

The drinking messages we send our young people (and how to send the right ones)

By Gisela Rots

In previous months, I've talked a lot about how important it is for young people to have adults to look up to, to have role models and to have adults in their lives they can talk to.

This month, I'd like to give you some pointers on the (inadvertent) messages we may be sending our youth at parties, and in our drinking habits. I'm not going to ask you to not drink during the upcoming holiday season, but to simply drink responsibly.

Think about the last party you went to. Were there young people there? Was there alcohol there? Were the young people able to get to the alcohol easily? Were they able to get to it at all? Were the adults drinking? And if so, how much?

These are key questions to think about when planning a party, holiday celebration or even following a family tradition. These are some of the situations in which parents might drink in front of their kids. The key in each case is to lead by good example – give your children a good example to follow when they grow up. Kids watch everything adults do, and whether we like it or not, parents still have more influence over their children's actions than anyone or anything else.

Keeping the alcohol completely away from young people, or not having young people at a party where alcohol is served, is your best insurance policy to prevent young people from getting alcohol.

Having alcohol at a party, where young people are present, however, is not illegal. Allowing them to drink, is. It is how the adults handle the alcohol that is important. If alcohol is the focus of the party, kids might get the wrong impression. If it is simply a part of the party, like the Swedish meatballs are, then young people might gather that it is an acceptable, normal part of being an adult.

The other thing to think about, however, is where the alcohol is. Are the kids' drinks mixed in with the alcoholic ones? In other words, among the apple juice and soda, are there bottles of wine and beer – are they in the same cooler or on the same table? Or are the wine and beer on their own table, away from the drinks for the younger partiers? Separating the 2 kinds of drinks is important to make sure young people understand there is a difference. Not only does this send young people the message that they 2 kinds of drinks are not the same, but it also makes it easier for the adults to see when a young person tries to help themselves to an alcoholic drink.

Of course there is no substitute for the adults drinking responsibly, and not getting drunk or trashed, especially when the young people are present.

And if the party isn't in your own home, remember to have someone be the designated driver and abstain from drinking altogether. Not ever drinking and driving is again leading by good example – sending the message that it is absolutely *not* ok for adults to drink and drive, no matter what the situation.

Remember also that there are other situations in which your children may see adults, besides yourself, drinking. Talking about drinking norms in other cultures is important as well – some traditions allow young people to drink under certain circumstances, but set the rules straight with your children – drinking is simply *not* acceptable when a person is under 21.

Robin Goodman, a clinical psychologist, has some good tips on drinking in front of your kids:

1. First, set a good example. Don't get drunk in front of your kids – this gives them mixed messages about drinking. If you drink responsibly in front of them, that gives them a good role model for when they are old enough to drink.

2. Be aware of when you say you 'need' a drink. If you come home every day and say you 'need' a drink you're telling your child that it is ok to use alcohol as a coping mechanism. And don't place too much emphasis on drinking.
3. Never ever drink and drive.

It is also important to remember to have a conversation with your kids about why it is ok for you to drink, and not for them. Simply, they are not allowed to drink until they are 21, that is the law. You are over 21, so you are allowed to, as long as you do it responsibly. Dr. Lonnie Carlton recommends comparing it to movies that have age limits – if you are 15, you aren't allowed to go to a Rated R movie either, or to vote until you are 18.

Ensuring that your children understand the differences, and putting the need for them to understand that before your own, reinforces the message that they are also important to you. And whatever you do, keep the message consistent – the law is no drinking until you're 21. Let's lead our youth by good example, be consistent and show them that even adults can have a great time without getting drunk.

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