

BEGINNING A DIALOGUE

The first step in effective communication is getting started. Research suggests opening lines that convey open-mindedness tend to result in less defensiveness.

Here are some possible options:

- “I know that some kids are drinking more now. Since this is becoming more common, is it okay if we talk a little about it?”
- “Do you know kids who drink? Maybe you can tell me about how you think it has affected them? How you think it might affect them later on?”
- “Do you think there are times when it is okay for teens to drink alcohol? If yes, why is that? If not, what might you say if someone asked you to drink?”

Ask questions, don't lecture!

Most teens have heard a version of a comment like “it is terrible when kids drink” from other adults. They might even come to expect that they will hear a lecture when you bring up the topic. If your teen is concerned about being lectured, a good response is, “I can see how you might think that. Things will be different because this conversation is important. I promise.” Then keep your promise.

Reacting to what you hear

It is important to not get angry if you hear things you do not like. Here are some ways that parents respond when they are angry. Do any describe you?

- **The Outburst**—The person feeling anger responds with a highly charged emotional response followed by an attempt to be forgiven.
- **The Silent Treatment**—The angry person turns cold and punishes by using silence and rejection.
- **Bringing up the Past**—The angry person brings up past events that were hurtful and directs attention away from the current issue.
- **Social Aggression**—The angry person never expresses the anger directly, but rather makes hurtful comments or remarks, but when asked if something is wrong the response is “nothing”.
- **Collecting Social Allies**—The angry person attempts to get others to take sides and join the conflict.

Take a Break!

If you are met with resistance don't force the issue. You might say, “Why don't you think about it for a while and we can talk again in a couple of days.”

Although some resistance is likely and quite normal, when parents express concern and caring as the basis for their discussions with their teens about important topics, teens tend to be more open and responsive.

Improving Relationships

A positive relationship helps communication. Here are some practical ways to promote a good relationship with your teen.

- **Keep in Touch**—Make a point to take time out to share your thoughts.
- **Show Courtesy**—Small things like saying “please” and “thank you” are nice ways of showing you care. Your teen will respond better if he or she feels respected, cared for, and valued.
- **Be Thoughtful**—A note, a small gift, or helping with something will let your teen know you care.
- **Avoid Excessive Teasing**—Teasing can be hurtful when it results in someone being put down or insulted.
- **Give Support**—If your teen has a bad day give a shoulder to lean on. Even though your teen is growing up, your support is still needed.
- **Be Flexible**—Be open to change and trying new things in your relationship with your teen. Taking interest in your teen's activities may go a long way.

Quality relationships consist of:

- **Respect**
- **Empathy and understanding**
- **Mutual trust**
- **Concern**
- **Knowledge**

Communication Pointers

- Listen — Permit your teen to speak without interruption.
- Agree to disengage — This is good if either person becomes too emotional or angry with the conversation.
- Communicate directly — Don't multi-task when talking about important things with your teen.
- Admit your errors — Be willing to admit you are wrong and apologize.
- Use open-ended questions — Don't turn a conversation into a lecture. Ask your teen what he or she thinks instead.
- Appeal to common goals — Focus on the things you have in common instead of differences.
- Avoid communication stoppers — It is better to avoid highly judgmental statements such as "anyone who drinks is stupid" or "nobody in their right mind would drink and drive."
- Be honest— teens appreciate honesty just as you appreciate honesty from them.

Closing Thoughts

Some conflict is natural. However, there is no value in having conversations turn into mini-debates.

Communication is most effective when it is based on mutual respect and understanding.

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Selected References

Boyle, J. R., & Boekeloo, B., O. (2009). The association between parent communication and college freshmen's alcohol use. *Journal of Drug Education*, **39**: 113-131.

Turrisi, R., & Ray, A. E. (2010). Sustained parenting and college drinking in first-year students. *Developmental Psychobiology*, **52**: 286-294.

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