



Mixed Messages About Alcohol Summary

Why Mixed Messages About Alcohol?

Children receive many mixed messages about alcohol consumption and its role in their lives and 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. 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 children through your actions about alcohol. And, it's never too late to become more fully aware of the messages your child 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 are not tired or in a rush.

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

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

- Ask questions to make the connection between what your child eats and drinks and how it impacts how their body and how they feel.
 - *"What have you noticed about how foods and drinks affect your body? How do various foods and drinks make you feel?"*
 - *"How do we make healthy choices with foods and drinks in our family?"*
- Ask your child about alcohol.
 - *"What do you know about alcoholic beverages?"*
 - *"When do you see it and how is it used?"*
 - *"Do you have any ideas on why alcohol might only be appropriate for grownups?"*
- Listen carefully to what your child understands and their gaps in understanding. This will help you formulate future teaching and practice opportunities.

Tip Your child 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 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. Some questions you can ask yourself include:
 - Where do you take your child where alcohol is present?
 - Is drinking alcohol a part of your daily lives? Weekly lives?
 - When is alcohol present when your child is around?
 - Is alcohol consumed in moderation typically?
 - Do individuals drink to the point of intoxication (more than 1-2 drinks)?
 - Do children sip or have a taste of alcohol at any events?
 - Are children 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?
 - Are there 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?
- Talk about your family history with alcohol.
- Create empathy and compassion through understanding.
- Become a strong parent advocate. If you are in a circumstance in which relatives become obviously intoxicated, trust your gut. When people become unsafe, it's your responsibility as a parent or someone in a parenting role to get you and your child to safety.
- Talk about the feelings someone might have who wants to escape their lives. Ask your child if they have ever felt that way.
- Take the learning further because your child will increasingly need to find ways to deal with stress and social pressures. Ask: "*When you are upset, what makes you feel better?*" Brainstorm a list together.
- Discuss values. Consider the following questions:
 - What do you do to keep healthy (diet, exercise, preventative doctors visits)?
 - How do food and drinks fit into keeping your body healthy?
 - 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 to learn?
 - How can you align your own actions with those values?
- Set goals that demonstrate your values.
- Create a family ritual out of expressing gratitude in your lives.

Tip For 10-year-olds (or younger if your family encounters relatives who drink too much), talk about why an adult might want to lose some of their control and numb their thinking. Often it relates to their level of stress or even hard times in which they are attempting to cope. Digging a bit into the reasons behind alcohol use and misuse can begin to stir empathy in yourself and in your child. This does not mean supporting the unhealthy behaviors but rather realizing that they have an illness they must treat, just as you might view a family member dealing with diabetes, asthma, or another debilitating chronic disease. This is a family value worth communicating!

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

- If you've set a goal to leave situations that feel unsafe, for example, set your family's expectations ahead of time. Find specific ways you and your child can take small steps to work on the healthy choice goals you've set.
- When your child comes to you with an interpersonal problem whether it's with a friend or a teacher, reflect back feelings. Ask what choices your child might have in communicating with this other person.
- Practice empathy. You could ask questions like, *"Why would she have chosen to be mean to her friend when they've been friends since kindergarten?"*
- Tell stories of your own or your child's ability to empathize and be kind to others.
- Encourage leadership. Talk about social situations and opportunities for decisions. Give your child plenty of chances to decide where they fall on a variety of social issues (thus exercising their sense of responsibility and right and wrong).

Tip When your child 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 Development and Success

- Ask key questions like: *"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 child is eager.
- Engage in further practice.

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

- Recognize when your child chooses something healthy when those around them are not.
- If your child decides to forego dessert because they're too full, recognize their good decision. They're listening to their body cues.
- When your child stops to reflect about relationships, consider consequences and how their decisions will impact others; these deserve recognition because they are the fundamentals of responsible decision making.
- Recognize small steps along the way.
- Build celebrations into your routine.

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

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