking that much alcohol is extremely dangerous and can lead to serious health consequences, like alcohol poisoning and death. It’s important to talk to your student about celebrating their 21st birthday safely.

✓ SAY THIS

“Are you excited for your birthday? Do you have anything fun planned?”

Talk with your student BEFORE they turn 21 since most people make birthday plans in advance. One simple way to start a conversation is just to inquire about their plans.

“I was very upset to read that some celebrate this birthday by drinking 21 drinks. That is a way to seriously injure yourself or overdose on alcohol.”

When talking to your student there are a few things you can say to highlight your student’s safety.

“Why don’t you celebrate with your friends over dinner?”

“If you’re going to drink alcohol, make sure you’re eating and drinking other things like water.”

Food is a great way to fill up your stomach on something other than alcohol, and it slows alcohol absorption. Suggest that your student go out to dinner.

“Why don’t we do something together for your birthday? It would be great to spend some time together.”

“I could take you out for a celebration. Maybe bring a couple of your friends...”

Suggest celebrating your student’s 21st birthday with them.

“That’s great that you are doing that for your birthday. You are being very responsible.”

Send your student a birthday card reminding them about acting responsibly. If you can’t make one, you can [send your student a 21st birthday card through this website](#).

If your student chooses to celebrate with an activity that doesn’t involve alcohol, be encouraging so that it’s clear you support their decision.

“I’ve heard about the tradition to take 21 shots on your birthday. I really hope you aren’t doing this. It’s dangerous and you can get seriously sick or even die.”

If your student has plans to go out with friends, you should have a talk with them about safer ways to drink. Be stern about not being OK with them taking 21 shots or participating in any other dangerous drinking activities.

“Not everyone gets extremely wasted on their birthday.”

“When you drink with friends how many drinks do you usually drink?”

“What’s the most you’ve had to drink before?”

“Have any of your friends had too much on their 21st birthdays (or any other time)? How’d that go for them?”

Remind your student of the responsibilities that come along with legal drinking, like not ever driving after drinking, and not providing alcohol to someone who is underage. You can even ask about their previous drinking experiences.

“Just because you’re legal age now doesn’t mean you should go crazy or do something that will be dangerous or make you feel gross. If you’re going to celebrate, remember 4 drinks for females and 5 drinks for males is enough to make most people legally intoxicated. So, count your drinks. After 4 or 5 drinks, anything more is probably too much. And if you’ve lost count, that’s definitely a good time to stop.”

“It’s really hard to tell when you’ve had too much to drink—it’s the type of thing that sneaks up on you. A good trick is to switch to drinking water with lemon when you’re at a party or out somewhere. It’s a lot cheaper too!”

You can also remind them that at the end of the day, you might not be there to celebrate with your student, but talking to them about celebrating their birthday safely could make a significant difference in their drinking choices.

X NOT THIS

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.

"I know you're going to drink 21 shots. Don't do this!"

Don't assume your student is going to drink excessively or even take 21 shots. "I know you're going to drink 21 shots. Don't do this!" might be perceived as a challenge for them to prove you wrong. Your student might also be upset if they feel you assume they make unsafe choices.

"You only turn 21 once, go crazy!"

Don't encourage reckless celebration or imply that being intoxicated on a 21st (or any) birthday is a rite of passage. This gives the message that high-risk drinking is OK. Make sure you encourage good decision-making and discourage risky drinking. If you say "You only turn 21 once, go crazy!" they will listen and not be cautious when celebrating.

"I know you're not going to remember your 21st birthday, but try to be safe anyway."

Don't send mixed messages. Saying "I know you're not going to remember your 21st birthday, but try to be safe anyway," encourages drinking and can be seen as an expectation for their 21st birthday. Encouraging your student to be safe while assuming that they will make irresponsible choices can be confusing and doesn't support safe drinking behaviors.

Scientific References

Rutledge PC, Park A, Sher KJ. 21st birthday drinking: Extremely extreme. J Consult Clin Psych. 2008;76(3):511-516.

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.