



# Mixed Messages About Alcohol Summary

## Why Mixed Messages About Alcohol?

Children/teens receive numerous mixed messages about alcohol consumption and its place in their lives and in their communities. They may see commercials or alcohol products placed in a glamorous context in shows. They may encounter drunk adults at weddings, festivals, or concerts. Perhaps children/teens in these encounters view those others as having fun, or perhaps, they view them as scary and out of control. These outside messages, though they have an impact, are not as critical as the messages that you and your immediate family and friends send to your child/teen through your actions about alcohol. And, it's never too late to become more fully aware of the messages your child/teen is receiving, their impacts, and how you can shape the messages you send going forward to promote healthy choices.

**Tip** These steps are done best when you and your child/teen are not tired or in a rush.

**Tip** Intentional communication and a healthy parenting relationship support these steps.

## Step 1. Get Your Child/Teen Thinking by Getting Their **Input**

- Ask open-ended questions.
  - *“What have you noticed about how we use alcohol in our family?”*
  - *“What are some things you have learned about how alcohol affects your body?”*
  - *“What are some things your friends say about alcohol?”*

**Tip** Your child/teen may have different impressions about your attitudes and values toward alcohol based on what they've observed. Listen carefully to their understanding of the role of alcohol in your family's life and how they perceive your values. Their impressions may surprise you!

**Trap** Don't get caught up in feeling defensive about your own drinking practices. Keep focused on the fact that your child/teen is just at the start of understanding alcohol. It's a brand new chance to offer essential guidance. Focus on the impacts you can have today and in the future.

## Step 2. **Teach** New Skills by Interactive Modeling

- Examine family messages around the role of alcohol and think about what they're teaching your child/teen.
  - Is drinking alcohol a part of your daily lives? Weekly lives? When is alcohol present when your child/teen is around?
  - Is alcohol consumed in moderation typically? Or, do individuals drink to the point of intoxication (more than 1-2 drinks)?
  - Do children/teens sip or have a taste of alcohol at any events? Are children/teens given their own alcoholic beverages (under 21) at a certain age?
  - When someone becomes intoxicated, how do other adults react to that person?
    - Are they laughed at?
    - Are they the source of ridicule?
    - Are they a source of shame?
    - Do people reject them?
    - Do they become more popular?
    - How is that person treated?
  - If there are relatives that are dealing with alcohol use disorders like alcohol addiction, how are they treated by the family? How are they spoken about when they are not around?
  - The answers to these questions formulate the modeling your child/teen witnesses and what they are currently being taught about alcohol.
- Talk about your family history with alcohol.
- Create empathy and compassion through understanding. Promote empathy and understanding as family members deal with challenges in life.
- Address your past drinking behavior or current alcohol use. Tell the truth about your past and current alcohol use.
- Explain why you want your child/teen to abstain from drinking and drug use. Some reasons include the increased risk of experiencing negative consequences, their brain is still developing, alcohol is an addictive substance, and a family history of alcohol or drug problems.
- Invite your child/teen to ask questions.
- Be clear about your expectations about alcohol and drug use.
- Talk about why people may use alcohol to manage stress.
- Become a strong parent advocate. If you are in a circumstance in which relatives become obviously intoxicated, trust your gut.
- Take the learning further because your child/teen will increasingly need to find ways to deal with the stress and social pressures that they face. *"When you are upset, what makes you feel better?"*
- Discuss values. Instead of diving into a discussion about alcohol, first you may want to consider questions about health and healthy development.
  - What do you do to keep healthy (diet, exercise, preventative doctors visits)?
  - How do food and drinks fit into keeping your body healthy?
  - What about the role of medicine: Do you take medication? For what and why? What is your attitude about medicine? When is it important to take it? When do you want to avoid taking it? If you take medication, what side effects have you experienced?
  - What are the many substances that alter your body and brain like coffee, tea, over-the-counter medicine, prescription medicine, alcohol, energy drinks, others? How do those altering substances fit into a healthy lifestyle?

- What do you and/or your partner or other family members believe should be the role of alcohol in family life and with your child?
- What do you want your child/teen to learn?
- How can you align your own actions with those values?
- Create a family ritual out of expressing gratitude in your lives.
- Set goals to demonstrate values. Now that you have articulated your family's hopes and values for what you want to teach your child/teen, consider what goals you can set for yourself and what goals you can encourage your child/teen to set in order to align actions with values.

**Tip** Did you know that giving children/teens at any age under 21 sips of alcohol sends a clear message to them that authority figures feel drinking is acceptable for them. These children/teens are more likely to experiment with alcohol or drugs younger and more frequently with friends than those whose families who did not permit sipping.<sup>1</sup> Researchers advise not allowing any drinking even on special occasions for those under 21.

### Step 3. **Practice** to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Take the first small step. If you've set a goal to leave situations that feel unsafe, for example, set your family's expectations ahead of time.
- Tell stories of your own or your child's/teen's ability to empathize and be kind to others. These stories will begin to shape your child's/teen's identity as one who is able to empathize and act compassionately no matter the social pressures.
- Encourage leadership. As you build your child's/teen's social and emotional skills - the very ones that are also key leadership skills - they will have an opportunity to influence the decision making of their friendship group.

**Tip** When your child/teen comes to you with a peer pressure challenge, reflect back their feelings. Ask open-ended questions to prompt their thinking. Show your trust and support that they can solve their own problems with reflection.

### Step 4. **Support** Your Child's/Teen's Development and Success

- Ask key questions.
  - *"Are there times when your friends or other classmates want you to do something you don't want to do?"*
  - *"How would you respond if your friends asked you to drink?"*
- Reflect on outcomes. *"Seems like you are worrying today about your friends and their impressions of you. Often it helps if you talk about it. What's going on?"*
- Stay engaged. Be ready to talk when your child/teen is eager.
- Engage in further practice. Help build your child's/teen's leadership and assertive communication skills by talking about times when you set healthy boundaries and maintained relationships as well.

## Step 5. **Recognize** Effort and Quality to Foster Motivation

- Times when your child/teen chooses something different other than what the crowd is doing are times to recognize.
- Recognize small steps along the way. Find small ways your child/teen is making an effort like using self-control and let them know you see them.
- Build celebrations into your routine. Children/teens are constantly seeking new adventures and the thrill of trying out something new. Keep this in mind when considering celebrations.

**Tip** Your child/teen is trying to define their identity as an independent person. Comments that point out how they are acting in ways that are self-sufficient will help them see how their decision making is defining who they are and what they value.

Connect with other Montana parents about underage drinking and drugs at [LetsFacetMt.com](https://www.LetsFacetMt.com).

## Reference

[1](#). Donovan, J.E., & Molina, B.S. (2014). Antecedent predictors of children's initiation of sipping/tasting alcohol. *Alcohol Clinical Experimental Research*. 38(9): 2488-95.

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2020). *Mixed Messages about Alcohol Summary. Ages 11-14*. Retrieved from <https://www.ParentingMontana.org>.