

Talking to Kids About Alcohol and Drugs

Strategies to help teenagers make good decisions

*Helping teenagers make good decisions about **drinking and drugs** can be a huge challenge for parents—especially for those who are uncomfortable about setting limits that they distinctly remember violating in their own teenage years. But in an environment where alcohol and pot are ubiquitous, research shows that **clear parental direction helps kids reel in substance use and dangerous behavior**. The Freedom Institute in New York runs workshops for parents and kids struggling with these issues. Caroline Miller of the Child Mind Institute sat down with four experts — **Donna Wick, Katherine Prudente, Tessa Kleeman and Kathryn Crosby** — who've collectively listened to many, many parents and teenagers, to see what wisdom they've gleaned and what strategies they recommend.*

CAROLINE MILLER: What do you hear most from parents, in terms of what they're worried about?

TESSA KLEEMAN: The first thing that comes to my mind is the difficulties that parents have with limit-setting, and that they are often looking for reassurance or permission, for someone else to tell them that yes, indeed, setting limits is something that they can do and should do—whether it's setting a curfew time, or saying no to a party that is not going to be supervised, or laying out expectations that there be no drinking until they're 21.

MILLER: You think it's a mistake for parents to acknowledge that they expect kids will experiment?

KLEEMAN: Talking about “experimentation” tends to be a very slippery slope. Parents have one idea about what it means, and kids have another idea about what it means. And some kids who get the idea that experimentation is okay will rationalize *any* kind of drinking that they’re doing as experimentation.

MILLER: The word means something different to parents and kids?

KLEEMAN: When parents use it, I think they often rationalize: “They’re just going to *try* alcohol, or maybe they’re going to get drunk once, or maybe they’ll even try *marijuana*.” But teens can use it as a catch-all phrase for partying—regularly drinking to get drunk, regularly using marijuana. Research shows that if parents express expectations for experimentation, their kids will use, and the continuum of use tends to be more dramatic than kids whose parents lay out expectations for no experimentation.

MILLER: So, the law aside, why is drinking so problematic for teens?

KATHERINE PRUDENTE: We’re trying to help parents understand that their children’s brains are not fully formed until they’re in their mid-twenties. So if adolescents use alcohol, they are much more likely to feel the adverse effects, and they get drunker on less alcohol, and much quicker. Parents forget that their kids’ bodies are not like theirs, even though they may look like similar, because they’re growing up fast. Parents may be able to exercise moderation while their children may not be able to yet. Parents and kids are starting to understand there is some biological basis for why drinking is postponed until 21.

MILLER: Are parents worried that they’ll stunt their kids’ social lives if they’re strict about drinking?

KATHRYN CROSBY: We hear from parents, “I don’t want my child to go to college and suddenly be faced with a keg party and not know what to do”—or, you could even say, not be popular, not fit in, not have the social skills that should be developed in upper school. So it’s kind of this subtle message of, “I want my child to be popular. I want my child to be able to go to a party. I want my child to experiment, perhaps, like I experimented at that age”—again, [with the misperception of what really is going on](#), when there’s [binge drinking](#), or pre-gaming, or five shots, not one beer. It’s quite different now.

MILLER: Is there social pressure on parents to go along with the drinking?

KLEEMAN: There’s actually peer pressure among parents. One of the things that I’ve observed at some schools is that parents are even reticent to say that they don’t want their child to drink, because they feel that it might make them unpopular with other parents. Because then it shifts the expectations for the community. If there are people who are vocal about not wanting alcohol to be served, and they make everyone accountable for that, it can be very tricky territory for people to enter.

MILLER: Other parents don’t appreciate being told about their kid’s drinking?

KLEEMAN: Many parents say, “I would really want anybody to call me, if you thought my child was doing something harmful.” But it’s exactly the opposite when that actually has transpired. I think people are usually caught off-guard, blindsided, and embarrassed, and don’t know what to do with the information. It may have a positive impact down the line, but the bearer of the bad news doesn’t necessarily get the positive feedback. There may be a defensive reaction: “Well, lots of kids are drinking. Why are you singling me out?”

CROSBY: I think some of it is that it puts the parents of the drinkers in uncharted territory. They now are confronted with the fact that they need to do something, and they don't know what to do. I also think that it speaks, to some extent, to what an incredibly competitive environment most of these kids and parents live in. They don't want their kid to look bad.

MILLER: If a parent isn't comfortable saying no to any experimentation, is there a limit that you think works, short of abstinence?

KLEEMAN: We would say that the way to talk to teenagers about this is to be very black and white. Keep that leash really short. When it comes to [substance abuse](#), you don't want to give them any room, or any permission, to be out drinking with their underage friends. Even if you suspect that it may happen, you want to give the message that you don't expect it.

DONNA WICK: You want to voice the expectation that they won't drink, but you also want them to call you if they end up in a bad situation. This is a really tricky line for parents to tread. We find it helps if you express something along the lines of, "You know that we do not want you to drink, and we expect that you will make good decisions. But if anything happens that you are uncomfortable with, please, please, call us. We will help you, and it's much more important that you ask for help than that you may have made a stupid decision."

MILLER: What's an appropriate consequence for breaking the rules on this?

KLEEMAN: It's best to let the [consequences](#) come out of the experience itself, and be directly related to it. Because the issue is kids being able to handle being out with their peers in a sober way, most often, parents settle on some kind of

grounding. But we do encourage parents to wait, and make that decision on a case-by-case basis.

WICK: Some parents have an amnesty policy (I do with my children), where if you have the good judgment to call for help, you are not punished for the actual drinking. Every parent has to make their own decision on this, but I've generally found it be successful, because it emphasizes the relationship, rather than the behavior. Kids respond to this, and take away the impression that their parents are reasonable people who care, first and foremost, about their safety.

MILLER: Do you think that parents are reluctant to set limits because they don't want their kids to lie to them?

KLEEMAN: Yeah, I think that's very often a rationalization, or a fear, that parents have.

WICK: I remember my daughter saying that to me. She was in ninth or tenth grade, I think. I knew she was going out with a bunch of friends on a Saturday night, and I said, "No drinking." And she looked at me and she said, "Mom, **don't make me lie to you.**" It was one of those moments. I was like, "What do I say? What do I say?" I think if you give them the expectation that you expect them not to drink, that is better. Are they going to always be truthful with you? No. But you've at least established guidelines.

KLEEMAN: Along those lines, one of the other primary points that we share with parents is not to talk about their own past use, as a parent. It's a rule of thumb to really think twice if your child is asking you a direct question about your own use, because it's almost guaranteed that any question they're asking you is really about them, and the choices that they are facing.

MILLER: What do you tell them to say?

KLEEMAN: We suggest that parents really let their children know that whatever happened in the past in the parents' lives probably has very little relevance to this particular time and place. "So much has changed, and what we're really interested in is making sure that you're safe and sound. And one of the ways I want to make sure that's the case is by expecting you not to drink." It's a chance to reiterate the rules. And certainly to [give them lots of room to talk about it](#), about what they're being exposed to.

MILLER: Parents are nervous about these conversations. What about kids?

PRUDENTE: I've been meeting a lot of upper school students in the past month or so, and I've been asking them, "Would you all want to know where your parents stand on alcohol and drugs, or would you not want to know it?" Every kid, even the kids who have admitted using, says, "I'd rather know where my parents stand." And they do want to know. I ask them, "Do your parents influence the choices you make?" And I remember this one student said, "Yeah, I know that my dad would get really mad at me if I came home drunk. So I really have to think twice, if I'm at a party: Do I pretend, or do I just not drink?" Some kids say, "I know my parent doesn't want me to drink, so I'll go somewhere else." That's the minority. But every single kid, in the five schools I went to, said, "I'd rather know." I mean, not one kid said "I don't want to know, because if I know, I'll feel bad." And it was great to hear that."

CROSBY: It's very hard—and I've been through this myself, as a parent—it's very hard to sort of own your parental authority. And you also have this deep desire to be straight with your kids. And it's so easy to get mixed up. But increasingly, I believe that kids want parents to be parents.

PRUDENTE: Even the most rebellious child.

CROSBY: Probably *particularly* the most rebellious child. They really want you to be a parent. And, you know, that doesn't necessarily always mean being completely straight with them.

KLEEMAN: That's right. Each of us, I think, has an experience of a teenager telling us, "Well, when my mother told me that she smoked pot, I was horrified! I didn't really want that image in my head, of my mom getting high."

MILLER: That's an interesting phrase, "I don't want to have that image in my head."

PRUDENTE: They idealize parents so much.

KLEEMAN: And you want the authority in your life to be a certain way.

Donna Wick is the executive director of the Freedom Institute, the mother of three daughters, and a psychologist who works extensively with parents. Katherine Prudente does substance abuse prevention educational workshops in the schools for adolescents, faculty and parents—she has done over 2000 workshops in over fifty schools. Tessa Kleeman is a substance abuse counselor at the Dalton School, and supervises the Freedom Institute School Program. Kathryn Crosby is a parent, a substance abuse counselor at the Chapin School, and the School Program coordinator.