



# Talking to your kids about alcohol.



*Washington State*  
DEPARTMENT OF  
SOCIAL & HEALTH  
SERVICES

DIVISION OF ALCOHOL & SUBSTANCE ABUSE

## **Alcohol is a drug.**

If you find it difficult to talk to your children about

alcohol use, you're certainly not alone. Even parents who give their children a clear "no-use" message about illegal drugs find it hard to be as tough with their children about alcohol use. After all, although it is a drug, alcohol is legal for adults to use and many parents do drink at home occasionally.

However, the social acceptability of alcohol is actually what makes it one of most dangerous drugs your children will ever have contact with. What other drug can children get a hold of simply by opening the fridge at home? And while drinking is often portrayed on television as being funny or sexy, illegal drug use rarely is. It's also alcohol—not heroin, marijuana, or cocaine—that's responsible for accidents resulting in the leading cause of death for youths 15 to 24 years of age.

## **Prevention begins at home.**

Parents are the *single greatest influence* upon their children

and have a major role in determining whether or not their children will experience alcohol or other drug related problems. Recognizing that this puts a big responsibility on you, we've assembled this prevention guide to assist you.

## **Start while they're young.**

Many parents make the mistake of waiting until their

children are driving, or in high school, before talking about the problems and responsibilities associated with alcohol use.

While it is important to discuss alcohol use with teenagers, recent studies show that many attitudes about alcohol and other drugs are formed much earlier in a child's life. In fact, close to 50 percent of fourth through sixth graders report pressure from other students to try alcohol. And by the time they're 12, a growing number of children can even name the brand of alcohol they want to drink.

Most children have their first alcohol or other drug experience between the ages of ten and 14. That's why it's imperative you begin talking openly and naturally about alcohol and other drugs to your children between kindergarten and grade three. That way, they'll be more likely to accept your views and information rather than relying on peers or the media.

**FACT: THE 1998 WASHINGTON STATE SURVEY OF ADOLESCENT HEALTH BEHAVIORS REVEALED THAT AMONG 6TH GRADERS, HALF OF THOSE WHO DRINK GET THEIR ALCOHOL AT HOME, AND THEIR PARENTS KNOW ABOUT IT.**



## **Be aware of other influences.**

Whether you're talking with them about it or not, your children are probably

already receiving powerful messages about alcohol. These messages are coming from their peers, the media, and even possibly from your own unconscious behavior.

As a parent, you can't control all the information your young children receive about alcohol. However, as their single greatest influence, you have the unique ability to prepare them for the peer pressure and onslaught of pro-alcohol messages to come. Some suggestions on counter-acting pro-alcohol messages include.

- Be selective about television shows, movies and concerts that show alcohol and other drug use as normal and fun.

- Point out the negative effects of alcohol use when your children are watching shows or commercials that portray alcohol use as funny or attractive.

- Make sure your children's parties are chaperoned and that alcohol and other drugs will not be available. If you have doubts, don't be afraid to say "NO" to your kids.

- Get to know your children's friends and their parents. Know where your children will be, whom they will be with, and what they will be doing.

- Set reasonable curfews for your children and be clear about places and people that are off limits.

## **Teach them how and when to say “no.”**

Using or not using alcohol and other drugs is a decision—a decision your chil-

dren are being forced to make at an increasingly early age. That’s why it’s so important to teach young children decision-making skills as early as possible.

Help your children practice ahead of time so they’ll know what to say when someone confronts them about alcohol or other drugs. Tell them that although you expect them to refuse, you understand that saying “no” is difficult – even for adults.

To begin, work with your children to develop responses to the following questions and situations that they feel comfortable with. Don’t just tell them what to say, and then expect them to parrot you.

■ What would you do if some older kids came up to you at school and offered you some marijuana? What would you say to them?

■ What could you say if you’ve finished baby-sitting and Mr. Jones wants to bring you home, but he’s drunk.

■ What would you say if your friends offered you some beer? What would you say if they called you a chicken or a baby?

Help your children come up with appropriate responses, such as, “No thanks, not tonight,” or “My dad would ground me,” or just plain “NO.” Take the time to listen and show concern. If your children practice saying the right answers ahead of time, chances are they’ll actually use them when a situation comes up.

## **Set boundaries.**

Children are less likely to use alcohol and drugs if they

know that this behavior is unacceptable to their parents. This means telling children what you expect of them and what the consequence will be if they don't meet these expectations. Try using this four-step process.

- 1.** Have in mind exactly what you expect. Both parents should be in agreement on expectations. For health and legal reasons, we recommend advocating no use of illegal drugs, and no use of alcohol until of legal age.
- 2.** Sit down with your children and tell them exactly what you expect and why. Make sure they understand. Let them know you are serious.
- 3.** Tell your children what will happen if they don't honor your expectations. Choose consequence that are immediate and important to your children.
- 4.** Be prepared to follow through. Be realistic about consequences. If you make them too severe, you may be reluctant to impose them. Consistency is more important than severity.

## **Set a good example.**

*Remember that children are mirrors.*

In front of them, even the most casual gestures and comments about alcohol use take on great importance. By setting good examples, you'll increase the chance that your children won't make risky decisions about alcohol and other drugs.

■ If you drink, let your children see you drink small amounts that don't produce intoxication. Also, let them see you abstain from drinking at times, and hear you say, "No thanks, I'm driving."

■ If you don't drink, explain to your children why you have made this choice. Point out examples of low-risk drinking, should they choose to drink as adults.

■ Show your children you are a responsible host by having non-alcoholic drinks available for guests, never "pushing" drinks, and by serving food with drinks.

■ Demonstrate positive way to handle stress. Don't make casual comments about "needing a drink to relax," or "deserving a drink" after an especially difficult day.

■ Treat alcohol like the dangerous substance it is. Don't have your children serve drinks in your home, and don't ask them to get you a beer from the fridge.

Children don't stay alcohol and drug free by luck. It takes caring, thought, and effort.

## **Get help for chemical dependency.**

There may be individuals in your home—possibly parents, relatives, or older siblings—who are unable to control their drinking. If so, they're not only hurting themselves, they're also increasing the likelihood that your young children will have difficulties dealing with alcohol in the future.

Chemically dependent people can't be expected to stop by themselves. Heavy drinkers need professional assistance to stop drinking. Treatment works, and it's usually covered by health insurance. If it isn't, state funds are available. Call the Alcohol/Drug Help Line, 1-800-562-1240, for more help and information or visit their website at [www.adhl.org](http://www.adhl.org).

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Alcohol/Drug Teenline  
(206) 722-4222



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