



Mixed Messages About Alcohol Summary

Why Mixed Messages About Alcohol?

Teens receive numerous mixed messages about alcohol consumption and its place in their lives and in our communities. They may see commercials or alcohol products placed in a glamorous context in television shows. They may encounter drunk adults at weddings, festivals, or concerts. Perhaps, 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 teens through your actions about alcohol. And, it's never too late to become more fully aware of the messages your 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 teen are not tired or in a rush.

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

Step 1. Get Your 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 of the mixed messages you hear about alcohol?”*
 - *“What are some mixed messages you receive about alcohol in our family?”*
- As your teen attempts to assert their independence while still being dependent on your household, the paradox can be frustrating and confusing for parents and teens alike. Seeking their input is critical because it offers valuable practice in thinking through decisions they might approach when they are on their own.

Tip Your 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 teen is still only beginning to understand alcohol. Consider that you still hold significant influence on their decisions while they are living in your household, but in a few short years, they may be living on their own. 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 teen. Reflect on these questions.
 - Is drinking alcohol a part of your daily lives? Weekly lives? When is alcohol present when your teen is around?
 - Is alcohol consumed in moderation typically? Or, do individuals drink to the point of intoxication (more than 1-2 drinks)?
 - Do teens sip or have a taste of alcohol at any events? Are 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 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 teens witness and what they are currently being taught about alcohol. Understanding what challenges you face can better position you to teach your teen about alcohol in healthy, constructive ways.
- 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.
- Explain why you want your 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 teen to ask questions.
- Be clear about your expectations about alcohol and drug use.
- Talk about why people may use alcohol to manage stress.
- Talk about the emotions someone might feel who wants to escape their lives. Has your teen ever felt that way? Reassure your teen that it's normal to feel overwhelmed by your own problems at times.
- Take the learning further because your teen will 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 think about health and healthy development.
 - What do you do to keep healthy (diet, exercise, preventative doctor 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 teens?
- What do you want your teens to learn?
- How can you align your own actions with those values?
- Create a family ritual 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 teen, consider what goals you can set for yourself and what goals you can encourage your teen to set in order to align actions with values.
- Discover together opportunities to serve in your local community. What social issues does your teen care about? Pursue their interest and volunteer your time and energy in your community as a family.

Tip Did you know that giving anyone under age 21 sips of alcohol sends a clear message to teens and young adults that authority figures feel drinking is acceptable for them. These teens and young adults are more likely to experiment with alcohol or drugs younger and more frequently with friends than those whose families who did not permit sipping.¹ 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, set your family's expectations ahead of time.
- Practice empathy. When your teen comes home with reports of a conflict between friends or of a mistake a friend made, talk about that friend's perspective. You could ask questions like, "*Why would she have chosen to be mean to her friend when they've been friends since kindergarten?*"
- When your teen comes to you with a peer pressure challenge, reflect back their feelings. Ask open-ended questions to prompt their thinking.
- Tell stories of your own or your teen's ability to empathize and be kind to others.
- Encourage leadership. As you build your 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 teen comes to you with an interpersonal problem whether it's with a friend or a teacher, reflect back feelings. Ask what choices your teen might have in communicating with this other person. Perhaps, offer supportive language that will help them broach the topic. Then, show your confidence that they can manage their own communications and work through their own problems.

Step 4. **Support** Your Teen’s Development and Success

- Ask key questions.
 - “How are you feeling about your friends? Do they treat you well? Do they pressure you?”
 - “Are there times when your friends or other classmates want you to do something you don’t want to do?”
- 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 teen is eager.
- Use any opportunity to talk about the mixed messages regarding alcohol in society, in the media, or at home.
- Engage in further practice. Help build your 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 teen chooses something different than what the crowd is doing are times to recognize.
- Recognize small steps along the way. Find small ways your teen is making an effort, using self-control, and let them know you see them.
- Build celebrations into your routine. Teens are constantly seeking new adventures and the thrill of trying something new. Keep this in mind when considering celebrations.

Tip Your 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 LetsFaceItMt.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.

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