

THE FACT IS

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Hispanic Parents Can Help Their Children Avoid Alcohol and Other Drug Problems

As a Hispanic parent, you want the best for your children. You know that many American children are in trouble from alcohol and other drug use, and you want to keep your own children from such harm. We do not know how many Hispanic children and teens use alcohol. Based on what we do know, you are wise to be concerned. As a Hispanic parent, you can take actions to help protect your children from alcohol and other drug problems.

The Problem Among Hispanic Youth

Studies show that many U.S. children start to use alcohol at very early ages (1,2). Alcohol is called a "gateway" drug, because nearly all youth who use marijuana or other drugs started first with alcohol. The child who does not drink is not likely to move on to other drugs. We know that:

- 8.4 percent of U.S. children start to use alcohol as early as the sixth grade (1).
- By age 18, about 53 percent of Cuban-American youth, 46 percent of Puerto Rican youth, and 50 percent of Mexican-American youth have used alcohol, according to researcher Hortensia Amaro, Ph.D., of Boston University (Hispanic Health and Nutrition Examination Survey data (H-HANES)).
- In New York City's Hispanic communities, school counselors and teachers note a trend for children aged 10-12 to come to school high on wine coolers, beer, and wine, according to Priscilla Chavez-Relley, director of guidance services for the city's elementary and junior high schools.

- Children who drink at young ages also seem to begin sexual activity early and to show other kinds of problem behavior, such as poor school performance, truancy, and drug use (3).

Prevention At Home: A Long-Term Process

Alcohol problems can run in families. Children may inherit a physical vulnerability or they may learn to drink the way their parents drink at home (4,5). From recent research (6,7), it appears that "alcohol use may be heavier among adult Hispanics than among non-Hispanic whites, and Hispanics may also tend to be accepting of alcohol use and even excessive use," according to Jane L. Delgado, president of the National Coalition of Hispanic Health and Human Services Organizations (COSSMHO). Since, as Delgado points out, "children learn by watching their parents, inappropriate alcohol use by parents in the home can send the message to children that it's all right for them to drink even though their parents may have told them not to."

For parents who choose to drink as well as those who do not, there are ways to help children understand that alcohol should not be used until later in life. Carlos Garcia, executive director of the East Los Angeles Alcoholism Council, stresses that "one important point must be remembered—you can't help children to refuse alcohol and other drugs by simply sitting down with them and telling them it is forbidden to use alcohol or other drugs. Rather, drug and alcohol abuse prevention is a long-term process which should begin at as early an age as possible." Parents can help their children in the following ways:

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1. Make family communications as open and trusting as possible. Let your children know that they can talk to you about even the hardest of subjects: drugs, sex, death, and the like. Felipe Castro, a UCLA research psychologist, advises that "As time passes, you will find that this openness enriches your relationship. It also allows you the chance to influence your child in a positive and non-demeaning way."

2. Build on the great pride in family and the loving support from extended family members that is part of the Hispanic tradition. Let your tios and tias, as well as primos, primas, and abuelos, share in the learning and joys of raising your children. Felipe Castro suggests that one of the most valuable actions you can take is to "tell these people how important they are in raising your children and let them know they can have a beneficial influence on your children's lives."

3. Help your child to be proud of his or her Hispanic culture and of your family's values and traditions. When it comes to alcohol and other drugs, make clear family policies that help your child to say "no." It's helpful when parents spell out specific family rules against alcohol use by minors and what will happen if children break these rules. Parents then need to follow through consistently, so children know there will be consequences from their actions.

Family Communications: A Key to Prevention

A family environment in which parents and children are able to communicate with each other helps to protect the child against early alcohol use. According to Felipe Castro, when there is poor communication, children may rebel and associate with peers who use alcohol and other drugs. Parents can do a lot to keep communications open by how they answer questions and how they listen.

Dealing with questions. Children need to feel that it is OK to talk with their parents about alcohol and other drugs. How you answer a young child's questions can help determine whether the child seeks your advice later. For example, you might answer your child in very different ways when asked why people drink alcohol or take other drugs:

- You could ignore the question, but give a stern lecture about what you will do if he or she tries alcohol or other drugs. This will likely stop communication on the topic.
- You could turn the question back to the child, asking why he or she thinks people use alcohol and what he or she thinks of these reasons. This response may prompt your child to think, and it shows that the two of you can talk about this issue openly, calmly, and without fear of your anger.

With this second example, you will be setting up a family climate in which children feel free to talk about what is bothering them. In this climate, the child will feel that you are not simply a maker of rules, but a parent who values his or her opinion and will help in sorting through the issues in the child's life.

Listening to your children. A skill called "active listening" can be used by parents to help their children say "no" to alcohol and other drugs. When children speak, listen—truly listen. Before telling them what you think, make sure that they have had a chance to fully state their feelings. For example, here are two ways you could respond if your child mentions that a good friend's father drinks a lot:

- You could say, "Stay away from there when he is drinking!" This gives direction but does not encourage your child to think about the issue.
- You could repeat the child's statement and ask her or him to be more clear: "What do you mean by 'he drinks a lot'?" This allows the child to discuss drinking and how the friend feels about it, and may lead to an in-depth talk about alcohol and the pain it can cause families.

Helping your child feel valued. Many children use alcohol and other drugs because they feel bad about themselves. Some experts believe that if a child finds things he or she can do well—and that other people value—that child will be less likely to have alcohol or other drug problems (8). Success can be at school, in the community, in the neighborhood; it can be a way with children, a knack with machinery, an ability in

mathematics. As a parent, you can help your child find the things he or she does well. Self-regard is also enhanced when parents praise efforts, as well as accomplishments, and when they correct by criticizing the action and not the child.

What Your Children Need To Know

Your child needs to know how you feel about drinking by young people. Children also need to know the reasons why parents feel the way they do. As a parent, you may want to learn more about young people and alcohol. For a quick list, here are some key reasons for young people to avoid drinking:

- Alcohol use can interfere with a teenager's normal development and social growth (9); teenagers who become dependent on alcohol often miss out on the normal emotional growth occurring at this stage of their lives (10).
- Alcohol use can interfere with learning the skills needed for a job, whether in classes at school or in vocational training (10,11).
- Alcohol can affect a child's brain and muscles much more quickly and powerfully than an adult's (12), so young people who are drinking don't do as well at sports or any activity where fast, clear thinking is needed.
- Alcohol affects coordination and judgment (12), which is why drinking is a factor in a high percentage of fatal automobile accidents with a teenage driver (13).
- Alcohol is also involved in a high percentage of teenage suicides and accidental deaths, such as drowning (14,15).
- Alcohol can make a teenager less inhibited, sometimes leading to unintended sexual activity.
- Alcohol can cause coma and death if young people drink large amounts in a short period of time.

Influences Outside The Family

Young people in our society hear messages about drinking from all sides--on television, on the radio, and from their friends. Parents cannot be expected to carry the burden alone. Schools, media, and other institutions need to repeat the message that "saying no" is the wisest thing to do.

The truth is that your children will get pressure to drink from many directions. Here are some suggestions for dealing with two major influences--the media and peers.

- *Media*--Drinking and other drug use appear daily in the popular shows on television. These make good starting points for talking to your child, such as "Did you see how that character was drinking to escape his problems? Is this a good idea? Did it help solve the problem?"
- *Peer Pressure*--Your children may be pushed by their friends to try alcohol or other drugs. Children who are raised to be kind and loving may find it very hard to say "no" to friends. This problem begins to show up quite early; parents need to help such children know when and how to stick up for themselves and to practice saying "no."

Where To Find Helpful Information

Several sources are available that provide good information on alcohol and other drugs for Spanish-speaking groups. The Office for Substance Abuse Prevention is now developing materials for children and parents in a Hispanic "Be Smart! Don't Start!" national prevention campaign. This campaign, supported by more than 35 national organizations such as the PTA, includes a video and materials featuring the rock music group, The Jets. The Hispanic campaign has been endorsed by such Hispanic celebrities as Edward James Olmos, star of TV's *Miami Vice* and the motion picture, *Stand and Deliver*, and by Gloria Estefan, lead singer of the Miami Sound Machine.

The "Be Smart! Don't Start!" and other bilingual materials can be ordered from the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, P.O. Box 2345, Rockville, Maryland 20852.

The national PTA offers a brochure for parents in Spanish called, "Young Children and Drugs: What Parents Can Do" and a brochure in English only, "Teens, Alcohol and Drugs: What Parents Can Do." Order from: National PTA, 700 N. Rush St., Chicago, Illinois 60611-2571.

If there is an alcohol- or other drug-abusing parent in your family, you and your children can be helped by the self-support groups Al-Anon and Alateen. Your area may have Spanish-speaking Al-Anon and Alateen groups. If not, materials in Spanish are available at low cost from Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, P.O. Box 862, Midtown Station, New York, New York 10018-0862.

COSSMHO--The National Coalition of Hispanic Health and Human Services Organizations operates several alcohol prevention programs aimed at Hispanic youth and families. For more information, including activities in local communities, write to COSSMHO's Early Intervention Program, 1030 15th St., NW, Suite 1053, Washington, DC 20005, or call (202) 371-2100, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The Minority Health Resource Center, operated by the Office of Minority Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, can provide information on other materials aimed at Hispanic youth and families. The Center also has listings of prevention programs operating at the local level. Call the Center (at no cost) 1-800-444-6472.

There are other ways to find information and help in your community. Pastors and other church officials often can make referrals; health care providers also are good sources. City and county governments in most areas operate alcohol prevention or treatment programs.

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