

Tips for Talking to Your College Student About Alcohol or Other Drug Use



Alcohol and drug abuse prevention is a job NDSU cannot perform alone. We need the involvement and support of parents and guardians. Please talk with your student about your expectations regarding drug and alcohol use.

Alcohol and drug abuse can have serious consequences, including missing classes, getting behind in school work, unplanned sexual activity, damaged property and trouble with campus or local police. Even if your student is not likely to bring up the topic, she or he will listen if you talk. You may not get a response, but research shows that students pay attention when their parents talk about alcohol and drugs.

In this publication, you will find some suggestions for how to start the conversation and some facts that may help guide your discussion. We appreciate your involvement and your support on this critical issue.

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The prevalent view is that college students are old enough to leave home and be on their own. We have heard parents say, “What can I say now? They are grown adults.” or “There is just no use. They will do what they want anyway and don’t care what we say.” Such statements grossly underestimate the influence parents can have in providing information that can shape the behavior of their children at this point in their lives. In fact, 84 percent of NDSU students take their parents’ rules and expectations about alcohol use seriously, and 89.5 percent take rules and expectations about other drugs seriously.



How to have a healthy discussion with your college student about alcohol or drug use.

Communication

- When the time and setting seem appropriate, suggest to your student that you would like to talk with her or him about the topic. Do not be surprised if your student initially responds negatively. Give him or her some time and bring the issue up again when the time is right.
- **Possible Reactions by Young Adults**
 - Suspicion about your sudden interest
 - Doubts they will be understood
 - Fear of hearing a lecture
 - Indifference or lack of concern
 - A fear you are invading their privacy
- **Central Themes Your Response Should Include**
 - Caring about your student
 - Wanting to understand your student
 - Wanting to help your student
 - Respecting your student’s privacy and desire to be independent
- If you have had communication difficulties in the past, be prepared for some objections and think through the kinds of responses you might make to your student. Don’t force the issue of having a discussion; the willingness to back off shows you are going to be respectful. Structure the time of discussion so that neither you nor your student will be distracted by other activities.

The Conversation

- **Beginning with a statement that conveys open-mindedness and then asking your student about his or her experiences probably is best.**

Speak honestly about your own experiences and opinions (while being careful to avoid glamorizing any past use of alcohol or other drugs) and how they have changed through the years. As you tend to open up, so will your student. Ask questions rather than lecture.

- **Try not to get angry at your student if you hear things you don’t like.**

The ways in which people deal with anger and how they react to it can have a large impact on the relationships they form. These reactions can close down communication and impair your ability to help your student effectively solve problems and deal with difficult situations.

Additional Pointers

- Avoid exaggerations and blanket statements.
- Be specific about the behavior you want your student to change (for example: “I expect you to wait until you are 21 years old to drink.”)
- Disapprove of the behavior, not the person.
- Use “I” statements such as, “I feel scared when I hear that you are drinking to get drunk. I worry that you will get hurt or into trouble.”
- Don’t assume that everything has to be discussed in a single sitting.
- Be a role model. Set an example of appropriate substance use behavior with your own life.

- Although any amount of drinking alcohol carries at least a moderate risk, some ways to minimize risk and model appropriate use of alcohol include never driving after drinking, spacing drinks to no more than one per hour and not exceeding a BAC (blood alcohol content or concentration) of .05.

Assertive Tactics for Saying “No”

Talk with your college student about ways to say “no.” A prepared response can be helpful in saying “no.”

- Simple, straightforward “outs” are helpful in pressure situations: Encourage your student to think about such “one-liners” beforehand to be prepared for finding himself or herself in an uncomfortable situation. For example, “I don’t feel like it.” “I have to get up early tomorrow.” “I’m trying to cut back.” Or be honest and say, “I am not comfortable with it.” or “My parents will disown me.”
- Have an “out” plan if someone is insistent, such as, “I have a test in the morning.”
- Avoid being defensive and making the other person defensive. You could say: “I’d love to, but I”
- Just explain you are not interested.
- Be confident. Show others you are having fun without drinking.
- Avoidance: Say “No, thank you” and remove yourself from the conversation.



Discussion Topics

- Make clear your own position on your student’s substance use and be clear that drug use or underage drinking is not appropriate.
 - Remember that consumption of alcohol while under the age of 21 and the use of illegal drugs at any time is against the law.
 - Model appropriate behavior concerning alcohol use. Research shows that young people who have seen one or both of their parents drunk are more than twice as likely to get drunk in a typical month.
 - Discuss your expectations for handling disciplinary action/consequences.
- Talk about how alcohol and other drugs affect the body (for example, lowered inhibitions, blackouts, hangovers and long-term effects of chronic use).

- Review North Dakota penalties for driving under the influence
 - For more information about North Dakota’s laws, visit www.dot.nd.gov/divisions/safety/penaltiesdrinkingdriving.htm
- Discuss the reasons why college students drink alcohol or use other drugs (for example, to ease social interactions, fit in, test newfound freedom).
- Talk about risks associated with binge drinking (for example, legal risks if under age 21, sexual assault, accidents, reduced academic achievement).
- Make clear your willingness to help your student find positive and fun alternatives to substance use.
- Encourage your student to examine how his/her friends may be influencing the decisions he/she makes. Being around individuals who regularly consume alcohol is a subtle pressure that can increase the likelihood of your student consuming alcohol.

Addressing an Alcohol or Drug Abuse Problem

Most parents underestimate their college students’ drinking activity or the possibility their student may be using illegal drugs. You have several behavioral indicators to look for if you are concerned that a serious drinking or drug problem has developed. Many of these indicators are quite common and a natural part of transitioning to the adult world.

What distinguishes a drinking or drug problem is that these signs occur suddenly, in combination with each other, and are extreme in character. Some signs of a problem:

- Drop in grades
- Switching friends
- Defiance of rules and regulations
- Mood changes
- Trouble in school
- Lack of motivation
- Reduced self-esteem or self-confidence
- Quitting or getting fired from a job
- Reduced self-discipline
- Never available or reluctant to talk with you
- Unwilling to talk about activities with friends
- Incidents resulting from a high BAC. Many factors affect your BAC when you drink. These include: your size, gender and physical condition; what you

have had to eat; how much sleep you have had; what medications you are taking; and, most importantly, the actual alcohol content of your chosen drink. A BAC of .08 or higher is past the legal limit for driving in North Dakota.

If you think your student might have a drinking or drug problem, here are some suggestions for ways you can help:

- Do not turn your back on the problem.
- Be calm when discussing the problem with your student.
- Let your student know you are concerned and willing to help.
- Do not make excuses or cover up for your student.
- Do not take over your student's responsibilities, but provide him or her with the means to take responsibility for him or herself.
- Refer your student to the NDSU Counseling Center for free counseling services. Feel free to consult with the Counseling Center if you need help in knowing how to refer your student. More information is available at www.ndsu.edu/counseling/. To make an appointment, call (701) 231-7671.

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Additional Resources

NDSU Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Prevention Programs:

For more information about alcohol and drug abuse prevention, visit our website at www.ndsu.edu/alcoholinfo/.

Parents LEAD:

For more information about talking to your college-age student about alcohol, visit Parents LEAD at www.parentslead.org/. Click on College/Young Adult on the home page for more helpful information.

For more information on this and other topics, see www.ag.ndsu.edu

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