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Drinking Age

Tips on how to talk to your teen about the effects of alcohol

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Sixteen-year-old Megan Fraser* from Vancouver says her mom, Karen Fraser*, did a fantastic job of teaching her about drugs and alcohol. "My mom says I was four the first time we talked about them." Karen Fraser says through the years she's answered Megan's questions as thoroughly as she could. "My technique is to give info until her eyes glaze over." Fraser figures she's been pretty exhaustive with the facts, but she hasn't shied away from acknowledging the appeal. "Heck, I enjoy having a drink."

Why no doesn't work

"Alcohol is out there. As parents we can't just tell our kids just to say 'no,' because they are going to experiment," says Dr. David Wolfe, head of Ontario's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health Centre for Prevention Science and author of *What Parents Need to Know About Teens: Facts, Myths and Strategies*. Dr. Wolfe explains it's not enough just to have one talk on the subject. "The discussion needs to change as kids develop." By the time they are teenagers, the primary message needs to be one of safety. "This is the age when kids are becoming more independent and experimenting," says Wolfe. "Our role as parents is to help them navigate the risks associated with alcohol and peer pressure."

Dr. Wolfe suggests that for most families, a first step is to introduce alcohol in the home. "In other cultures this is how it is done. It teaches kids there is nothing magical about alcohol." Wolfe explains that by having the occasional drink, teens have the chance to learn their tolerance slowly and to demystify drinking and social activity. "And as parents we have the chance to see how they are reacting to it—and talk about it, before they are out there pounding it back at parties." Dr. Wolfe says the next step is to encourage kids to delay drinking outside the home for as long as possible.

Teach, don't scare

Fraser says this is the approach she took with Megan. "When I had a party she could have a drink. When she wanted to go out to a party, I told her I needed to speak to the other parents first." Fraser says this worked for a while, but then Megan discovered her dad had a more lenient policy.

Dr. Wolfe says that searching for the loopholes, or even lying to avoid getting into trouble, is mostly pretty typical for teens. "That's what makes these years so dangerous." Parents often see these first rebellious acts as a time to start cranking out the horror stories, but Dr. Wolfe cautions against using scare tactics, saying they only work for kids who wouldn't be out there in the first place. Megan says she never would have believed her mom if she had tried to scare her. "If she says 'don't,' I want to know 'why not?' I want her to educate, not dictate." Instead, Dr. Wolfe suggests you assume drugs and alcohol will be available and focus your talks on being prepared. "Ask them what they'll do. Remind them of the risks."

Peer pressure

Susan Smith* of Delta, B.C., says her 15-year-old daughter Lisa* has been offered alcohol at parties but so far she doesn't appear interested. "She doesn't want to yet and she's surrounded herself with friends who stand up for one another." Smith says that when she was a teen, she didn't have the confidence to say no and she never told her parents about her struggle. "My parents were the type to lecture, not offer advice." Smith says while she encourages Lisa to stick with her own values, she knows peer pressure can be tough to deal with. "I encourage her self-confidence, but I also make sure she knows that it doesn't matter what has happened, or what time it is—if she needs us, mom and dad will be there."

*(*Names have been changed)*

Freelance writer Diane Selkirk hopes that by starting early and being open and honest she can help her daughter Maia navigate the teen years.

3 tips for talking about alcohol

- Make your position clear when it comes to substances like alcohol. Don't assume that your child knows where you stand.
- Approach conversations about alcohol with a sense of curiosity and interest, rather than accusation and fear. Remember that some experimentation is normal—you and your teen need to discuss what that means and where to draw the line.
- Know the facts about alcohol (its effects, the laws regarding underage drinking) that you plan to discuss before talking with your teen.

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