

The Halloween Conversation

Why is This Important?

No longer simply an amusing night of trick-or-treating for young students, Halloween has now become a major drinking holiday in the United States. Halloween is also a particularly popular social event for college students, and the festivities can last for several days.

Family members need to know that Halloween is not just about candy any more. For alcohol companies,¹ Halloween has become a big business opportunity, so the marketing tactics are extensive. College students are inundated with Halloween-themed images and messages that promote celebratory drinking. As a result, even students who do not ordinarily drink excessively might view Halloween as an opportunity to engage in high-risk drinking.²

Research shows that students who drink with a specific reason to celebrate, like a holiday such as Halloween, reach higher levels of intoxication.³ Along with increased drinking comes more negative consequences such as skipping class, falling behind in classes, injury and safety risks, and use of other drugs.

Here are four things you need to know about Halloween:

1. Halloween costumes can be great fun at any age, and many students enjoy dressing up for Halloween parties. But did you know that college students who choose to dress up in costumes for Halloween are more likely to drink?⁴
2. Many Halloween parties occur off campus, where drinking is less regulated than at on-campus venues. The lack of rules and oversight makes off-campus parties particularly dangerous for fostering excessive drinking.
3. Halloween-themed drink promotions at local retailers are popular because they make alcohol cheaper to buy, but they also encourage heavier drinking.
4. High-profile drinking events such as Halloween can exacerbate students' overblown beliefs about how much their peers are drinking. When students overestimate what is a "normal" amount of drinking on their campus, they can feel more pressure to drink heavily on Halloween and other special occasions.⁵ In other words, although the truth is that most college students do not drink excessively, on Halloween it might seem like everyone does.

✓ SAY THIS

“What are your plans for Halloween? Have you picked your costume already?”

This is an easy way to find out what your student has planned and start the conversation about how to enjoy this holiday safely.

“I have heard that in college, Halloween can sometimes be celebrated for an entire weekend. This can encourage excessive drinking, which is not safe.”

Make sure your student knows that you are concerned for their safety and you do not want them to engage in any unhealthy behavior.

“I was upset to hear that some people play drinking games based on costume styles. These types of games sometimes lead people to drink much more than they normally would, and that can be very harmful to your health.”

Make your student aware of the consequences of excessive drinking and its potential harm to their health, including alcohol poisoning or even death. If your student is 21 or older and plans to drink, emphasize the importance of moderate alcohol consumption and not drinking at all if driving. Encourage alternating their alcohol drinks with water, and eating a substantial meal before drinking. Remind them that providing alcohol to minors is both illegal and unsafe. If they are not yet 21, discourage any use of alcohol.

“Hanging around with drunk people all weekend can get old pretty fast. Do you and your friends have any unique ideas for other fun ways to celebrate?”

Remind your student that there are plenty of other fun and festive ways to enjoy Halloween with friends without drinking alcohol—and with much less chance of getting groped or puked on. With the right attitude, they can have just as much fun decorating and carving pumpkins, visiting a haunted house, participating in or hosting a costume contest, or watching scary movies.

“If you have time to come home for Halloween this year, we could make a day of it! You can help me decorate the front porch for the neighborhood kids. We can dress up and make it really spooky and fun for the kids when they come around to get candy.”

If you live nearby, suggest celebrating the holiday with your student as you might have done in the past. This is especially opportune when Halloween falls on a weekend. If your home is too distant for a quick weekend visit, find out if any campus organizations are planning charity trick-or-treat events for local students, and suggest that your student consider getting involved.

“Does your school have any special traditions for Halloween? Does your school put on any events (i.e., play, show, etc.) that you and your friends would enjoy attending? What about Halloween parties—are there any special rules for them?”

Encourage attending other events on campus with friends rather than just going out to parties. This can promote starting new adventures and traditions for your grown student and their friends.

“I have heard that some schools have a lot of off-campus Halloween parties where they serve alcohol. Are these parties popular at your school?”

You can bring up the way other schools celebrate Halloween to see if your student’s campus celebrates in the same way.

*(If your grown student is of legal drinking age):
“Do bars near your school host Halloween-themed costume contests, haunted houses, and the like?”*

This is a great way to bring up the issue of drink specials and other promotions that might glorify excessive drinking. Remind your grown student that you expect them to drink in moderation. Encourage the balancing of alcohol-oriented celebrations with other kinds of activities and rejecting the misconception that “everyone” drinks excessively at Halloween.

“What are your friends planning for Halloween?”

Sometimes it is easier to talk to your student about their friends’ behavior. It is important to encourage them to think about how celebrating can lead to excessive drinking.

X NOT THIS

“I went to some really crazy Halloween parties when I was in college.”

Don’t share personal anecdotes about parties you went to, or stories about your excessive alcohol consumption to your student. This destigmatizes, glorifies, and encourages excessive drinking behavior.

“I heard you’re going to a costume party in a fraternity house. I don’t want you to go there.”

Don’t assume your student is going to parties that offer alcohol and will be drinking excessively. Forbidding your student to even attend parties with their friends might shut off chances to communicate effectively with them.

Scientific References

1. Chief Marketer Staff. *Trick or drink?* Chief Marketer. 2003. September 30, 2015. Available at: <http://www.chiefmarketer.com/trick-or-drink/>.
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3. Glindemann KE, Wiegand DM, Geller ES. Celebratory drinking and intoxication: A contextual influence on alcohol consumption. *Environ Behav.* 2007; 39(3):352-366.
4. Miller KA, Jasper CR, Hill DR. Dressing in costume and the use of alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs by college students. *Adolescence.* 1993; 28(109):189-198.
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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.