

Talking with young children about alcohol



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Children form opinions about drugs and alcohol at a very early age.

Even four and five year olds have definite opinions about alcohol. Preschoolers, because of the commercials they see on TV, often think that alcohol helps people have more fun and be better athletes! Images of alcohol are everywhere in our society — consumption of alcohol is depicted twice per hour in day time shows, and three times in an average evening program.

Despite the prevalence of alcohol in our society, and the problems that can be associated with it, many parents feel uncomfortable talking about alcohol with their children, or are not sure when and how to start. Many parents believe that teenage drinking is something that their children would **never** be involved in.

Unfortunately, teenage drinking is very common in North Dakota. In a state wide survey of adolescents in junior and senior high school, only 24% claimed

to have never consumed alcohol. When asked about their drinking in the past 30 days:

- 61% adolescents reported drinking
- 42% drank five or more drinks in a row
- 17% reported binge drinking
- 4.2% reported driving and drinking

Other research on rural youth in North Dakota has found that about 10% of a sample of fifth and sixth graders to be engaged in frequent drinking. Teenagers who reported alcohol use (especially those who began use in late elementary school and junior high school) were more likely to be depressed, felt less positive about both their family and friends, and had poorer grades.

Research has found that children and even teenagers look to their parents in making decisions about important decisions in their life. Decisions about using alcohol are undoubtedly something that parents will want to provide guidance about. Here are some suggestions about talking to children about alcohol.



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Suggestions for talking with your children about alcohol

◆ When your children are in Preschool:

- Begin to talk about what alcohol is, and what part it plays in your family. It is less important that you **initiate** these conversations, than it is to be open to the questions and comments of your preschooler.
- Now is the time to carefully examine your own values about alcohol. When, if ever, is drinking permissible in your family? Deciding as parents on the occasions when alcohol is acceptable, as well as the frequency and amount of alcohol use that is allowed, will help present a clear message to your children.
- Begin now to create an environment where your children feel comfortable asking questions and discussing feelings. Being supportive and interested in their lives in the preschool years will lay a strong foundation for helping them make responsible decisions later.
- Learn to “read” each of your children and understand their cues when they are troubled and unhappy. It is important to respond to these cues as well. It is helpful for preschoolers to learn to trust parents when problems occur, and it is a good habit to achieve long before adolescence!

◆ When your children are in Elementary School:

- Begin a more realistic discussion of the risks of alcohol use and its effects. By mid-elementary school, it is important to initiate discussions about alcohol if these conversations haven't already come up. Discuss both **facts** about alcohol use, as well as your **values**.
- When talking about alcohol, be realistic. Exaggerating the dangers is not effective. Be open to discussing both the potential risks and benefits of alcohol, and be clear about what your own values are.

- Examine your own behaviors about drinking. Realize that your children will most likely adopt these behaviors.
- Think about ways that you can give your children chances to make meaningful choices, gain responsibility, and learn about consequences to their actions. Drugs and alcohol are not good areas for teenagers to learn or practice beginning decision-making skills.
- Don't be naive and assume that children in elementary school are not using alcohol, or assume that your child would never be part of it. Stay involved in your child's life and be aware of where they spend their time.
- Inform your children that the use of alcohol or drugs will not be tolerated under any circumstances.

◆ As your children enter adolescence:

- Be supportive of your adolescent. Be involved with and praise their activities and accomplishments. Many research studies have found that adolescents who describe their parents as supportive, encouraging, and affectionate are much less likely to drink.
- Monitor who your teen becomes friends with and get to know their parents. Most teenage drinking occurs in someone's home.
- Know where your teen is, and set clear limits about their activities. Unstructured activities are often associated with drinking.
- Watch for loneliness and depression during adolescence. Although occasional moodiness is normal, prolonged depression is not a normal part of adolescence, and it often leads to substance abuse for adolescents.
- Think about making a pact with your teenager to abstain from alcohol until reaching age 21. Most adolescents don't “buy” the argument that reaching a certain age makes certain behaviors okay.

