

Talk It Up! Column

Talking About Alcohol with College-Bound Youth
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Congratulations! You have a student who's graduated high school and is preparing for their next adventure. While it may feel like you've reached the parenting finish line, the truth is that your role continues to matter. Research has proven that parents of emerging adults continue to wield a crucial influence in their young people's lives—especially when it comes to topics such as alcohol, substance use, and other risky behaviors. Today we'd like to offer some tips for conversations to have as your young person prepares to launch.

First, we'll share some data to give you a sense of the issue. Between the ages of 18-24, young people are more at risk for drinking in a way that negatively impacts their health and safety. That risk increases if the young person is enrolled in college. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism estimates that around 1,500 college students die each year from alcohol-related causes, that there are 969,000 victims of assaults by another student who has been drinking, and that there are 97,000 cases of sexual assault or date rape due to alcohol each year (NIAAA.NIH.gov). Additionally, young people in and around college are experiencing secondhand harms of alcohol even if they don't drink (Trangenstein, 2019).

As a parent, you can help by starting the conversation. Research indicates that the first six weeks in college are a critical time for alcohol-related incidents, so it's important to start the conversation now. Talking about drinking may feel taboo, but your influence can really make a difference.

Give yourself permission to disapprove of your child's drinking. It's okay to take a stand and share your expectations with your young person. The best practice here is to articulate that not drinking is best and certainly not excessive amounts even when they're of legal age.

It may feel naïve to communicate these expectations because of the myth that "all kids drink" at this age. What we know is that that is simply not true. Locally we know that an overwhelming majority of high school students aren't drinking (Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2017), and that only 61% of UNC students report consuming alcohol in the last 30 days (National Collegiate Health Assessment, 2017). The myth of college as a time for drinking to excess is simply not true for the majority of students nationwide.

Now, young people have a lot on their plate besides the decisions they have to make about alcohol and other substances. We encourage parents and families to keep regular lines of communication open during this critical time for growth in their young person's life. For more tips, check out collegeparentsmatter.org.