

A holiday prevention gift from parents to kids

'Tis the season for sharing important messages to our young people about alcohol

By Emily Moser

The holiday season is here. With it come gatherings with family and friends. For a segment of parents, these get-togethers are a time to enjoy a glass of wine or other favorite beverage from the bar. For others, imbibing isn't part of the equation.

Whether or not you drink, alcohol often simply plays a larger role at festivities this time of year, kids can end up spending more time around people who drink, and more alcohol tends to be stored in or above refrigerators. This situation is a great springboard to talk with your kids about a range of hugely important issues, such as our decision as parents about whether to drink; family values, rules and expectations around alcohol; what the law says about alcohol use at different ages; and the fact that alcohol affects adults and youth differently.

Given our culture and alcohol, it can be easy for us as parents to dismiss the powerful influence we have on our kids. Bumping up against our messages is a culture flooded with alcohol advertising that promotes the false notion that everyone drinks, with no consequences. But it's important for us to remember that what we tell our kids, and the actions we model, do carry tremendous weight in their eyes. Consider a survey a few years ago by the respected Roper organization, which found that 76 percent of youth ages 8 to 17 said parents were a leading influence in their decision about whether to drink alcohol.

That's a great reason to take a look at the example we're setting with our kids. If you don't drink alcohol, or imbibe only occasionally, explain to your child why. If you enjoy a drink, talk about the importance of moderation in terms of health and safety (a standard drink is one 12-ounce bottle of beer or wine cooler, one 5-ounce glass of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits).

And let your son or daughter see you say "no" to a drink from time to time. Some kids who drink believe the myth that alcohol will make them more comfortable in social situations. A message via your actions that you don't need alcohol to have fun can go a long way toward helping your kids make healthy and responsible choices when they're confronted with opportunities to drink.



Your kids may ask why it's "OK" for you, your adult relatives and friends to drink but not for them or their friends. One important message for them to hear is that it's simply against the law for youth to drink. Share why the legal drinking age is 21; studies show the law has saved lives on the road and prevented injuries, and it has kept countless adolescents and teens from drinking at early ages. Beyond that, talk about the fact that there is no safe level of drinking for adolescents and teens, that we know more today about alcohol's health effects, and that alcohol use by kids can harm their developing brains, which don't fully develop until our mid-20s.

Capitalize on the holiday season to talk about, or reinforce, your family's values around alcohol, and put the conversation into the context of their lives. If your son or daughter plays sports, for example, talk about how drinking would affect their body and undermine their performance. Establish rules, and be specific. For instance, make it a family rule that there's no drinking until age 21, and that your kids should never ride in a car with someone who has had alcohol.

Remember that many kids who drink get alcohol from homes. If you drink, or if you've had a holiday party where alcohol was served, take stock of the alcohol at home and monitor it regularly. Consider it in the same vein as checking your child's Internet activities. It's not a trust issue; it's all about safety. Kids who drink alcohol they find at home can be taking whole bottles, sipping it or mixing it with other beverages.

If an adult friend or relative drinks too much during a party, and your child witnesses the behavior, capitalize on the situation as a teachable moment. Ask your son or daughter how they feel about it. Discuss alcohol's negative short- and long-term effects on the body when consumed to excess, and that intoxication can result in people behaving in ways they wouldn't when sober. If it's appropriate, talk about the fact that some adults use alcohol as an unhealthy way to cope with stress, whether that stress is because of the holidays, economic troubles or other reasons.

Holiday celebrations offer parents valuable opportunities to connect with kids, communicate important information and values, and provide healthy perspectives about alcohol. It's a gift that will stay with them long after we ring in the New Year.

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