



How to answer (and ask) the tough questions

Research shows that small talks about underage drinking can make a big difference in a kid's choices. Once the conversations start flowing, though, you may get hit with some tough questions. The good news? That's okay. In fact, it's a sign you're on the right track.

You'll feel more confident if you take a little time to prepare. Start by checking out the common questions children ask about alcohol and underage drinking. To help, we've included advice and responses from real experts, along with a few questions parents can ask to help get small talks started.

When Kids Ask What Drinking Is and Does

“What happens when adults drink alcohol?”

How you answer may depend on your child's age, but try to keep it simple. Say something like: “Alcohol is a chemical in certain drinks, like beer and wine. Adults can drink a little bit if they want, but when they drink too much, alcohol can make them sick, dizzy, nauseous, blurry-eyed, and have headaches. It's called ‘getting drunk.’” You can also add: “Sometimes people who drink too much laugh a lot or look like they're having a good time, but really, they may be having a hard time thinking clearly. Adults who drink too much often act in ways they normally wouldn't, sometimes make dangerous or unsafe choices, or get so sick they end up in the hospital or pass away. Drinking can hurt our bodies in lasting ways, even if we don't get sick right away.”

“Why do people get drunk?”

People who drink alcohol aren't “bad.” That's why it's important to be compassionate when you explain why some people become intoxicated. Try saying: “There are lots of reasons. Sometimes adults don't mean to get drunk, but they aren't careful when they're drinking, and they have too much. Others get drunk because they think it's the only way they can relax or have fun.” Mental health is an important topic to discuss with kids, too. “Some people are sad, lonely, or overwhelmed, and think getting drunk will help them forget about their problems. Unfortunately, it just gives them more problems and makes them feel sick. Another reason is that some people have a disease called alcohol use disorder that they need help treating.”

“What does ‘addicted’ mean?”

Start with a simple definition. “Addiction is a disease where a person wants something so badly that they can't stop having it — even if that thing is bad for them.” If it feels right, you can go on to describe what may happen as a result of a person's alcohol addiction. “People who are addicted to alcohol often get drunk almost every day. Their relationships with friends or family may suffer, they may stop taking care of themselves, and they may even lose their jobs. Addiction can affect nearly every part of a person's life. Most people who are addicted to alcohol need help from doctors or other professionals to get healthy again.”



When Kids Ask Why Drinking is Not a Good Choice for Kids

“Why do I need to wait until I’m 21 to drink?”

It’s important to be calm and factual to avoid scaring your child. Saying things like, “You couldn’t handle it,” may also be interpreted as a challenge. You can start by sharing that there are several reasons why people under the age of 21 should not drink — then decide how many of these you’d like to talk about during any one conversation.

- “Drinking before you’re 21 is against the law.”
- “Because your brain is still developing, drinking can change the way your brain works now and into the future.”
- “Your body is also still growing, so alcohol would have a much greater effect on your health.”
- “Young people who drink are more likely to become depressed or have anxiety.”
- “Kids who try alcohol before they turn 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol use disorder.”
- “Alcohol affects your ability to make good choices.”

“If alcohol is bad, why do you drink?”

After explaining that drinking can be dangerous, it makes sense that your child would question why anyone would want to drink. It’s important to make the distinction that it is always harmful when children drink, but it is not always

harmful for adults when they drink in moderation. You can explain the idea of moderation this way: *“One drink at dinner can be a nice treat for a grownup, just like one piece of cake is for you. But I’m careful not to drink too much.”* You may also share the reasons why you drink — such as to enhance a meal or celebrate a special occasion — and talk about how you make sure to never drink, then drive.

“Did you drink when you were a kid?”

Don’t let your past stop you from talking to your child about underage drinking. If you drank as a teenager, be honest. Acknowledge that it was risky. Make sure to emphasize that we now know even more about the risks to children who drink underage. Consider telling your children relatable stories about making smart decisions when it comes to alcohol. These could be stories that show the consequences of engaging in risky behavior.

“Why do you keep bringing up drinking? It’s not like I’m doing it.”

You can be honest and say: *“I love you and it’s my job to help you stay healthy. Friends and other kids will try alcohol, so it’s natural for you to be curious about it. I’m here to answer any questions you have, and even brainstorm what you can say to your friends, but it’s important to me that you don’t drink. It’s bad for you in so many ways. You can also add: I want to make sure you’re safe. Never hesitate to call me if you or one of your friends is in trouble. No questions asked. I will be there if you need me.”*

When Kids Ask About Setting Boundaries and Saying No

“I got invited to a party. Can I go?”

Ask your child if an adult will be present at the party or if they think kids will be drinking. Remind your child that even being at a party where there is underage drinking can get them into trouble. Give them a chance to practice their “No thanks!” responses, in case they’re offered alcohol. Let them know that they can text you a code word if they need to be picked up right away.

“What if my friends ask me to drink?”

Helping your child learn how to say “no” to peer pressure is one of the most important things you can do to help them stay alcohol-free. You can’t always prevent your child from being offered alcohol, but you can help them be prepared if it occurs. Brainstorm different ways they’re comfortable saying “No thanks!,” then have practice conversations with your child. Possible responses include:

- “No, thanks! I’m the designated driver.”
- “Thanks, but I want to keep a clear head tonight.”
- “That’s okay, I don’t drink.”
- “No, thanks. I have a game tomorrow.”
- “Nothing for me. I don’t want to get kicked off the team.”
- “I can’t. I’m allergic to alcohol.”
- “No, thanks! I have to get up early tomorrow.”
- “Thanks, but I don’t feel well.”
- “No way. My parents would ground me forever if they found out — and they always do.”

“I’m bored. What else is there to do?”

Make sure your child has other opportunities for extreme fun, whether it be physical activities like skateboarding or rock climbing, or artistic pursuits like acting.



Questions you can ask your child

If your child isn’t asking many questions, you can help them by starting the conversation with a question or two of your own. Remember, there are no wrong answers — the key is to listen, learn their point of view, and help guide them in the right direction.

- “Why do you think it’s illegal for kids under the age of 21 to drink alcohol?”
- “What would you do if you were in a car and the driver had been drinking?”
- “When do you think someone is ready to try alcohol?”
- “Why do you think kids try alcohol?”
- “What happens at parties you go to?”
- “Have you ever been offered a drink?”
- “What could you say if you were offered a drink and you didn’t want to look foolish?”
- “What could you do at a party if you were feeling nervous, besides drinking?”
- “What would you do if you were at a party and someone passed out from drinking?”
- “Have you ever thought that I drank too much? What about other adults?”
- “Are you at all worried about becoming addicted to alcohol or drugs?”