



Supporting Personal Development and Academic Success for Parents/Families:

How to Talk to Your Student about Alcohol and Other Drug Use

UNH is committed to creating a campus environment that supports learning, success, safety and wellbeing. High-risk choices related to alcohol and other drugs can negatively impact students in terms of:

- Academic success
- Health (unintentional injuries, overdoses, illnesses)
- Unsafe sex
- Sexual and physical violence
- Increased risk for suicide and homicides
- Abuse and dependence

All of us can carry misperceptions about alcohol and other drugs and their role in the “college experience”.

The reality is:

- Not everyone is drinking or using drugs
- "Study hard, play hard" doesn't work
- There is more to do at UNH than drink or use drugs
- Most students don't use other drugs and if they choose to drink, they drink in ways that don't negatively affect themselves or others

Research shows that parents and guardians hold significant influence when it comes to their college student's choices around alcohol, nicotine, marijuana and other drug use.

You have the ability and opportunity to shape your student's choices at college by having conversations that are open, informed, direct and ongoing throughout the summer. Students might react negatively when parents or guardians try to open a dialogue about substances if they're feeling: reluctance to hear a lecture, anger about not being trusted, fear of punishment, or dismissive thinking that they already know it all.

You can work to avoid these reactions by communicating that you **care** about your student, that you want to **understand** and **support** them, and that you **respect** them, their privacy, and their desire to be independent.

Here are some other tips to help you get started:

1. **Plan ahead:** A crucial component to productive dialogue is timing. Schedule time when you both are not rushed and are emotionally neutral. Pick a place that allows you to focus on each other and minimizes interruptions, e.g. take a walk together. Don't have a conversation while doing other things such as texting, looking at social media, or watching a movie or TV show.

2. **Check in with yourself:** Talking about alcohol and other drugs with your student can be a challenge based on your own experiences, beliefs, values around this topic. Be aware of these and how they might influence what you say and how you talk about these issues. Try not to romanticize your own experiences with alcohol or other drugs. You may inadvertently encourage risky behavior.
3. **The Approach:** Approach with a sense of curiosity and caring. Begin the conversation by asking open-ended questions, e.g. “I was thinking about you going off to college and wondered if you have given any thought to what you want to do with: your free time? your goals and how choices you make might influence these? how you would handle situations where alcohol or other substances are present?” Be honest about your own discomfort in talking with them about sensitive topics if this is the first time you are engaging in this type of conversation. Assure them that you want to know their thoughts, not what they think you want to hear.
4. **Listen:** Allow your student to speak uninterrupted. Listen to what they’re saying. Paraphrase their sentiments to ensure you are interpreting what they’re sharing and so they know they are being heard.
5. **Respect:** Whenever appropriate, convey respect to your student. Everyone wants to be respected and we are all more likely to open up when there is a dynamic of mutual respect in the relationship. Acknowledge your student’s strengths, efforts and resilience.
6. **Set expectations together:** Don’t be afraid to be specific about what you expect them to do in college (e.g., academic performance, utilizing resources for support, abstain or drink in low risk ways, make responsible choices related to sexual health, nutrition, spending, etc.). Even if they don’t agree, it is important that your student knows where you are coming from. This also opens a conversation about what they expect for themselves so you can work from common goals.
7. **Avoid judgment statements:** Avoid critical statements that shut people down (e.g. “Anyone who drives drunk is crazy;” “No one in this family would ever consider doing that.”). Allow space for a full, judgement-free conversation so you can come to an understanding about why they feel the way they do.
8. **Avoid debate mode:** Notice if one or both parties are starting to become defensive. “You” statements can often cause this, since it tends to make the other person feel attacked (e.g., you always do this, you shouldn’t...). If you sense tension, you can agree to disengage and come back to the conversation at another time. Or you can try to shift your approach by asking questions. Be prepared for answers you may not feel comfortable with, and respond with more questions (e.g., tell me more about that, how did you come to know that, where did you learn that, why is that important to you?)
9. **Allow Your Student to Learn from Experience:** Part of growing into adulthood is making choices, making mistakes, and being accountable for the outcomes of our actions. Painful consequences can be powerful motivators for behavior change and for making more informed choices in the future.
10. **Keep the Conversation Going:** Once your student comes to UNH, keep the conversation going. Stay in touch, keep talking and asking questions, listen to their successes and struggles, reinforce positive choices and behaviors, share any concerns, and encourage them to access campus resources as needed.

If you are concerned about your student and are not sure how to best assist them, you can contact us at (603) 862-9355.

Source: Turrisi, R. (2010). [*A Parent Handbook for Talking with College Students about Alcohol: A compilation of information from parents, students, and the scientific community.*](#) Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University.