

Talking with Your Son or Daughter about Alcohol Issues



You may have seen and heard some of the recent media stories featuring trends in college students' underage drinking and high-risk drinking behaviors. As parents, this information is hard to take in, especially when the stories center around alcohol-related tragedies. It is important to be aware of the issues facing your college-age son or daughter but also to have a balanced perspective on those issues. Certainly, every college student in the U.S. is faced with numerous choices about alcohol use, and Concordia University students are no exception. In fact, Concordia University students' use of alcohol is consistent with the rates of students at other private universities in the country. However, that does not mean there is nothing to be done about it. Concordia University seeks to support students through educational programming, policy setting, focusing on alcohol-free activities on campus, and providing services through which students can address these concerns. As parents, you also play a key role in the choices that your adult sons and daughters make with alcohol and other substances.



The Importance of Ongoing Parental Involvement

Your influence on your children's behaviors does not stop the moment they come to campus. Though they may roll their eyes or change the subject when you try to talk with them about important choices they face at college, they're still listening. In fact, almost 73% of college students still get most of their health-related information from their parents. So, you play a huge role in delivering accurate information to your son or daughter about issues with alcohol, no matter if you know whether your son or daughter drinks or not. It's also true that the strategies you used for talking with them when they were children need to change now that they're adults.



Changing the Way You Communicate

Talking with your adult son or daughter about any number of topics is a bit different than talking to him or her when he or she was a child. You can let your adult child know you're open to talking about things that are important to him or her and assure him or her that he or she doesn't have to protect you from the things that go on in his or her life. Then, the most critical thing you can do is listen. Hear what they are saying and focus on understanding what is happening in their lives. Avoid interruptions, criticisms, or rapid-fire questioning. Hold off on your own reaction and reassure them that you understand. When your adult child feels heard and understood, he or she will be more likely to be receptive to discussing strategies for handling situations that come up.



Initiating a Conversation about Issues with Alcohol

Specifically related to conversations about alcohol, you may wish to consider some of the following ideas for approaching your son or daughter:

- *Possible lead-ins to your conversation*
 - “In the media, I hear a lot about underage drinking and binge drinking on most college campuses. What have you seen or heard about since you’ve been at Concordia? What kinds of pressures are you getting?”
 - “I love you and I care about your health and safety so I’m interested in knowing how you might handle different situations where you have to make decisions about using alcohol or drugs.”
 - “There can be a lot of pressure meeting new people in college and trying to fit in. You may be tempted to make some choices that you wouldn’t usually make. I want you to be thoughtful about decisions you’ll make, especially as it relates to alcohol and drugs.”
- *Familiarize yourself with issues related to alcohol use and college students*
 - Underage drinking
 - High-risk drinking
 - Drinking and driving
 - Alcohol use and dating
- *Discuss your expectations and your values when it comes to their alcohol use*
- *Share your own experiences related to substance use*
 - Be honest about your choices but avoid idealizing any over-indulging you may have done (which can end up reinforcing their choice to drink)
 - Highlight the mistakes made, what the consequences were, and what you learned from the choices you made
 - Talk about how alcohol has affected your family, especially if there are chemical dependency issues in your immediate or extended family
- *Discuss specific scenarios that could arise*
 - You’re at a party. You’re offered a drink but don’t want to take it. What are some ways you could decline?
 - Your roommate comes home drunk and passes out. You’re unable to wake him/her up. What should you do?
 - You’ve been drinking at a party. You drove to the party alone and want to go home. What are your options?
 - Your friends are leaving the party. You didn’t drive but you’ve been drinking too. How do you get home safely?
- *Help connect choices to consequences*
 - Driving after drinking...DUI, accidents, loss of license, hefty court fees
 - Riding with someone who has been drinking...accidents
 - Binge drinking...alcohol poisoning, academic problems, performance problems at work or in sports, addiction
 - Underage drinking...loss of drivers license, loss of eligibility for sports, sanctions on campus (fines, loss of residence hall contract)
- *Accept mistakes made and focus on taking responsibility for mistakes*
 - Acknowledge how mistakes are part of learning
 - Discuss how part of being an adult is taking responsibility for our mistakes

- *Discuss resources that are available*
 - Who on campus can you go to if your roommate is coming home drunk?
 - Where can you meet other students who do not want to drink?
 - What offices can you go to for education about alcohol choices?

Conversations about sensitive issues like alcohol use can be challenging. Your approach to these conversations with your adult child likely will likely need to change in ways that reflect the change in your relationship with your child as he or she matures. You can start to shift away from telling them directly what to do and move towards encouraging them to problem-solve, figure out options, and identify resources to help them handle the situation themselves. It may be hard to keep yourself from jumping in there and taking care of the problem or to see that your son or daughter handles things differently from how you would. But, hang in there. Believe that, with your support and encouragement, your son and daughter will be able to take responsibility for what is happening and can find a solution to the challenges they are facing in college, whether related to alcohol or other things. These strategies may open up ongoing dialogue and can strengthen your connection over time.

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