

# Mixed Messages About Alcohol

## Age 14 Summary

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### Why Mixed Messages About Alcohol?

Children/teens receive numerous mixed messages about alcohol consumption and its place in their lives and communities. They may see commercials or alcohol products in a glamorous context in shows. They may encounter drunk adults at weddings, festivals, or concerts. Perhaps children/teens in these encounters view those others as having fun, or maybe they view them as scary and out of control. These outside messages may have an impact on your child/teen. Still, as a parent or those in a parenting role, what you model and the messages you send related to alcohol in your child's/teen's early years will be the most significant influence. It's never too late to become more aware of the messages your child/teen is receiving, their impacts, and how you can shape the messages you send going forward to promote healthy choices.

**Tip** These steps are best done when you and your child/teen are not tired or in a rush.

**Tip** Intentional communication and a healthy parenting relationship support these steps.

#### STEP

#### 1



### Get Your Child/Teen Thinking by Getting Their Input

- Ask open-ended questions.
  - *"What have you noticed about how we use alcohol in our family?"*
  - *"What are some things you have learned about how alcohol affects your body?"*
  - *"What are some things your friends say about alcohol?"*

**Trap** Avoid lecturing your child/teen when they are honest with you. Lecturing may result in your child/teen not sharing truthfully in the future for fear of your response.

**Tip** Your child/teen may have different impressions about your attitudes and values toward alcohol based on their observations. Listen carefully to their understanding of the role of alcohol in your family's life and how they perceive your values. Their impressions may surprise you!

**Trap** Don't get caught up in feeling defensive about your drinking practices. Keep focused on the fact that your child/teen is just at the start of understanding alcohol. It's a brand new chance to offer essential guidance. Focus on the impacts you can have today and in the future.

**STEP**  
**2**



## Teach New Skills

- Examine family messages around the role of alcohol and think about what they're teaching your child/teen.
  - Is drinking alcohol a part of your daily life? Weekly life? When is alcohol present when your child/teen is around?
  - Is alcohol consumed in moderation typically? Or do individuals drink to the point of intoxication (more than 1-2 drinks)?
  - Do children/teens sip or have a taste of alcohol at any events? Are children/teens given their alcoholic beverages (under 21) at a certain age?
  - When someone becomes intoxicated, how do other adults react to that person?
    - Are they laughed at?
    - Are they the source of ridicule?
    - Are they a source of shame?
    - Do people reject them?
    - Do they become more popular?
    - How is that person treated?
  - If there are relatives who are dealing with alcohol use disorders like alcohol addiction, how does the family treat them? How are they spoken about when they are not around?
  - The answers to these questions formulate the modeling your child/teen witnesses and what they are currently being taught about alcohol.
- Talk about your family history with alcohol.
- Create empathy and compassion through understanding. Promote empathy and understanding as family members deal with challenges in life.
- Address your past drinking behavior or current alcohol use. Tell the truth about your past and current alcohol use.
- Explain why you want your child/teen to abstain from drinking and drug use. Some reasons include the increased risk of experiencing negative consequences. Their brain is still developing. Alcohol is an addictive substance and a family history of alcohol or drug problems.
- Invite your child/teen to ask questions.
- Be clear about your expectations about alcohol and drug use.
- Talk about the feelings someone might have that would cause them to resort to unhealthy means of coping. Ask your child/teen if they have ever felt that way. Reassure your child/teen that it's normal to feel overwhelmed by your problems at times, and yet using alcohol and other substances does not solve the issue and can instead lead to medical problems.
- Become a strong parent advocate. If you are in a circumstance in which relatives become intoxicated, trust your gut.

- Take the learning further because your child/teen will increasingly need to find ways to deal with their stress and social pressures. “When you are upset, what makes you feel better?”
- Instead of diving into a discussion about alcohol, first, consider questions about health and healthy development.
  - How do you keep healthy (diet, exercise, preventative doctor visits)?
  - How do food and drinks fit into keeping your body healthy?
  - What about the role of medicine? Do you take medication? For what and why? What is your attitude about medicine? When is it important to take it? When do you want to avoid taking it? If you take medication, what side effects have you experienced?
  - What substances alter your body and brain, like coffee, tea, over-the-counter medicine, prescription medicine, alcohol, energy drinks, and others? How do those altering substances fit into a healthy lifestyle?
  - What do you or your partner or other family members believe should be the role of alcohol in family life and with your child/teen?
  - What do you want your child/teen to learn?
  - How can you align your actions with those values?
- Create a family ritual out of expressing gratitude in your lives.
- Set goals to demonstrate values. Now that you have articulated your family’s hopes and values for what you want to teach your child/teen, consider what goals you can set for yourself and what goals you can encourage your child/teen to set to align actions with values.

**Tip** Did you know that giving children/teens at any age under 21 sips of alcohol sends a clear message to them that authority figures feel drinking is acceptable for them? These children/teens are more likely to experiment with alcohol or drugs younger and more frequently with friends than those whose families did not permit sipping.<sup>1</sup> Researchers advise not allowing drinking even on special occasions for those under 21.

**STEP**  
**3**



## Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Take the first small step. If you’ve set a goal to leave unsafe situations, for example, set your family’s expectations ahead of time.
- Tell stories of your or your child’s/teen’s ability to empathize and be kind to others. These stories will begin to shape your child’s/teen’s identity as one who can empathize and act compassionately no matter the social pressures.
- Encourage leadership. As you build your child’s/teen’s social and emotional skills - the very ones that are also key leadership skills - they will have an opportunity to influence the decision-making of their friendship group.

**Tip:** When your child/teen comes to you with a peer pressure challenge, reflect on their feelings. Ask open-ended questions to prompt their thinking. Show your trust and support that they can solve their problems with reflection.

**STEP  
4****Support Your Child's/Teen's  
Development and Success**

- Ask key questions.
  - *"Are there times when your friends or other classmates want you to do something you don't want to do?"*
  - *"How would you respond if your friends asked you to drink?"*
- Reflect on outcomes. *"Seems like you are worrying about your friends and their impressions of you today. Often, it helps if you talk about it. What's going on?"*
- Stay engaged. Be ready to talk when your child/teen is eager.
- Engage in further practice. Help build your child's/teen's leadership and assertive communication skills by discussing when you set healthy boundaries and maintained relationships.

**STEP  
5****Recognize Efforts**

- No matter how old your child/teen is, your positive reinforcement and encouragement have a significant impact.
- You can reinforce your child's/teen's efforts in many ways. It is important to distinguish between three types of reinforcement – recognition, rewards, and bribes. These three distinct parenting behaviors impact your child's/teen's behavior differently.
  - **Recognize** even small successes to promote positive behaviors and expand confidence: *"You shared your concerns about the party with your friend. Love seeing that!"* Recognition can include nonverbal acknowledgment such as a smile, high five, or hug.
  - **Rewards** can be helpful in certain situations by providing a concrete, timely, and positive incentive for doing a good job. A reward is determined ahead of time so that the child/teen knows what to expect, like *"If you talk with your friend about not going to the party, I will let you have your friends over to hang out at our house instead."* (if you XX, then I'll XX) The goal should be to help your child/teen progress to a time when the reward will no longer be needed. Rewards can decrease a child's/teen's intrinsic motivation if used too often.
  - Unlike a reward, **bribes** aren't planned ahead of time and generally happen when a parent or those in a parenting role is in a crisis (like a child/teen arguing and refusing to leave a social gathering. To avoid disaster, a parent or those in a parenting role offers to stop for ice cream on the way home if the child/teen will stop arguing and leave the event). While bribes can be helpful in the short term to manage stressful situations, they will not grow lasting motivation or behavior change and should be avoided.
- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, after hearing that your child/teen did the right thing rather than going along with the crowd, stop for a treat on the way home from school to celebrate their positive choices.

## Reference

1. Donovan, J.E., & Molina, B.S. (2014). Antecedent predictors of children's initiation of sipping/tasting alcohol. *Alcohol Clinical Experimental Research*. 38(9): 2488-95.

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