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Summer 2018

Your Student and Alcohol: Four Tips on Effective Conversations

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Your Student and Alcohol: Four Tips for Effective Conversations

If you're the parent of a soon-to-be first-year or returning college student, you're most likely doing what so many of the rest of us (myself included) are doing: crossing your fingers and hoping you've equipped your student with everything they need to know to be successful and safe while away at college! As a parent myself, I'll admit: I don't like this topic of students and alcohol. I want to believe that the only thing my own child will consume is fabulous knowledge from those inspiring textbooks and professors. But here are the facts, folks: Research shows 9 out of 10 college students experiment with alcohol; 7 out of 10 drink regularly; and 3 out of 10 will be frequent binge-drinkers (people who consume five drinks or more at one time and/or drink to get drunk).

OK, BREATHE. Because the good news? Research also shows that if parents talk with their children just prior to sending them off to college, it will most likely reduce their alcohol use and lower their risk of suffering alcohol-related consequences. Essentially, conversations on these topics can save lives. So before you pack up the suitcases and move your children to their new dorm rooms, be sure you pack in a few conversations about safe alcohol use and healthy alternatives, because research suggests doing so will make a difference in your child's choices.

To help with these conversations, I've collected four tips for making sure the conversations you have (and please, DO have them) are effective.

Tip one: No to lecturing, yes to listening

It's no surprise your college kid doesn't want to be told what to think. They want to be heard. They want to have a discussion with you, not a lecture from you. This is probably the single most important aspect of communication: DIALOGUE. One strategy is to bring up the topic of alcohol use among their high school or other peers, and then listen. Listen while trying to understand the reality of what your child has already seen and heard – what your child already knows and has experienced. Suspend your judgment and don't get defensive. Even if your child tells you exactly what you hope to hear ("I don't drink!"), don't think that this means you don't have to talk. Your goal is help expand your child's thinking and help them anticipate the range of experiences that they are likely to have in college.



About Our Contributor

Carol Bruess '90 is professor emerita of communication journalism and former director of family studies at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota. For more than 20 years, she has researched family, interpersonal and relationship communication with a critical eye on the influence of digital technologies in our lives and relationships. She is the author or editor of five books, has published her work in national and international journals, professional books, and has presented her work at dozens of national, regional and international conferences.



Tip two: Ask thought-provoking questions

Try to think of thought-provoking questions that can be asked in a supportive, nonthreatening way. I've leaned on a few of the excellent questions the experts at the Pierce Prevention Research Center at Penn State suggest:

- 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, 'Come on, it's just a little sip.'
- Is there another side to this view? Do you see any risks?
- Do you have any concerns?

(Don't forget tip one: Ask questions; don't lecture!)

Tip three: Be ready to answer questions about your past

If you truly establish a dialogue with your student, they will probably ask you questions about your past behavior. Yikes, right? Expect questions like these (also from the smart folks at Penn State):

- Did you drink alcohol when you were a student?
- If it was OK for you to do, why isn't it OK for me to do?
- Did you ever get drunk?

You need to be prepared to answer such questions, and in ways that your student will not decide that it is permissible to drink. Before initiating a discussion with your child, you should take some time to think about the kinds of questions they are likely to ask you and what your responses will be.

Tip four: Get the facts

One of the best resources on this topic is this [how-to guide](#) produced by SNC in partnership with Penn State. Do take time to increase your knowledge so that once you have established trust by doing some good listening and beginning dialogue, you will be ready to share a few facts. These facts include alcohol-related topics such as the increased risks of sexual and physical assaults and date rape; myths about getting sober (no, coffee and cold showers do not help); facts about blood-alcohol level (what alcohol is doing to your body); facts and myths about why kids drink: loneliness, stress, depression; and alternatives to drinking. In addition, a little bit of fact-finding can help your student connect with others on campus who share similar values.

As always, keep breathing! And keep in mind: This is the one area where the experts remind us you can and should be a bit of a helicopter parent. Because the research will back you up: that your words and advice CAN and WILL make a difference.

Aug. 16, 2018

Bruess is married to Brian Bruess '90, president of St. Norbert College, and the couple have two children, Tony, a new college graduate and Grace, who will be entering college this fall.

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