

A PARENT HANDBOOK FOR TALKING WITH COLLEGE STUDENTS ABOUT ALCOHOL

A compilation of information from parents,
students, and the scientific community.



Introduction

The Problem of Alcohol Consumption and Binge Drinking in College-Age Students

Alcohol is the most misused and misunderstood drug in our society. Although college-age students are under the legal age for drinking alcohol, it is important to remember that alcohol is the most widely used drug by this age group. One of the results of the misuse of alcohol in this age group is binge drinking. Sure, we have all heard about “frat parties” and crazy spring break trips and assume that these are just another part of the college experience. Although part of the college experience, binge drinking has been consistently associated with higher incidences of unplanned sexual activity, sexual and physical assaults, date rape, injuries, trouble with campus and local police, and alcohol-related driving injuries and fatalities. For example, consider this account from a college freshman:

“My friend had a drinking contest with her boyfriend. They each had five shots of Wild Turkey, two beers, and then started a ‘power hour’ or ‘century’ - one shot of beer per minute for 60 minutes. My friend began falling down and looked ill. She laid down to go to sleep and began throwing up for two hours straight. She rolled over and almost choked on her vomit.”

This account from a college student is more common than you may believe. Episodes such as this can be avoided through parents helping their students as they attend college. Time and time again we have heard some parents say, “There is just no use — they will do what they want anyway and don’t care what we say.” This grossly underestimates the influence that parents can have — **you can make a difference!**

Families are quite different from one another and we have written this handbook to reach a wide audience. Consequently, there may be some sections of the handbook that you can relate to better than others. This is okay. Not all families are the same and we tried to respect those differences.

By reading this handbook and talking with your son or daughter, you have the opportunity to reduce the likelihood he or she will experience the negative consequences associated with binge drinking.

At Colgate:

- Actual non-drinking rates among students are 8 times higher than what other students believe are non-drinking rates.
- 78% of Colgate students reported refusing an offer of alcohol or other drugs in the previous 30 days; however,
- 68% engaged in binge drinking in the previous 2 weeks. (Binge drinking is defined as five or more drinks in one sitting.)
- 46.2% reported experiencing peer pressure to drink or use drugs within the last 30 days.
- 51% feel that alcohol use is greater at Colgate compared to other campuses.

National Undergraduate Surveys Show:

- 9 out of 10 experiment with alcohol.
- 7 out of 10 drink regularly, and 3 out of 10 will be problem drinkers.
- By the time males are 18 years old, 1 in 4 of them are considered to be binge-type heavy drinkers (they drink once a week or more and have five drinks at one time).

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Improving Communication in General

In this chapter, we discuss general issues about communicating effectively with your son or daughter. In all communication processes there are two important aspects: the style in which the material is presented and the content of the material. You may find that some parts of the chapter apply more to you than other parts.

Beginning a Dialogue

The first step in effectively talking with your student is simply getting the talking started. Such conversations will not necessarily occur in a single sitting, but often will evolve over multiple times. As a parent you must take active steps to establish the dialogue that is so important to both you and your student. When the time is right, you will want to suggest to your student that you would like to talk with her or him. Don't expect your student to agree. In fact, many students will respond with a negative reaction.

Here are some common negative reactions that students have when parents try to open a dialogue about sensitive topics and a few ways other parents find useful in dealing with them:

Fear of Hearing a Lecture

Many students are open to talking but the last thing they want to hear is a one-way lecture from their parents about right and wrong. *Studies show more drinking goes on in teens who come from homes where parents tend to lecture too much.*

Student Objection

"I know what you will do if we talk. You'll lecture me like you always do. Then if I argue you will interrupt me."

Parental Response

"You're right. This time I won't lecture. I will listen to what you think. I want to change things now that you are heading to college."

Anger About Not Being Trusted

Some students interpret a request to talk as a sign that you do not trust them. Studies show that when teens feel they can trust their parents and are trusted by them they tend to drink less. You will need to offer reassurance that you are not suspicious and are doing this to help them, not attack them.

Student Objection

"What's the matter, don't trust me?"

Parental Response

"I trust you. But this is a very important issue and I think we need to pool the information we know to make sure you deal with everything effectively and that you know what to expect and what to do. To do that, we need to talk to each other."

Fear of Punishment

Another common objection focuses on fear of being punished. Studies show that when teens fear punishment they communicate less often with their parents. In turn, these teens tend to drink more often and are more likely to experience alcohol-related consequences.

Student Objection

"Sure, talk with you and you won't let me go out. Forget it."

Parental Response

"I promise that I won't be that way. I will listen to you. I'll take what you say seriously. I'll be straight with you and you be straight with me."

The Student Thinks They Already Know It All

Some students don't want to talk because they think they already know everything there is to know about a topic. Even though students think they know everything, they often do not. Don't let this objection deter you in your pursuit of communication.

Student Objection

"I've heard it all before. We don't need to talk."

Parental Response

"You probably already know quite a bit. It would make me feel better if we talked it through. Besides, it would help me to better understand how things are different from when I was your age."

Additional Considerations

There are other objections that you might get, although these are the major ones. Sometimes you will hear more than one of them from your son or daughter. The central themes in your response should be that of **caring** about the student, wanting to **understand** the student, and wanting to **help** the student, while at the same time **respecting** the student's privacy and desire to be independent. The example parental responses we gave illustrated these themes. They may not work well for your particular son or daughter and you may need to adapt them to his or her particular personality. But if you have open communication channels, you are more likely to help your student. Most of all, be constructive in your responses, not defensive or angry.

Communication Pointers

Here are some tips studies have shown make a difference in how students respond.

Listen

Permit the person to speak without interruption. Listen to what he or she says. Sometimes, it is good to paraphrase. “Let me see if I understand you. It sounds like you feel that...” With paraphrasing, you don’t agree or disagree, you interpret.

Verbalize Respect

Whenever you can and it is appropriate to do so, convey respect to the other individual (e.g., “I admire what you have done and how you are coping”). People want to be respected and will be more willing to talk to those who respect them. Tell your son or daughter you are proud of them for being able to handle these tough situations.

Choose a Good Time

Choose an optimal time to bring up and discuss problems. Don’t do it when the other person is rushed or has a commitment elsewhere. Wait until you both can have a relaxed, calm discussion. Perhaps you could take your child to lunch or out for some ice cream where you could both sit down to talk and listen to one another.

Communicate Directly

Don’t talk about important things while absorbed in another activity, such as reading the newspaper, watching television, or doing the dishes.

Try to Appeal to Common Goals

Students need to be reminded that you are on their side. Whenever possible, common goals should be emphasized and should serve as the basis for your guidance and recommendations (e.g., you both want them to be healthy and safe).

Avoid Communication “Stoppers”

There are single statements that will close anyone down (e.g., “Anyone who drives drunk is crazy”; “No one in this family would ever consider doing that”).

Conflict Is Natural

Realize that conflict is natural. We are not identical to one another. We all have different beliefs and values, therefore disagreement is a natural thing. We should use conflict as an opportunity for growth and for learning about each other rather than treating it as a negative experience.

Agree to Disengage

Agree to temporarily stop if things don’t go well. Wait until both individuals can talk in a calm, direct fashion.

Use Appropriate Body Language

How you position yourself as you talk can send important messages about your attitudes or possibly convey something you are not trying to convey.

Avoid Debate Mode

Sometimes conversations become structured so that people feel they must “defend” their position. The entire conversation turns to a mini-debate. If you sense the conversation has turned into a debate, try suggesting that you both approach matters from a different angle. Also avoid statements that begin with “you” (“You did this...”). They often make the other person feel attacked.

The Initial Conversation

Most students have heard comments like, “Kids getting drunk is terrible,” from other adults and from the media. You should not start your conversation with statements such as this. Keep your comments short and remember that you don’t have to say everything. This is the beginning of a conversation. It probably is best to begin with a statement that conveys open-mindedness and then ask your son or daughter questions and his or her experiences. Talk about your own experiences and opinions about how they have changed over the years. As you tend to open up, so will your son or daughter. Keep distinctions between facts and opinions: “My opinion is...This opinion is based on facts. This opinion is based on these experiences. This opinion is based on these observations.”

Ask your son or daughter what he or she thinks. Listen while trying to understand, without defensiveness. Suspend critical judgment. Even if your student says what you want to hear (e.g., “I don’t drink now, let alone drink to get drunk”) don’t think that this means you don’t have to talk. Your goal is not just to reassure the student through talking but to help expand your student’s thinking. You want to help him or her deal with the range of experiences that your son or daughter is likely to encounter in college.

Try to think of thought-provoking questions that can be asked in a supportive, non-threatening way. For example: Do you know kids who drink a lot? How has it affected them? Have you ever been offered alcohol by someone you knew? If so, what did you say? If not, what would you say? What if someone really pushed you? What would you say if they said...Is there another side to this view? Do you see any risks? Do you have any concerns? Ask questions; don’t lecture! This is probably the single most important aspect of communication. People like to talk about themselves and their opinions. People like to explore logic and details.

They do not like to be told what to think!

The Short Response

A number of parents who we have interviewed express frustration at their inability to get their son or daughter to talk at length on any issue. They swear that their son or daughter has a vocabulary comprised mostly of “Okay, Mom,” “I dunno,” “Whatever,” “If you want,” “Sure, okay,” “Not now,” when it comes to parental conversation. Some students use these responses when they don’t feel like talking because they are busy, tired, or simply not in the mood. Maybe the student thinks he or she is just going to hear yet another lecture from the parent. Maybe the student thinks that the parent will start nagging at him or her, yet again. The student may think the parent just doesn’t understand them.

Parents need to respect this and not force communication at a bad time. Let it drop and bring it up later. Try to structure a time to talk when the student is apt to be open to it. Students are often tired at the end of a hard school day or an athletic event, and this may not be the best time to try to start a conversation. Or the student may be preoccupied with something else. Think about your student’s schedule and how you can create a time where you will have his or her undivided attention. Perhaps taking him or her out to a quiet dinner or some other place where a “one-on-one” conversation can be effectively initiated will work.

Note: **Be Prepared to Answer Questions About Your Own Behavior**

If you truly establish a dialogue with your son or daughter, then they will probably ask you questions about your past behavior. Did you drink alcohol when you were a student? If it was okay for you to do, why isn’t it okay for me to do? Did you ever get drunk? You need to be prepared to answer such questions and in ways that the student will not decide that it is permissible to drink.

Before initiating a discussion with your son or daughter, you should take some time to think about the kinds of questions he or she is likely to ask you and what your responses will be.

Developing Assertiveness

When your son or daughter begins college it is likely that they will form entirely new social groups. The most influential reason why new students drink is because of social pressures. Friends can influence your son or daughter in two major ways. First, there is active social influence, which occurs when a friend explicitly suggests that your son or daughter engage in some behavior (e.g., “Let’s go get drunk”). Second, there is passive influence, such as when they think everyone is doing it and that it is an acceptable thing to do.

Part of reducing social pressure is not only helping your son or daughter resist active influence attempts but also helping your student to put into perspective the fact that:

- Not everyone is necessarily doing it,
- Even if people were, this does not make it right or a good thing to do, and
- Friends may respect your son or daughter for not drinking.

There may be times when your son or daughter may be put in situations where he or she is pressured by one or more peers to perform behaviors he or she would rather not engage in. For example, he or she may be pressured by someone to have a drink when your son or daughter doesn’t want to. Students need to develop skills to resist such pressure and affirm their own values, beliefs, and attitudes.

Students need to develop adequate responses to such pressure lines. What they need most are simple but effective “one liners” that will diffuse the pressure without making a big scene or issue about it. It is difficult for parents to provide such responses to the student because parents usually are not aware of the current language that students use with one another. It is probably more useful for parents to tell their students that they will probably be exposed to pressures to drink and for the student to try to think of short yet effective responses to pressure attempts.

Often such simple phrases as “**It’s just not for me, it’s not what I want**” or “**I don’t drink**” will work quite effectively. We have evaluated a wide range of possible responses and students clearly prefer simple, straightforward “outs” to the pressure situation. Encourage the student to think about such “one liners” beforehand to be prepared if he or she finds himself or herself in an uncomfortable situation.

Note: **Common Pressure Lines**

Students are exposed to a wide range of pressure lines to try to get them to experiment with drugs or alcohol. Here are some examples of what they might hear:

- Come on, everyone has tried it.
- If you won’t drink with us, then why are you hanging out with us?
- It’s all part of growing up and being in college.
- We drank once before, so what’s the problem now?
- You will love it!
- You’ll have an incredible time if you do.
- Come on, take a drink. It will get you in the mood.
- Everyone is doing it.
- You’ve been working too hard. You deserve to go party.
- You can study tomorrow.

Talking About Alcohol

Alcohol is the most misused drug in our society, although most people do not even consider alcohol to be a drug. **It takes only a single episode of intoxication to experience life-changing consequences, accidents, arrests, etc.** We are not so naïve that we think that parents talking with their sons and daughters about alcohol use will put an end to alcohol consumption in college students. However, you should do everything in your power to minimize the odds of them being at risk.

Parental Reluctance to Talk With Student About Drinking

Myth	Fact
My son or daughter is not interested in drinking.	Over 90% of students try alcohol outside the home before graduating from high school.
My son or daughter has learned about the negative effects of alcohol in school.	Although most students do learn about alcohol in their classes on health, we have found that many important issues never got covered.
At this point my son or daughter should know better.	Unfortunately, the reality is that many students at this point in their lives are still uninformed about how powerful a drug alcohol can be.
My son or daughter won’t listen at this point.	The results of the American College Health Survey revealed that parents were the number one source that students turned to for important information.

Topics You Should Be Sure to Address

In your talks there are several topics that you should be sure to address:

- **First**, you should talk about how drinking affects the body. Students need to know how drinking on a given occasion will affect them.
- **Second**, you should make clear your own position concerning your student’s drinking, exactly what is okay and what is not.
- **Third**, students drink for a variety of reasons. If you address this directly, then he or she will be better able to think through the choices she/he makes when confronted with “positive” motivations.
- **Fourth**, you need to discuss reasons for NOT drinking and the many negative consequences that can result from drinking.
- **Finally**, you need to make clear your willingness to help your son or daughter find constructive alternatives to drinking.

How Alcohol Works in the Body

Alcohol is a drug that is absorbed into the bloodstream from the stomach and the small intestine. It is broken down by the liver and then eliminated from the body. **There are limits to how fast the liver can break down alcohol and this process cannot be sped up.** Until the liver has had time to break down all of the alcohol, the alcohol continues to circulate in the bloodstream, affecting all of the body's organs, including the brain. Nothing can speed this up. Not exercise, drinking coffee, etc. Nothing.

In the media it is suggested that most individuals can have one drink per hour and maintain sobriety. Unfortunately, this is a dangerous rule. For individuals weighing over 200 pounds this might be true, but for most females and males, even ½ drink per hour could lead to intoxication and the bad things that go along with it (fights; accidents).

As alcohol reaches the brain, a person begins to feel drunk. The exact nature of this feeling can vary considerably from individual to individual and even within the same individual from situation to situation. What is common to all individuals and all situations is that alcohol depresses the brain and slows down major functions such as breathing, heart rate, and thinking. This is one reason why alcohol is so dangerous. **If an individual drinks too much alcohol, his or her breathing or heart rate can reach dangerously low levels or even stop.**

Physical and Psychological Effects

Alcohol is measured in terms of blood alcohol content. In popular press, you may see reference to terms such as BAC or BAL. A BAC of 0.1 percent means that 1/1000 of the fluid in the blood is alcohol. This may seem very small, but it does not take much to achieve this level. For example, a 150-pound female who consumes 5 drinks in 2 hours will have a BAC near 0.1. A 115-pound female who consumes 4 drinks in 2 hours will have a BAC near 0.1. **At a BAC of 0.1, most students will be very drunk. Their thinking, vision, hearing, reaction time, movement and judgments of speed and distance will be seriously impaired.** It is likely that the brain will not form new memories even though the person is completely conscious and speaking. This is what is known commonly as a “black-out”. The person is awake, but the brain is focusing on other more important tasks such as breathing and keeping the heart and blood going.

Most students **DO NOT** know how drinks influence the blood alcohol level. In fact, they have many misconceptions about how drinking affects BAC. Students tend to think that the impact on BAC of additional drinks is smaller after more drinks have been consumed. This is wrong. Each additional drink adds the same amount of alcohol to the blood whether or not that drink is the first or fifth drink.

People are notoriously bad at estimating how drunk they are. In cases where they are very drunk, it is indeed obvious. But more often than not, people get to the point where they are impaired but do not realize it. Study after study has demonstrated that people are extremely poor at guessing how sober they are.

Drug Interactions

Many accidental deaths occur from mixing alcohol with other drugs. Even drugs that you can buy without a prescription, such as aspirin or cold remedies, can change the way alcohol acts on the body.

ALCOHOL (Beer, wine, liquor) Mixed With:	EFFECTS
Antibiotics	Extreme drowsiness, decreases effectiveness
Antihistamines	Extreme drowsiness, causes temporary depression
Aspirin	Stomach and intestinal bleeding
High Blood Pressure Medicines	Dangerously lowered blood pressure
Narcotics	Extreme slowing of brain activities, breathing slowed down or stopped
Non-Narcotic Pain Killers	Stomach and intestinal irritation or bleeding
Sedatives & Tranquilizers	Extreme slowing of brain activities, breathing slowed down or stopped, heart slowed or stopped

Some parents allow their sons or daughters to drink a controlled amount on certain occasions, such as holidays and family functions. Still other parents believe it is all right for students to drink small amounts of alcohol, as long as he or she does so in a responsible fashion. **Your own orientation as a parent is a matter of your own values.** However, if you are going to permit your son or daughter to drink alcohol in certain contexts, then you must be clear about exactly what these contexts are and what constitutes responsible behavior. **Studies consistently show that when parents permit their sons or daughters to drink they tend to drink more often and heavier outside the home.**

Note: **Here are beliefs that many students hold which are NOT true:**

- Black coffee will help you become sober
- Exercise will help you become sober
- Eating food will help you become sober
- Taking a cold shower will help you become sober
- Fresh air will help you become sober
- A quick walk will help you become sober
- Going from dark lighting to bright lighting will help you become sober
- Drinking milk before drinking will allow you to drink as much as you want
- Putting a penny in your mouth will lower your BAC

These myths are important to dispel because students may decide to drive drunk after engaging in such activities, thinking that the activity has “sobered them up.” In fact, the activity only creates a temporary illusion of sobering up and in some instances increases drunkenness.

Reasons Why Students Drink

It is important for parents to recognize that there will be “positive” reasons (at least from the student’s perspective) for why they choose to drink. If parents only choose to focus discussions on the negative aspects of drinking, ignoring the positive aspects, they run the risk of losing credibility in their son’s or daughter’s eyes. Also, you need to help your son or daughter put these “positive” motivations in perspective so that they do not start to drink because of them. Here are some of the major ones that research has shown impact drinking behavior.

Adds to a Celebration

Some students believe that drinking is one way to celebrate a special occasion. For example, a friend may suggest to your son or daughter that they have a few beers after finishing an important assignment. It is important that you talk with your son or daughter about alternative ways of celebrating such as: (1) suggesting that your son or daughter go shopping for something special (e.g., clothes, music, sporting goods); (2) suggesting an outing, such as dinner, that would include a few special friends; and/or (3) offering to have friends over for a small dinner party (without alcohol). Encourage your student to tell you about significant things that happen in his or her life and then try to help him or her celebrate positively.

Fitting In

Often the highlight of the day after drinking are the post-party war stories about who drank the most shots, who blacked-out, and who had the worst hangover. Although some students view these outcomes as badges of honor, our findings suggest that hangovers, black-outs, and heavy drinking are associated with accidents, rapes, unsafe sex, arrests, missed work, failed courses, and general victimization. It is important to understand that the data shows that both males and females who black-out from drinking are victims of sexual coercion.

Peer Pressure

Another important reason why students drink is the influence of friends. Your son or daughter may feel pressured to drink. This pressure can be direct, as in the form of someone handing him a beer at a party, or it can be indirect, such as when he or she wants to be part of a group and that group experiments with alcohol. Parents CANNOT choose their student’s friends for them. However, parents can help their son or daughter understand the dynamics of peer pressure and stress the importance of being his or her own person. Finally, parents and students can talk about situations that could come up, such as a friend introducing alcohol at a party, so that students can anticipate how to react.

Makes You Feel Sexier, Enhances Sexuality

Some students believe that drinking alcohol adds to sexual experiences, but it is important to warn your son or daughter about the dangers in mixing alcohol and sex. First, because alcohol impairs judgment, students may do things that they may regret later on, such as have sex with someone that, if sober, they would choose not to, or going further sexually than they are interested. Second, alcohol may decrease your son’s or daughter’s ability to prevent someone from forcing them to have sex. Finally, there is considerable scientific evidence to indicate that students are much more likely to engage in unprotected intercourse if they have been drinking, thereby increasing the chances of an unintended pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease, such as AIDS.

Helps Mood

Many students believe that alcohol will help them get in a better mood. They should know that it is normal to feel sad and stressed at times. They should also find alternate ways to regulate their mood without alcohol or other drugs (e.g., caffeine). Exercise is always a good alternative to help improve one’s mood. It is also important to explain to your son or daughter that the “high” from alcohol is accompanied by extreme lows as well.

Lowers Stress

Another reason students give for drinking is that alcohol helps reduce worries. Parents should talk with their sons or daughters to find out about what worries them and help the student directly confront these worries in a realistic fashion. Parents can also point out the need to confront problems directly rather than avoid them and note that the problem does not go away because you drink (and, in fact, it may become worse).

Makes It Easier to Express Feelings/Less Inhibited

Another reason students give for drinking is that they believe that alcohol helps make it easier to express feelings or talk with members of the opposite sex. Parents need to be sensitive to how difficult it is for students to communicate in a new environment where they are unlikely to know anybody. Parents should point out that while often releasing inhibitions, alcohol actually could cloud judgments, making students think that they are communicating better when, in fact, they are not. Oftentimes alcohol interferes with communication about what is okay and what is not. This can lead to unwanted sexual advances, arguments, and sometimes fights.

Something to Do

Some students get bored and turn to alcohol as a means of getting excitement out of their lives. To confront this, you can offer alternatives that your son or daughter can pursue. Some examples include getting involved in sports, hobbies, music, dance, games, reading, and school clubs. Students could also become involved in volunteer activities that are associated with causes they really care about, such as protecting the environment or promoting literacy. This is a good way to meet others with similar interests and also to feel good about themselves. Many students go to parties or have parties as a means of entertainment. Drinking frequently occurs in such settings and it is important that you provide suggestions on how students can enjoy themselves without alcohol. Here are some such suggestions:

- Try to meet three new people.
- Try to find individuals who share common interests other than drinking.
- Try to think about topics for conversation before going to the party to keep the focus of the conversation away from drinking or not drinking.
- Never drink from a glass that has been out of your sight. Unfortunately there are some predators who use drugs to facilitate committing sexual assault.



Why Students Do Not Drink

Many students choose not to drink and the reasons they cite for not doing so can form the cornerstone of your conversations about the disadvantages of drinking. Before discussing these, we must interject a word of caution. If you try strong scare tactics with students by inducing a great deal of fear about negative consequences, then your efforts might actually backfire. Research has shown that when faced with highly fear-arousing information, some people will often “turn off” to it and not pay as much attention to it. This is because such information and thoughts are anxiety provoking and people are motivated to avoid anxiety. Why think about something when it is unpleasant to do so? In addition, strong scare tactics will often result in a loss of credibility. If you paint a picture based solely on the dire consequences of drinking and a student fails to see such consequences materialize when he, she, or a friend drinks, then the student will infer that you were wrong or you were exaggerating the consequences. Discuss the negative consequences in a matter of fact, honest, and straightforward fashion.

Drinking Is Illegal

Students generally know that drinking alcohol under the age of 21 is illegal. However, the general perception is that they will not get caught by the authorities and suffer any legal consequences. The fact is there is some truth to this perception. If, as a parent, you try to convey to your student the idea that there is a high probability of being caught when in fact there is not, then you will probably lose credibility. Instead of taking such a position, we have found it useful simply to remind students about the many ways that they may get caught. Drinking at parties often leads to public disturbances and complaints to police, who will arrest all at the scene who are intoxicated.

What happens if authorities catch a student? This varies from community to community and judge to judge. However, there generally will be substantial costs in legal fees. There will be family embarrassment, since many such arrests are routinely reported in newspapers (not as headlines, of course, but in smaller sections labeled “Police Reports”). The student will also probably experience embarrassment, as he or she is publicly associated through the newspapers with getting caught for alcohol consumption. Prosecution in court may require the parent to take time off from work, thus costing the family money. Our experience has shown that students rarely have thought about even half of the above consequences and that making them more aware of the implications of an arrest may have deterrent value.

Drinking Can Lead to Premature Death

Excessive alcohol consumption can have serious negative physical effects. Among other things, it causes damage to the liver, kidneys, brain, and cardiovascular system, which are all long term in nature. There are however, countless instances of students that have had fatal accidents or unsafe sex and contracted a sexually transmitted disease following a single night of heavy drinking. Unfortunately, it is also not uncommon for individuals who vomit from heavy drinking to choke to death.

Drinking Makes You Sick or Pass Out

Alcohol is an irritant to the lining of the digestive system. If too much is consumed, an individual will vomit and the effects on the system can be felt for days (frequently referred to as a “hangover”). Nobody at a party or a social function likes being around someone who is sick. This is complicated by the fact that the sickness one experiences often happens suddenly and with little warning.

Drinking Might Lead to Being an Alcoholic

Most students have negative images of alcoholics and most do not want to become alcoholics. Most students are also convinced that they can control their drinking and will not become alcoholics. Experts distinguish between three types of drinkers: social drinkers, problem drinkers, and alcoholics.

Binge Drinking: Drinking to Get Drunk

Binge drinking refers to individuals who set out to get drunk on a given occasion by drinking five or more drinks in the course of a short period of time (e.g., over the course of two hours). Binge drinking is quite common in both high schools and colleges. Almost 30% of high school students have engaged in bingeing. Many colleges report rates as high as 60%. There are times when individuals will plan to binge drink (e.g., Let’s go out and get hammered!). However, there are numerous occasions where individuals will only plan on having a drink or two, but get carried away by drinking games, parties that get out of hand or someone buys a round of drinks, etc. **Binge drinking has serious risks.**

Consider these quotes from a sample of college students:

“I went to a fraternity party off campus. I had at least 12 shots of liquor and two mixed drinks. That night, I went home with this guy I did not know ... The guy and his roommates carried me home. I went to the hospital for alcohol poisoning and rape. I blacked out. I never pressed charges because he used the condom in my wallet.”

“I was having a great night. I drank at least 15 beers. Then I blacked out. This is not unusual for me. Another time, I became violent, smashed bottles and got in tons of trouble.”

“In a crowded party, I accidentally nudged someone. I apologized but the guy hit me anyway, making my mouth bleed.”

“A girl I know got so drunk that a friend and I had to carry her for several blocks, trying to keep her from burning us with a cigarette. Since then, she has gotten as drunk every weekend.”

These accounts sound shocking, but chances are they have happened to your son or daughter or someone he or she knows. These experiences alone should convince you of the potential risks of binge drinking. Binge drinkers are more likely to have been insulted by others, been in a serious argument or quarrel, been pushed, hit or assaulted, had one’s property damaged, put themselves in situations where they are more susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV, been injured or had life-threatening experiences, driven while intoxicated or rode in a car with an intoxicated driver. We also know that perpetrators target individuals that are incapacitated by alcohol. No one deserves to be sexually assaulted no matter how much they drink.

You need to emphasize to your son or daughter how powerful a drug alcohol can be and how quickly binge drinking can lead to dangerous results. By discussing the reasons why students drink, why students choose not to drink, and the basis of good relationships, and by providing your son or daughter with skills on how to resist pressures from others, you will be helping your student develop the foundations that are necessary to reduce the probability of binge drinking.

Note: **Research suggests that individuals tend to binge drink for many reasons. Some of these include:**

- Binge drinkers tend to have generally positive expectations about the types of activities where binge drinking is more likely to take place (e.g., bars, fraternity/sorority parties). Some of the more commonly held beliefs include: I will be able to meet new people, I might meet potential sexual partners, and I will get to hang out with my friends.
- Binge drinkers tend to agree with many of the reasons why students drink indicated earlier (e.g., drinking adds to a celebration, improves mood).
- Binge drinkers tend to disagree with many of the reasons why some students do not drink indicated earlier (e.g., drinking makes you sick).
- Binge drinkers tend to believe that there is nothing else to do, but go get drunk on weekends and associate with others who hold the same belief.
- Binge drinkers tend to associate with others who tend to binge drink (e.g., Everyone at my age is doing it, My friends will think I am strange if I do not drink, It can’t be that bad if everyone is doing it).

Did You Drink When You Were a Student?

It is highly likely that in the course of your discussions with your son or daughter, you will be asked if you ever drank as a student. The fact is that most parents did drink in their youth, which creates a dilemma. If you answer no, then you are not being honest with your son or daughter. If you answer yes, then you are being hypocritical. At the same time you are telling your son or daughter not to drink, you admit that you did. You are, in an indirect way saying it is permissible to drink because you did it. And if you drank as a student, how can you turn around and punish your son or daughter for drinking? How should you answer questions about your own drinking as a student?

We believe that honesty is important and that you should not lie to your student. Ultimately, this can undermine effective communication. Some parents establish a “ground rule” at the start of their discussion: They will talk about anything but will not answer questions about their own use of drugs or alcohol as a student. The parent tells the student that this rule does not mean that the parent drank alcohol as a teenager nor does it mean that the parent did not. Rather, the parent’s behavior as a student is not relevant to a careful consideration of the issues surrounding the student’s current use of alcohol. This strategy works well in some families but not others.

Students may be convinced that their parents are hiding something and resent the fact that the parent won’t talk about it. How can the parent expect the student to talk about his or her behavior when the parent refuses to talk about the parent’s behavior as a student?

While this strategy may work for some families, it may prove to be ineffective for others. An alternative approach is to admit use, but to state in unambiguous terms that it was a mistake. Use your experiences as an opportunity to discuss some of the negative things that happened. Relate how drinking led to an embarrassing moment or an unpleasant consequence for the parent, making salient the fact that drinking has negative consequences that the parent has personally experienced. Stress that just because the parent behaved foolishly and was lucky enough to escape serious consequences does not mean that the same fortune will befall the student.

Unfortunately, there is no good scientific data about how best to handle this issue and psychologists are divided on what they recommend. You should use your own judgment about what you think will work best given your own past and your knowledge of your son or daughter.



For More Information

Riding With a Drunk Driver

Even if your student never drinks, she/he may be faced with a situation where a decision must be made whether or not to ride with someone who has been drinking. This is just as dangerous as driving drunk. As a rule your son or daughter should not get into a car with someone who has been drinking and should be knowledgeable about effective alternatives (e.g., calling a taxi, asking someone else for a ride home). You should develop an explicit agreement with your son or daughter that he or she never rides home with someone who has been drinking. Again, it is almost impossible to judge how drunk or sober someone is once the person has been drinking, so it is best not to ride with someone regardless of the number of drinks that person has had or how sober the person seems to be. The student should be aware that the techniques for “sobering up” (e.g., drinking coffee) do not work (see our earlier discussion) and that they should not rely on these to make a friend a “safe and sober” driver. Make sure your son or daughter always has enough money for a taxi ride or for public transportation. Encourage them to ride with other non- drinking friends or call home.

Warning Signs of a Potential Problem

Most parents underestimate the drinking activity of their sons or daughters. If you think your son or daughter might have a drinking problem, here are some suggestions for ways in which you can help:

- **Do not turn your back** on the problem.
- **Be calm** when discussing the problem.
- Let your son or daughter know that you are **concerned and are willing to help**.
- **Do not make excuses** or cover up for your son or daughter.
- **Do not take over your student’s responsibilities** but provide him or her with the means to take responsibility for himself or herself.
- **Do not argue** with your son or daughter if he or she is drunk.
- If your child stays out late, **stay awake for them when possible**, to show you care and are interested in what they are doing.

Preventing a Friend From Drinking and Driving

Your son or daughter may also be faced with a situation where his or her best friend has been drinking and intends to drive. In these cases, your son or daughter should try to stop his or her friend from driving. Many students are reluctant to do so because they feel that it might prove to be embarrassing or that an argument might ensue, or even a physical confrontation. Our research suggests that less resistance will result if:

- Students do not try to take their friend’s keys away
- Students try to arrange for a friend to drive
- Students arrange for their friend to stay over
- Students try to reason with their friend

If you would like more information about alcohol and drug use in young adults, you can contact the following organizations for many useful materials:

National Resources

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism
NIAAA College Drinking Changing the Culture
National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence
Alcoholics Anonymous
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Colgate University Resources and Services

Health Services
315-228-7750
studenthealth@colgate.edu

Counseling and Psychological Services
315-228-7385 (dial #2 in emergencies)
counselingcenter@colgate.edu

Shaw Wellness Institute
315-228-6403
wellness@colgate.edu

Campus Safety
315-228-7333 (general inquiries); 315-228-7911 (emergency)
cusafety@colgate.edu

Dean of the College's Office
315-228-7425

University Chaplain
315-228-7682
chaplainsoffice@colgate.edu

Communications and Parent Initiatives
Rebecca Downing, Senior Director,
315-228-7415;
parents@colgate.edu

University Directory: colgate.edu/directory

Talking with College Students About Alcohol

By Rob Turrisi, PhD

Prevention Research Center, The Pennsylvania State University

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