

Sussex County Coalition for Healthy & Safe Families
A program of the Center for Prevention and Counseling
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Dear Sussex County Parents:

Children are growing up in a world very different from the one of our youth. Opportunities for learning and excitement have increased, yet so have the potential dangers. From a very early age, children face daily decisions and challenges regarding the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

As your elementary, middle or high school age child is trying on new clothes, new friends and new behaviors, could alcohol be involved with these changes? Nearly 10.5 million youth between the ages of 12-20 are underage drinkers; and the average age of first use keeps dropping. Here in Sussex County a recent survey indicated that 48% of 8th graders have used alcohol and that number almost doubles to 88% for 12th graders.

Some good news! Parents are the most powerful influence on their children's behavior. Believe it or not, teens still listen to their parents, In fact, kids usually listen to their parents more than anybody else, including their friends. In a recent survey on underage drinking, teens reported that parental disapproval is the #1 reason they chose not to drink! As someone who cares for and about a child, you are in a position of tremendous influence. What you do and say every day can affect your child's attitude about underage drinking.

By providing a clear and consistent message that underage alcohol use is unacceptable and by keeping lines of communication open, it is more likely that your child will continue to look to you for advice on this and other serious issues in the future. Whether you drink alcohol or not, you can take steps to lessen the likelihood that your child will engage in underage drinking:

- Make sure there are clear rules and consequences about family rules regarding the use of alcohol and talk about them frequently.
- Make it clear that alcohol use before the age of 21 is unacceptable and against the law. Explain that alcohol use has many negative effects on drinkers of different ages, but that its effects on the developing brain and body of a person under 21 are especially harmful.
- Monitor alcohol kept in your home.
- Consider not serving alcohol to other adults at child-focused events, such as a graduation or birthday party.
- Think carefully about what to tell children if they ask whether you used alcohol as a teen. Be clear in explaining why underage drinking was not a good idea then and is not a good idea now.
- If you or a family member is in recovery, now is the time to talk with your child about the disease of alcoholism. You need to explain that your child may be more vulnerable to developing a drinking problem if he or she chooses to drink when older.

Parents need to communicate to youth that underage drinking is against the law; that using alcohol is risky; and that lots of smart, cool people choose not to drink alcohol. Help them think... and choose not to drink. Ask children, "When alcohol comes your way, what will you say?" If they aren't sure, prepare them by helping them learn a few simple refusal skills.

Underage drinking is a problem shared by the entire community. Everyone must take the responsibility to send a strong no-use message. By working together, we can reduce the "acceptance" of underage drinking and improve the future of our children.

Sincerely,

Members of the Sussex County Coalition for Healthy & Safe Families
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