a parent handbook for
Talking with College Students About Alcohol
A Compilation of Information from Parents, Students, and The Scientific Community

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Table of Contents

Introduction ......................................................... 7
Improving Communication in General ....................... 8
Communication Pointers .......................................... 10
The Initial Conversation ........................................... 11
Communication: The Short Response ......................... 12
Developing Assertiveness ......................................... 13
Talking About Alcohol ............................................ 14
How Alcohol Works in the Body ................................. 15
Why Students Drink ................................................ 17
Why Students Do Not Drink ...................................... 19
Heavy Episodic Drinking: Drinking to Get Drunk ........... 21
Did You Drink When You Were a Student? .................. 23
For More Information ............................................. 25
Alcohol is the most misused and misunderstood drug in our society. Although college-age students are under the legal age for drinking alcohol, it is important to remember that alcohol is the most widely used drug by this age group. (See box at left.) One of the results of the misuse of alcohol in this age group is heavy episodic drinking. Sure, we have all heard about "frat parties" and crazy spring break trips and assume that these are just another part of the college experience. Although part of the college experience, heavy episodic drinking has been consistently associated with higher incidences of unplanned sexual activity, sexual and physical assaults, injuries, trouble with campus and local police, and alcohol-related driving injuries and fatalities. For example, consider this account from a college freshman:

This account from a college student is more common than you may believe. Episodes such as this can be avoided through parents helping their students as they attend college. Time and time again we have heard some parents say, "There is just no use – they will do what they want anyway and don’t care what we say." Thisgrossly underestimates the influence that parents can have – YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

Families are quite different from one another and we have written this handbook to reach a wide audience. Consequently, there may be some sections of the handbook that you can relate to better than others. This is okay. Not all families are the same and we tried to respect those differences.

By reading this handbook and talking with your student, you have the opportunity to reduce the likelihood they will experience the negative consequences associated with heavy episodic drinking.
Beginning A Dialogue

The first step in effectively talking with your student is simply getting the talking started. Such conversations will not necessarily occur in a single sitting, but often will evolve over multiple times. As a parent you must take active steps to establish the dialogue that is so important to both you and your student. When the time is right, you will want to suggest to your student that you would like to talk with them. Don’t expect your student to agree. In fact, many students will respond with a negative reaction.

Here are some common negative reactions that students have when parents try to open a dialogue about sensitive topics and a few ways other parents find useful in dealing with them:

FEAR OF HEARING A LECTURE

Many students are open to talking but the last thing they want to hear is a one-way lecture from their parents about right and wrong. Studies show more drinking goes on in teens who come from homes where parents tend to lecture too much.

Student Objection: "I know what you will do if we talk. You’ll lecture me like you always do. Then if I argue you will interrupt me."

Parental Response: "You’re right. This time I won’t lecture. I will listen to what you think. I want to change things now that you are heading to college."

ANGER ABOUT NOT BEING TRUSTED

Some students interpret a request to talk as a sign that you do not trust them. Studies show that when teens fear punishment they can trust their parents and are trusted by them they tend to drink less. You will need to offer reassurance that you are not suspicious and are doing this to help them, not attack them.

Student Objection: "What’s the matter, don’t trust me?"

Parental Response: "I trust you. But this is a very important issue and I think we need to pool the information we know to make sure you deal with everything effectively and that you know what to expect and what to do. To do that, we need to talk to each other."

FEAR OF PUNISHMENT

Another common objection focuses on fear of being punished. Studies show that when teens fear punishment they communicate less often with their parents. In turn, these teens tend to drink more often and are more likely to experience alcohol-related consequences.

Student Objection: "Sure, talk with you and you won’t let me go out. Forget it."

Parental Response: "You probably already know quite a bit. It would make me feel better if we talked it through. Besides, it would help me to better understand how things are different from when I was your age."

THE STUDENT THINKS THEY ALREADY KNOW IT ALL

Some students don’t want to talk because they think they already know everything there is to know about a topic. Even though students think they know everything, they often do not. Don’t let this objection deter you in your pursuit of communication.

Student Objection: "I’ve heard it all before. We don’t need to talk."

Parental Response: "I trust you. But this is a very important issue and I think we need to pool the information we know to make sure you deal with everything effectively and that you know what to expect and what to do. To do that, we need to talk to each other."

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are other objections that you might get, although these are the major ones. Sometimes you will hear more than one of them from your student. The central themes in your response should be that of caring about the student, wanting to understand the student, and wanting to help the student, while at the same time respecting the student’s privacy and desire to be independent. The example parental responses we gave illustrated these themes. They may not work well for your particular student and you may need to adapt them to their particular personality. But if you have open communication channels, you are more likely to help your student. Most of all, be constructive in your responses, not defensive or angry.
Some Communication Pointers

The Initial Conversation

Here Are Some Do's and Don'ts Studies Have Shown Make A Difference in How Students Respond:

LISTEN
Permit the person to speak without interruption. Listen to what they say. Sometimes, it is good to paraphrase. “Let me see if I understand you. It sounds like you feel that…” With paraphrasing, you don’t agree or disagree, you interpret.

VERBALIZE RESPECT
Whenever you can and it is appropriate to do so, convey respect to the other individual (e.g., “I admire what you have done and how you are coping”). People want to be respected and will be more willing to talk to those who respect them. Tell them you are proud of them for the effort in How Students Respond.

CHOOSE A GOOD TIME
Choose an optimal time to bring up situations. Sometimes, it is good to paraphrase.

TRY TO APPEAL TO COMMON GOALS
Students need to be reminded that you are on their side. Whenever possible, common goals should be emphasized and should serve as the basis for your guidance and recommendations (e.g., You both want them to be healthy and safe).

AVOID COMMUNICATION “STOPPERS”
There are single statements that will close anyone down (e.g., “Anyone who drives drunk is crazy.” “No one in this family would ever consider doing that”).

CONFLICT IS NATURAL
Realize that conflict is natural. We are not identical to one another. We all have different beliefs and values, therefore disagreement is a natural thing. We should use conflict as an opportunity for growth and for learning about each other rather than treating it as a negative experience.

COMMUNICATE DIRECTLY
Don’t talk about important things while absorbed in another activity, such as reading the newspaper, watching television, or doing the dishes.

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AGREE TO DISENGAGE
Agree to temporarily stop if things don’t go well. Wait until both individuals can talk in a calm, direct fashion.

USE APPROPRIATE BODY LANGUAGE
How you position yourself as you talk can send important messages about your attitudes or possibly convey something you are not trying to convey.

AVOID DEBATE MODE
Sometimes conversations become structured so that people feel they must “defend” their position. The entire conversation turns to a mini-debate. If you sense the conversation has turned into a debate, try suggesting that you both approach matters from a different angle. Also avoid statements that begin with “you” (“You did this…”). They often make the other person feel attacked.

Most students have heard comments like “kids getting drunk is terrible” from other adults and from the media. You should NOT start your conversation with statements such as this. Keep your comments short and remember that you don’t have to say everything. This is the beginning of a conversation. It probably is best to begin with a statement that conveys open-mindedness and then ask your questions and their experiences. Talk about your own experiences and opinions about how they have changed over the years. As you tend to open-up, so will your student. Keep distinctions between facts and opinions: “My opinion is…This opinion is based on facts. This opinion is based on these experiences. This opinion is based on these observations.”

Ask your student what they think. Listen while trying to understand, without defensiveness. Suspend critical judgment. Even if your student says what you want to hear (e.g., “I don’t drink now, let alone drink to get drunk”) don’t think that this means you don’t have to talk. Your goal is not just to reassure the student through talking but to help expand your student’s thinking. You want to help them deal with the range of experiences that your student is likely to encounter in college.

Try to think of thought provoking questions that can be asked in a supportive, non-threatening way. For example: Do you know kids who drink a lot? How has it affected them? Have you ever been offered alcohol by someone you knew? (If so) what did you say? (If not) what would you say? What if someone really pushed you? What would you do if they said… Is there another side to this view? Do you see any risks? Do you have any concerns? Ask questions; don’t lecture! This is probably the single most important aspect of communication. People like to talk about themselves and their opinions. People like to explore logic and details.

**They do not like to be told what to think!**

Be Prepared to Answer Questions About Your Own Behavior

If you truly establish a dialogue with them then they will probably ask you questions about your past behavior. Did you drink alcohol when you were a student? If it was okay for you to do, why isn’t it okay for me to do? Did you ever get drunk? You need to be prepared to answer such questions and in ways that the student will not decide that it is permissible to drink.

Before initiating a discussion with your student you should take some time to think about the kinds of questions they are likely to ask you and what your responses will be.
Communication: The Short Response

A number of parents who we have interviewed express frustration at their inability to get their student to talk at length on any issue. They swear that their student has a vocabulary comprised mostly of “Okay, Mom;” “I dunno;” “Whatever;” “If you want;” “Sure, okay;” “Not now;” when it comes to parental conversation. Some students use these responses when they don’t feel like talking because they are busy, tired, or simply not in the mood. Maybe the student thinks they are just going to hear yet another lecture from the parent. Maybe the student thinks that the parent will start nagging at them yet again. The student may think the parent just doesn’t understand them.

Parents need to respect this and not force communication at a bad time. Let it drop and bring it up later. Try to structure a time to talk when the student is apt to be open to it. Students are often tired at the end of a hard school day or an athletic event, and this may not be the best time to try to start a conversation. Or the student may be preoccupied with something else. Think about your student’s schedule and how you can create a time where you will have their undivided attention. Perhaps taking them out to a quiet dinner or some other place where a “one-on-one” conversation can be effectively initiated will work.

When your student begins college it is likely that they will form entirely new social groups. The most influential reason why new students drink is because of social reasons. Friends can influence them in two major ways. First, there is active social influence, which occurs when a friend explicitly suggests that they engage in some behavior (e.g., “Let’s go get drunk”). Second, there is passive influences such as when they think everyone is doing it and that it is an acceptable thing to do. Part of reducing social pressure is not only helping your student resist active influence attempts but also helping your student to put into perspective the fact that (1) not everyone is necessarily doing it, (2) even if people were, this does not make it right or a good thing to do, and (3) friends may respect your student for not drinking.

There may be times when they may be put in situations where they are pressured by one or more peers to perform behaviors she would rather not engage in. For example, they may be pressured by someone to have a drink when your student doesn’t want to. Students need to develop skills to resist such pressure and affirm their own values, beliefs, and attitudes.

Developing Assertiveness

COMMON PRESSURE LINES

Students are exposed to a wide range of pressure lines to try to get them experiment with drugs or alcohol. Here are some examples of what they might hear:

Come on, everyone has tried it.
If you won’t drink with us, then why are you hanging out with us?
It’s all part of growing up and being in college.
We drank once before, so what’s the problem now?
You will love it!

You’ll have an incredible time if you do.
Come on, take a drink. It will get you in the mood.
Everyone is doing it.
You’ve been working too hard. You deserve to go party.
You can study tomorrow.

Students need to develop adequate responses to such pressure lines. What they need most are simple but effective “one liners” that will diffuse the pressure without making a big scene or issue about it. It is difficult for parents to provide such responses to the student because parents usually are not aware of the current language that students use with one another. It is probably more useful for parents to tell their students that they will probably be exposed to pressures to drink and for the student to try to think of short yet effective responses to pressure attempts. Often such simple phrases as “It’s just not for me, it’s not what I want” or “I don’t drink” will work quite effectively. We have evaluated a wide range of possible responses and students clearly prefer simple, straightforward “outs” to the pressure situation. Encourage the student to think about such “one liners” beforehand to be prepared if they find themselves in an uncomfortable situation.
Talking About Alcohol

Alcohol is the most misused drug in our society, although most people do not even consider alcohol to be a drug. It takes only a single episode of intoxication to experience life-changing consequences, accidents, arrests, etc. We are not so naïve that we think that parents talking with their students about alcohol use will put an end to alcohol consumption in college students. However, you should do everything in your power to minimize odds of them being at risk.

PARENTAL RELUCTANCE TO TALK WITH STUDENT ABOUT DRINKING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MYTH</th>
<th>FACT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My student is not interested in drinking.</td>
<td>Over 90% of students try alcohol outside the home before graduating from high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My student has learned about the negative effects of alcohol in school.</td>
<td>Although most students do learn about alcohol in their classes on health, we have found that many important issues never got covered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At this point my student should know better.</td>
<td>Unfortunately, the reality is that many students at this point in their lives are still uninformed about how powerful a drug alcohol can be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My student won’t listen at this point.</td>
<td>The results of the American College Health Survey revealed that parents were the number one source that students turned to for important information.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IN YOUR TALKS THERE ARE SEVERAL TOPICS THAT YOU SHOULD BE SURE TO ADDRESS

First, you should talk about how drinking affects the body. Students need to know how drinking on a given occasion will affect them.

Second, you should make clear your own position concerning your student’s drinking, exactly what is okay and what is not.

Third, students drink for a variety of reasons. If you address this directly, then they will be better able to think through the choices they make when confronted with “positive” motivations.

Fourth, you need to discuss reasons for NOT drinking and the many negative consequences that can result from drinking.

Finally, you need to make clear your willingness to help them find constructive alternatives to drinking.

How Alcohol Works in the Body

Alcohol is a drug that is absorbed into the bloodstream from the stomach and the small intestine. It is broken down by the liver and then eliminated from the body. There are limits to how fast the liver can break down alcohol and this process cannot be sped up. Until the liver has had time to break down all of the alcohol, the alcohol continues to circulate in the bloodstream, affecting all of the body’s organs, including the brain. Nothing can speed this up. Not exercise, drinking coffee, etc. Nothing.

Alcohol consumption in college students. However, you should do everything in your power to minimize odds of them being at risk.

In the media it is suggested that most individuals can have one drink per hour and maintain sobriety. Unfortunately, this is a dangerous rule. For individuals weighing over 200 pounds this might be true, but for most students, even ½ drink per hour could lead to intoxication and the bad things that go along with it (fights; accidents).

As alcohol reaches the brain, a person begins to feel drunk. The exact nature of this feeling can vary considerably from individual to individual and even within the same individual from situation to situation.

Physical and Psychological Effects

Alcohol is measured in terms of blood alcohol content. In popular press, you may see reference to terms such as BAC or BAL. A BAC of 0.1 percent means that 1/1000 of the fluid in the blood is alcohol. This may seem very small, but it does not take much to achieve this level. For example, a 150-pound female who consumes 5 drinks in 2 hours will have a BAC near 0.1. A 115-pound female who consumes 4 drinks in 2 hours will have a BAC near 0.1. At a BAC of 0.1, most students will be very drunk. Their thinking, vision, hearing, reaction time, movement and judgments of speed and distance will be seriously impaired. It is likely that the brain will not form new memories even though the person is completely conscious and speaking. This is what is known commonly as a “black-out”. The person is awake, but the brain is focusing on other more important tasks such as breathing and keeping the heart and blood going.

Most students DO NOT know how drinks influence the blood alcohol level. In fact, they have many misconceptions about how drinking affects BAC. Students tend to think that the impact on BAC of additional drinks is smaller after more drinks have been consumed. This is wrong. Each additional drink adds the same amount of alcohol to the blood whether or not that drink is the first or fifth drink.

People are notoriously bad at estimating how drunk they are. In cases where they are very drunk, it is indeed obvious. But more often than not, people get to the point where they are impaired but do not realize it. Study after study has demonstrated that people are extremely poor at guessing how sober they are.
Many accidental deaths occur from mixing alcohol with other drugs. Even drugs that you can buy without a prescription, such as aspirin or cold remedies, can change the way alcohol acts on the body.

### ALCOHOL (beer, wine, liquor)

**MIXED WITH:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drug</th>
<th>Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antibiotics (Antibiotics)</td>
<td>Extreme drowsiness, decreases effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antihistamines</td>
<td>Extreme drowsiness, causes temporary depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirin</td>
<td>Stomach and intestinal bleeding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Blood Pressure Medicines</td>
<td>Dangerously lowered blood pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcotics</td>
<td>Extreme slowing of brain activities, breathing slowed down or stopped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Narcotic Pain Killers</td>
<td>Stomach and intestinal irritation or bleeding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sedatives &amp; Tranquilizers</td>
<td>Extreme slowing of brain activities, breathing slowed down or stopped, heart slowed or stopped</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some parents allow their students to drink a controlled amount on certain occasions, such as holidays and family functions. Still other parents believe it is all right for students to drink small amounts of alcohol, as long as they do so in a responsible fashion. Your own orientation as a parent is a matter of your own values. However, if you are going to permit your student to drink alcohol in certain contexts, then you must be clear about exactly what these contexts are and what constitutes responsible behavior. Studies consistently show that when parents permit their student to drink they tend to drink more often and heavier outside the home.

It is important for parents to recognize that there will be “positive” reasons (at least from the student’s perspective) for why they choose to drink. If parents only choose to focus discussions on the negative aspects of drinking, ignoring the positive aspects, they run the risk of losing credibility in their students’ eyes. Also, you need to help your student put these “positive” motivations in perspective so that they do not start to drink because of them. Here are some of the major ones that research has shown impact drinking behavior.

**ADDS TO A CELEBRATION**

Some students believe that drinking is one way to celebrate a special occasion. For example, a friend may suggest to your student that they have a few beers after finishing an important assignment. It is important that you talk with your student about alternative ways of celebrating such as: (1) suggesting that your student go shopping for something special (e.g., clothes, music, sporting goods); (2) suggesting an outing, such as dinner, that would include a few special friends; and/or (3) offering to have friends over for a small dinner party (without alcohol). Encourage your student to tell you about significant things that happen in his or her life and then try to help them celebrate positively.

**LOWERS STRESS**

One reason students give for drinking is that alcohol helps reduce worries. Parents should talk with their student to find out about what worries them and help the student directly confront these worries in a realistic fashion. Parents can also point out the need to confront problems directly rather than avoid them and note that the problem does not go away because you drink (and, in fact, it may become worse). Studies show that drinking is that they believe that alcohol helps make it easier to express feelings or talk with people to whom they are attracted. Parents need to be sensitive to how difficult it is for students to communicate in a new environment where they are unlikely to know anybody. Parents should point out that while often releasing inhibitions, alcohol actually could cloud judgments, making students think that they are communicating better when, in fact, they are not.

**STUDIES SHOW THAT**

- **Eating food will help you become sober.**
- **Putting a penny in your mouth will lower your BAC.**
- **A quick walk will help you become sober.**
- **Putting a penny in your mouth will lower your BAC.**

**Reasons Why Students Drink**

It is important to recognize that there will be “positive” reasons (at least from the student’s perspective) for why they choose to drink. If parents only choose to focus discussions on the negative aspects of drinking, ignoring the positive aspects, they run the risk of losing credibility in their students’ eyes. Also, you need to help your student put these “positive” motivations in perspective so that they do not start to drink because of them. Here are some of the major ones that research has shown impact drinking behavior.

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- **Aspirin**
- **High Blood Pressure Medicines**
- **Narcotics**
- **Non-Narcotic Pain Killers**
- **Sedatives & Tranquilizers**

### Here are Beliefs That Many Students Hold Which Are NOT TRUE:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief</th>
<th>Dispel Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black coffee will help you become sober</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise will help you become sober</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating food will help you become sober</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A cold shower will help you become sober</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh air will help you become sober</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going from dark lighting to bright lighting will help you become sober</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking milk before drinking will allow you to drink as much as you want</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting a penny in your mouth will lower your BAC</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These myths are important to dispel because students may decide to drive drunk after engaging in such activities, thinking that the activity has “sobered them up.” In fact, the activity only creates a temporary illusion of sobering up and in some instances increases drunkenness.
They should also find alternate ways to regulate their mood without alcohol or other drugs (e.g., caffeine). Exercise is always a good alternative to help improve one’s mood. It is also important to explain to your student that the “high” from alcohol is accompanied by extreme lows as well.

**SOMETHING TO DO**

Some students get bored and turn to alcohol as a means of getting excitement out of their lives. To confront this, you can offer alternatives that your student can pursue. Some examples include getting involved in sports, hobbies, music, dance, games, reading, and school clubs. They could also become involved in volunteer activities that are associated with causes they really care about, such as protecting the environment or promoting literacy. This is a good way to meet others with similar interests and also to feel good about themselves. Many students go to parties or have parties as a means of entertainment. Drinking frequently occurs in such settings and it is important that you provide suggestions on how students can enjoy themselves without alcohol.

**HERE ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS**

1. Try to meet three new people.
2. Try to find individuals who share common interests other than drinking.
3. Try to think about topics for conversation before going to the party to keep the focus of the conversation away from drinking or not drinking.

Many students choose not to drink and the reasons they cite for not doing so can form the cornerstone of your conversations about the disadvantages of drinking. Before discussing these, we must interject a word of caution. If you try strong scare tactics with students by inducing a great deal of fear about negative consequences, then your efforts might actually backfire. Research has shown that when faced with highly fear arousing information, some people will often “turn off” to it and not pay as much attention to it. This is because such information and thoughts are anxiety provoking and people are motivated to avoid anxiety. Why think about something when it is unpleasant to do so?

In addition, strong scare tactics will often result in a loss of credibility. If you paint a picture based solely on the dire consequences of drinking and a student fails to see such consequences materialize when they drink, then the student will infer that you were wrong or you were exaggerating the consequences. Discuss the negative consequences in a matter of fact, honest, and straightforward fashion.

**DRINKING IS ILLEGAL**

Students generally know that drinking alcohol under the age of 21 is illegal. However, the general perception is that they will not get caught by the authorities and suffer any legal consequences. The fact is there is some truth to this perception. If, as a parent, you try to convey to your student the idea that there is a high probability of being caught when in fact there is not, then you will probably lose credibility. Instead of taking such a position, we have found it useful simply to remind students about the many ways that they may get caught. Drinking at parties often leads to public disturbances and complaints to police, who will arrest all at the scene who are intoxicated.

What happens if authorities catch a student? This varies from community to community and judge to judge. However, there generally will be substantial costs in legal fees. There will be family embarrassment, since many such arrests are routinely reported in newspapers (not as headlines, of course, but in smaller sections labeled “Police Reports”). The student will also probably experience embarrassment, as they are publicly associated through the newspapers with getting caught for alcohol consumption. Prosecution in court may require the parent to take time off from work, thus costing the family money. Our experience has shown that students rarely have thought about even half of the above consequences and that making them more aware of the implications of an arrest may have deterrent value.

**DRINKING MAKES YOU SICK OR PASS OUT**

Alcohol is an irritant to the lining of the digestive system. If too much is consumed, an individual will vomit. Vomiting is complicated by the fact that the sickness one experiences often follows a pattern (often referred to as a “hangover”). Drinking at parties often leads to public disturbances and complaints to police, who will arrest all at the scene who are intoxicated. This is complicated by the fact that the sickness one experiences often happens suddenly and with little warning.
Heavy Episodic Drinking: Drinking to Get Drunk

DRINKING CAN LEAD TO PREMATURE DEATH
Excessive alcohol consumption can have serious negative physical effects. Among other things, it causes damage to the liver, kidneys, brain, and cardiovascular system, which are all long term in nature. There are however, countless instances of students that have had fatal accidents or unsafe sex and contracted a sexually transmitted disease following a single night of heavy drinking. Unfortunately, it is also not uncommon for individuals who vomit from heavy drinking to choke to death.

A PATTERN OF HEAVY DRINKING MAY LEAD TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS
Most students have negative images of alcoholics and most do not want to become alcoholics. Most students are also convinced that they can control their drinking and will not become alcoholics. Experts distinguish between three types of drinkers: social drinkers, problem drinkers, and alcoholics:

EXAMPLES OF SIGNS THAT MAY BE INDICATIONS OF A DRINKING PROBLEM INCLUDE:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needing A Drink To Have Fun</th>
<th>Using Alcohol To Help Solve Problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forgetting What Happened While Drinking</td>
<td>Sneaking Drinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking To Feel Better About Oneself</td>
<td>Finding Reasons to Continue Drinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bragging About Tolerance</td>
<td>Having Difficulty Stopping</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drinking Fast or “Guzzling” Drinks</td>
<td>Ability To Socialize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking In The Morning</td>
<td>Only When Drinking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some individuals pass through stages from social drinking to problem drinking to alcoholism. Some students are genetically disposed towards substance use disorders and can become problem drinkers relatively easily. Many students cannot articulate the differences between a social and problem drinker.

Some students arrive on campus having achieved recovery from substance use disorders. These students will seek to engage in a full and rich college experience while also disengaging from addictive behaviors, including substance use.

High-risk drinking refers to individuals who drink five or more drinks in the course of a short period of time (e.g., over the course of two hours). Heavy episodic drinking is quite common in both high schools and colleges. Almost 30% of high school students have engaged in binging. Many colleges report rates as high as 60%. There are times when individuals will plan to heavy episodic drink (e.g., let’s go out and get hammered!). However, there are numerous occasions where individuals will only plan on having a drink or two, but get carried away by drinking games, parties that get out of hand or someone buys a round of drinks, etc. Heavy episodic drinking has serious risks. Consider these quotes from a sample of college students:

“I was having a great night. I drank at least 15 beers. Then I blacked out. This is not unusual for me. Another time, I became violent, smashed bottles and got in tons of trouble.”

“A girl I know got so drunk that a friend and I had to carry her for several blocks, trying to keep her from burning us with a cigarette. Since then, she has gotten as drunk every weekend.”

“In a crowded party, I accidentally nudged someone. I apologized but the guy hit me anyway, making my mouth bleed.”

These accounts sound shocking, but chances are they have happened to your student or someone they know. These experiences alone should convince you of the potential risks of heavy episodic drinking. Heavy episodic drinkers are more likely to have been insulted by others, been in a serious argument or quarrel, had one’s property damaged, engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse where they are more susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV, been injured or had life threatening experiences, driven while intoxicated or rode in a car with an intoxicated driver. We also know that perpetrators of violence target individuals that are incapacitated by alcohol. No one deserves to be physically or sexually assaulted no matter how much they drink.
You need to emphasize to your student how powerful a drug alcohol can be and how quickly heavy episodic drinking can lead to dangerous results. By discussing the reasons why students drink, why students choose not to drink, and the basis of good relationships, and by providing them with skills on how to resist pressures from others, you will be helping your student develop the foundations that are necessary to reduce the probability of heavy episodic drinking.

RESEARCH SUGGESTS THAT INDIVIDUALS TEND TO HEAVY EPISODIC DRINK FOR MANY REASONS. SOME OF THESE INCLUDE:

Heavy episodic drinkers tend to have generally positive expectations about the types of activities where heavy episodic drinking is more likely to take place (e.g., bars, fraternity/sorority parties). Some of the more commonly held beliefs include: I will be able to meet new people, I might meet potential sexual partners, and I will get to hang out with my friends.

Heavy episodic drinkers tend to believe that there is nothing else to do, but go get drunk on weekends and associate with others who hold the same belief.

Heavy episodic drinkers tend to associate with others who tend to heavy episodic drink (e.g., Everyone at my age is doing it, My friends will think I am strange if I do not drink, It can’t be that bad if everyone is doing it).

Heavy episodic drinkers tend to agree with many of the reasons why some students do not drink indicated earlier (e.g., drinking makes you sick).

Heavy episodic drinkers tend to disagree with many of the reasons why students drink indicated earlier (e.g., drinking adds to a celebration, improves mood).

Heavy episodic drinkers tend to believe that there is nothing else to do, but go get drunk on weekends and associate with others who hold the same belief.

It is highly likely that in the course of your discussions with your student, you will be asked if you ever drank as a student. The fact is that most parents did drink in their youth, which creates a dilemma. If you answer no, then you are not being honest with them. If you answer yes, then you are being hypocritical. At the same time you are telling your student not to drink, you admit that you did. You are, in an indirect way saying it is permissible to drink because you did it. And if you drank as a student, how can you turn around and punish them for drinking? How should you answer questions about your own drinking as a student?

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We believe that honesty is important and that you should not lie to your student. Ultimately, this can undermine effective communication. Some parents establish a "ground rule" at the start of their discussion: They will talk about anything but will not answer questions about their own use of drugs or alcohol as a student. The parent tells the student that this rule does not mean that the parent drank alcohol as a teenager nor does it mean that the parent did not. Rather, the parent's behavior as a student is not relevant to a careful consideration of the issues surrounding the student's current use of alcohol. This strategy works well in some families but not others. Students may be convinced that their parents are hiding something and resent the fact that the parent won't talk about it. How can the parent expect the student to talk about their behavior when the parent refuses to talk about the parent's behavior as a student?

While this strategy may work for some families, it may prove to be ineffective for others. An alternative approach is to admit use, but to state in unambiguous terms that it was a mistake. Use your experiences as an opportunity to discuss some of the negative things that happened. Relate how drinking led to an embarrassing moment or an unpleasant consequence for the parent, making salient the fact that drinking has negative consequences that the parent has personally experienced. Stress that just because the parent behaved foolishly and was lucky enough to escape serious consequences does not mean that the same fortune will befall the student.

Unfortunately, there is no good scientific data about how best to handle this issue and psychologists are divided on what they recommend. You should use your own judgment about what you think will work best given your own past and your knowledge of your student.
A POTENTIAL PROBLEM

Most parents underestimate the drinking activity of their student. If you think they may have a drinking problem, here are some suggestions for ways in which you can help:

- Do not turn your back on the problem.
- Be calm when discussing the problem.
- Let them know that you are concerned and are willing to help.
- Do not make excuses or cover up for them.
- Do not take over your student’s responsibilities but provide them with the means to take responsibility for themselves.
- Do not argue with your student if they are drunk.
- If your child stays out late, stay awake for them when possible, to show you care and are interested in what they are doing.

WARNING SIGNS OF A POTENTIAL PROBLEM

If you think your student may have a drinking problem, here are some WARNING SIGNS OF A POTENTIAL PROBLEM:

- They are interested in what they are drinking.
- They always have enough money for a taxi ride or for public transportation.
- They get into fights or even a physical confrontation. Our research suggests that less resistance will result if:
  - Students do not try to take their friends’ keys away
  - Students try to arrange for a friend to drive
  - Students arrange for their friend to stay over
  - Students try to reason with their friend

ALCOHOL AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

Talking to your student about alcohol use is also a good time to have a conversation about sexual assault. Over half of all college sexual assaults involve alcohol and alcohol is the number one drug used to facilitate sexual assault. Perpetrators use alcohol as a weapon to incapacitate potential victims and intentionally target people who have been using alcohol. We often teach our student to avoid strangers in alleys, however 85% of all assaults are committed by someone the victim knows. Talk to your student about consent. Make sure to emphasize that consent must be asked for and received before sexual activity occurs and consent is not valid if someone is intoxicated or incapacitated by alcohol and/or drugs.

If you would like more information about alcohol and drug use in young adults, you can contact the following organizations for many useful materials:

- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism
  www.niaaa.nih.gov
- NIAAA College Drinking Changing the Culture
  www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov
- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence
  www.ncadd.org
- Alcoholics Anonymous
  www.alcoholics-anonymous.org
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
  www.samhsa.gov

For More Information

GEORGIA TECH RESOURCES & SERVICES

Student Life
studentlife.gatech.edu
Counseling Center
counseling.gatech.edu
Collegiate Recovery Program
counseling.gatech.edu/content/487/collegiate-recovery-program-2
Parents Program
parents.gatech.edu
Health & Well-Being
hwb.gatech.edu
Health Initiatives
healthinitiatives.gatech.edu
Stamps Health Services
health.gatech.edu
VOICE: Sexual Violence Prevention and Survivor Support Initiative
voice.gatech.edu
Georgia Tech Police Department
police.gatech.edu
University Alcohol Policy
healthinitiatives.gatech.edu/alcoholeducation/policies
Academic Calendar
registrar.gatech.edu/calendar

COMMUNITY RESOURCES & SERVICES

SAMHSA’s National Helpline (24 Hours)
1-800-662-HELP (4357) or 1-800-487-4889 (TDD)
Alcoholics Anonymous
atlantaaa.org
Narcotics Anonymous
gracna.com