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From: The Science Inside Alcohol Project of AAAS
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This Holiday Season Teach Your Kids the Science of How Drinking Alcohol Can Hurt Them

As adolescents get ready to attend holiday parties, it's time for parents to have "The Talk" with them about why they shouldn't drink alcohol. Telling teens not to drink doesn't usually work. They are constantly exercising their independence and individuality, and peer pressure is fierce. If their friends are drinking alcohol, chances are your teens will be too.

This year "The Talk" is more important than ever. Recent research shows most parents don't know how much or how often their teens drink. Fourteen year-olds are almost three times more likely than 13 year-olds to attend parties where there is drinking and parents are present, according to The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University.

It's time to try a new approach. The Science Inside Alcohol Project, an alcohol education effort from the American Association for the Advancement of Science, suggests teaching kids the scientific evidence behind why they shouldn't drink. Here are five questions parents can ask and answer for their kids to explain alcohol's dangers.

- 1) Are kids who begin drinking before the age of 21 more likely to become alcoholics?

Yes. Almost half of all kids who begin drinking at age 14 or younger become alcohol dependent at some point in their lives.

- 2) What are three important body organs that alcohol can harm?

Your liver: Alcohol can harm the liver's ability to remove poisons, germs and bacteria from blood as well as produce immune agents to control infection. You cannot live without a functioning liver.

Your brain: Kids' brains are not fully developed, particularly the part that stores memory. So when kids have 2-3 drinks, they are less likely to remember things that happen to them.

Your heart: Alcohol reduces blood flow to heart muscles causing weakness and deterioration.

- 3) Can drinking alcohol hurt your performance in sports?

Yes. A recent report from ESPN suggests that drinking after a practice or a game can impair your ability to play sports for up to 14 hours. Some of the effects are slowed reaction time, problems with balance and steadiness, dehydration, and a decline in fine and complex motor skills.

- 4) Can drinking alcohol make you gain weight?

Alcohol is classified as a food not a drink because it contains calories. The average alcoholic drink has about the same amount of calories as a large baked potato but it has no nutritional value. Drinking alcohol regularly can make you heavier.

- 5) Can drinking coffee or other stimulant drinks help sober you up enough to drive?

No. Caffeine is a stimulant and it can wake you up, but it does not counteract the effects of alcohol on making smart decisions or controlling a car. Don't be fooled by people who are "wide-awake drunks."

"Most adolescents don't really understand how alcohol affects their bodies," says Shirley Malcom, head of the Education & Resources Directorate at AAAS. "Teaching them the science behind the damage drinking alcohol causes will hopefully make them less likely to use and abuse it."

The Science Inside Alcohol Project, funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), is developing an interactive, Web-based science and health curriculum for middle school students and their families on how alcohol affects their bodies. The project, which is part of the highly regarded "The Science Inside" series from AAAS, helps provide children, teens and adults with a science-based understanding of critical developmental and health issues.

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