

Chapter 5

Family Values



Parents' drinking behaviors and favorable attitudes about drinking have been associated with adolescents' initiating and continuing alcohol use.

-J.A. Andrews

As we've previously discussed, adolescence is a period of change. As such, your child will begin to experience a dramatic transformation: change of schools, change in body, change in relationships with friends and family, and change in needs and desires. Adolescence is a time when your child will encounter life situations that call for thought, decision-making, and action. Decisions about a variety of circumstances and issues, including health and lifestyle choices will confront your child on a daily basis. Some of these circumstances and issues will be familiar, others new, some of little importance, many of the greatest importance. But no matter the nature of the circumstance, no matter its degree of simplicity or complexity, every choice that your child makes will be based on his consciously or unconsciously held *values*.

Just what are values? Values are those principles or beliefs that serve as guidelines to help us make decisions about circumstances, behaviors, and life choices. Values reflect what is and is not important to us. They enable us to judge the rightness or wrongness of an event, circumstance, and/or behavior. Values serve as a blueprint for what is and how to take appropriate action(s).

What role does your family's values about alcohol and other drugs play in your efforts to prevent your underage child from consuming alcohol and other drugs? Your family's values about alcohol and other drugs are a statement of how you wish for your child to think and act when confronted with a situation involving alcohol and other drugs. According to

research, when a child decides whether or not to use alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, a crucial consideration is, “What will my parents think?” Your family’s values about underage children consuming alcohol and other drugs are the answer to the question, “What will my parents think?”

The point is a simple one—your child needs to know what behaviors you endorse and what behaviors you disapprove of in regards to the consumption of alcohol and other drugs. Unfortunately, there are many mixed messages about underage consumption of alcohol and other drugs. These mixed messages may confuse your child about what is and is not acceptable.

For example, tobacco and alcohol advertising encourages young people to smoke and drink. A double standard also persists that somehow alcohol and other drugs consumption is okay when a child is older but not okay when they’re younger. At the same time the misperception lingers that consuming alcohol and other drugs causes little if any harm.

That is why your child *needs* you to articulate what your family’s values are about alcohol and other drugs. To do so, it’s critical that you’re clear in your own mind about:

- Your family’s values as they pertain to the consumption of alcohol and other drugs by underage children.
- Your family’s values as they pertain to the consumption of alcohol and other drugs by adult family members.
- The message(s) you communicate with your spoken word to your child about your family’s values associated with the consumption of alcohol and other drugs.
- The message(s) you communicate through your behavior to your child about your family’s values

associated with the consumption of alcohol and other drugs.

- The message(s) you communicate to your child when what you say and what you do don't match.

To help clarify in your own mind, 1) your family's values about underage family members consuming alcohol and other drugs, 2) your family's values about adult family members consuming alcohol and other drugs, 3) the mixed messages that may exist as a result of any discrepancies between your family's values about alcohol and other drugs and a family member's actual behaviors. Take a few moments and consider the following exercises. When I use the word, underage, I intend for underage to refer to *younger than the law permits*.

First off, let's examine what your family's values are in regards to your underage child consuming alcohol and other drugs. Does your family have values about what your underage child can and can't consume? Does your family have values about the type of circumstances your child may or may not consume alcohol and other drugs? Use the following exercise to help clarify some of the above questions.

Bridge Builder's Exercise

- 1) How old should your underage child be before you allow them to consume alcohol?
- 2) How old should your underage child be before you allow them to smoke cigarettes?
- 3) How old should your underage child be before you allow them to smoke marijuana?
- 4) How old should your underage child be before you allow them to consume prescription medications for purposes other than what they're prescribed for?

- 5) How old should your underage child be before you allow them to consume illicit drugs?
- 6) Under what circumstances will you allow your underage child to consume alcohol and other drugs? Religious observance? Celebration of special occasion(s)? Commemorating a rite of passage? Parties supervised by adults? Occasions that occur in the privacy of your home? Anytime—“just as long as I don’t know about it?”

Next, let’s examine what behaviors are sanctioned and what behaviors are disapproved of for adult members of your family as it pertains to the consumption of alcohol and other drugs.

Bridge Builder’s Exercise

- 1) What are your family’s values about adult family members consuming alcohol and other drugs?
- 2) In regards to your family’s values, what specific alcohol and other drugs are endorsed for consumption by an adult family member?
- 3) In regards to your family’s values, what specific alcohol and other drugs are disapproved of for consumption by an adult family member?
- 4) What occasions do your family’s values sanction the consumption of alcohol and other drugs by an adult family member?
- 5) What discrepancies exist between what your family’s values sanction for underage children and what your family’s values sanction for an adult family member to consume?
- 6) How do you explain these discrepancies to your child?

- 7) What impact do these discrepancies have on your child?

It's critical that you understand how any discrepancy between your behavior and the family values impacts your child. Such discrepancies inevitably result in mixed messages and double standards. These mixed messages convey the idea, "Do as I say and not as I do." Yet how effective is such a message? Think about the following questions so as to better understand any contradictions that may exist between your family's values and your behavior.

Bridge Builder's Exercise

- 1) What message(s) does your child receive if and when they observe you drinking alcohol?
- 2) What message(s) does your child receive if and when they observe you smoking cigarettes?
- 3) What message(s) does your child receive if and when they observe you smoking marijuana?
- 4) What message(s) does your child receive if and when they observe you consuming prescription medications?
- 5) What message(s) does your child receive if and when they observe you consuming prescription medications for purposes other than what they're prescribed for?
- 6) What message(s) does your child receive if and when they observe you consuming illicit drugs?

If contradictions occur between a family member's behavior and your family's values concerning the consumption of

alcohol and other drugs, what impact do these contradictions have on your child?

As much as you may not want mixed messages and double standards to muddy the waters, they inevitably will. Quite simply, rules are oftentimes different for adults than they are for children. That's why we examined the presence of double standards and mixed messages in the above exercise. In the following exercise we'll examine how you rationalize to yourself and explain to your child the double standards, mixed messages, and discrepancies that may exist in regards to your family values about alcohol and other drugs. Take a moment to answer the following questions.

Bridge Builder's Exercise

- 1) How do you explain to yourself any discrepancies that may exist between your family's values about underage consumption of alcohol and other drugs and your child's actual behavior concerning the consumption of alcohol and other drugs?
- 2) How do you explain to your child any discrepancies that may exist between your family's values about underage consumption of alcohol and other drugs and your child's actual behavior concerning the consumption of alcohol and other drugs?
- 3) What message(s) does any discrepancy that may exist between your family's values about underage consumption of alcohol and other drugs and an adult family member's consumption of alcohol and other drugs give to your child?
- 4) How do you explain to yourself any discrepancies that may exist between your family's values about the consumption of alcohol and other drugs and an

- adult family member's consumption of alcohol and other drugs?
- 5) How do you explain to your child any discrepancies that may exist between your family's values about the consumption of alcohol and other drugs and an adult family member's consumption of alcohol and other drugs?
 - 6) What message(s) does any discrepancy that may exist between your family's values about the consumption of alcohol and other drugs and an adult family member's consumption of alcohol and other drugs give to your child?

Once you clarify what your family's values are concerning the consumption of alcohol and other drugs, the next step is communicating those values to each family member. What follows are some suggestions for how to do this successfully.

Bridge Builder's Checklist

Ways to communicate your family's values to your family members.

- 1) **Identify and communicate values openly.**
Identify what values you want your child to embrace and apply to the living of their lives. Explain to your child the importance of values such as honesty, taking responsibility for one's actions, acting assertively, and abstaining from the consumption of alcohol and other drugs. Explain the importance of choices, and how values can help your child make good choices. Explain to your child how choices build on other choices—good choices lead to other good choices and bad choices lead to other bad choices.

- 2) **Be mindful of how your choices impact the development of your child's value system.** Your child is a keen observer of his environment. He observes your behavior and often imitates it. It would not surprise you that children whose parents smoke are more likely to become smokers. So think about your own consumption of alcohol and other drugs and prescription medications. How might your consumption of alcohol and other drugs influence the formation of your child's attitudes towards their consumption of alcohol and other drugs?
- 3) **Make sure that your words and actions match.** If you tell your child not to lie, are your actions consistent with that message or do you burden them with trying to understand the more confusing message, "Do as I say and not as I do."
- 4) **Check out with your child her understanding of what it is that you're attempting to teach her.** Is it safe to assume that your child understands you the way that you intend for her to understand you? You need to continually discuss, clarify, and reinforce your message in order for you to be assured that your message is being received the way that you've intended for it to be received. Ask your child to repeat back to you their understanding of what you've communicated to them. Play *what if* with your child by inventing scenarios that test your child's application of a value. For instance, what if the cashier at the drug store mistakenly gave your child a \$10 bill rather than a \$1 bill. What would he do in that situation?

Your family values about alcohol and other drugs articulate what behaviors each family member should aspire to enacting. In the next chapter, we'll examine the subject of rules and consequences. Rules and consequences are the *means* by which you ensure that your child honors the family values.

