To all incoming Yale students, and their parents and guardians,

Welcome to the community of Yale families! As part of the Yale College Dean’s Office, the Alcohol and Other Drugs Harm Reduction Initiative strives to minimize the dangers of alcohol and drugs on our campus. We are a group of students, recent alumni, and administrators who work with students and their families, and we need your help to succeed, starting now.

Over the next month, we ask that your family take some time to talk about alcohol and the choices first-year students make as they take on new degrees of independence. Although the drinking age in Connecticut is 21, students benefit from starting conversations about alcohol much earlier. Now is an ideal time to talk about your family’s values, goals, and priorities; it’s also a great opportunity to set the precedent for open communication during the college years.

Some forms of drinking – too much or too often – can have serious, negative consequences. And yet, alcohol in moderation can be an enjoyable element of meals, parties, and other events. Because of the different roles alcohol can play, students need to make careful, considered decisions about whether they will drink, and if so, how. Most students find they need their family’s help in that process – indeed, research has shown that conversations with parents and guardians during the summer before college help students make better, safer decisions about alcohol once they arrive on campus.

You already have access to Yale’s online course that describes the body’s ways of processing alcohol and offers strategies for navigating alcohol’s role in social life at Yale. We have filled that course with useful information, but it is no replacement for guidance from parents or other trusted adults. For some families, this is already a long-running conversation; for others it will be new.

We have developed this booklet based on research findings and similar materials created at other universities. We were influenced in particular by the work of Dr. Robert Turrisi, whose research explores how family conversations can help incoming college students avoid high-risk drinking. But most of all, we have drawn on the experiences and ideas of Yale family members, students, and alumni in creating this booklet. We are happy to put it now in your hands.

Yours sincerely,

The AODHRI team
(Alcohol and Other Drugs Harm Reduction Initiative)
Why should families talk about alcohol?

Students listen

Sometimes parents and other adult mentors can feel that young adults don’t take their advice seriously. In fact, research shows that parental guidance has a very real, very positive impact on college-aged adults’ decisions about drinking. These conversations make a difference regardless of whether a young adult has already tried alcohol, and continue to influence students even after they arrive at college. Don’t worry if the discussion feels awkward. Studies indicate that how smoothly a conversation goes has surprisingly little impact on how useful it is.

Inaccurate expectations about college drinking are common

Stories in the media and from friends can make college seem like one long drinking party. Those images are largely inaccurate, but they lead some students to expect that most of their college peers will drink heavily. This expectation is often enforced by the visibility of heavy drinking and the relative invisibility of moderate drinking or non-drinking activities. Students are more likely to notice the loud drunken party in their entryway than the laid-back gathering next door!

Because it’s easy to assume that peers drink more than they actually do, some students feel like they need to drink—or even drink heavily—to fit in or “do college right.” Families can be especially helpful in debunking this idea. Whether or not students decide to drink alcohol, it’s important for them to know that high-risk drinking, and the problems that come with it, are not normal parts of the college experience.

What counts as high-risk drinking?
The body’s reaction to alcohol depends on a lot of factors, including genetics, food, sleep, size, and how fast someone drinks. You can learn more about those factors in the online AOD course.

As a general rule, having more than three drinks in one sitting (four for some men), or more than 7 drinks per week (up to 14 for some men) is considered high-risk drinking.

Safe drinking also depends on context. A moderate amount of alcohol may be safe on its own, for example, but becomes very dangerous if the person drinking it chooses to drive a car or ride a bike.

Students benefit from knowing family histories

Many factors affect how someone reacts to alcohol, and genetics is an important one. Some families have a history of strong reactions to drinking or of alcohol dependence (alcoholism). It is important that students have this information in mind as they make decisions about their own alcohol use.

Students and their families can make plans to avoid negative consequences

Many students who drink alcohol do so safely. Nonetheless, some students engage in “high-risk drinking”—drinking too much, too quickly, or too often—which can have serious consequences such as alcohol poisoning, accidental injuries, and chronic disease. The more common consequences are less dire, but still significant: feeling sick, having problems with schoolwork, and damaging friendships. Families can help students make active plans for less risky social behaviors that will avoid these negative consequences.

Not planning to drink alcohol during college?

This is an important conversation even for students who do not plan to drink. Discussing alcohol as a family can help students better understand the reasons behind their own decisions. What’s more, this conversation will help non-drinking students plan for their relationships with friends who may choose to drink.
Central Conversational Strategy: Avoid Reinforcing Alcohol Myths

It is widely recognized that alcohol can impact the way people feel and behave. We tend to think of that as a biological effect—and there are, indeed, predictable physiological aspects—but researchers have also shown that our experiences are strongly influenced by our personal beliefs and expectations. You may have heard of experiments where subjects who falsely believe they are consuming alcohol will behave in classically “drunken” ways; even more strikingly, subjects who are unknowingly consuming alcohol do not become “drunk.” These experiments illustrate the power of what researchers call “alcohol outcome expectancies”: the beliefs we hold that actually change the impact alcohol has on our perceptions and behaviors.

These expectancies can become dangerous. For example, people who believe that consuming alcohol makes them prone to lose their temper are more likely to get into fights while drinking; people who believe that alcohol makes them more inclined to engage in riskier behavior will indeed, when intoxicated, take more risks. That’s why it is so important to avoid the more dangerous alcohol myths—it may feel that you are offering a useful warning, but instead you may be inadvertently strengthening a hazardous expectancy.

As you talk about alcohol, aim to differentiate expectancies from physiological effects. The online course offers a lot of information about alcohol’s effects on the brain, which will help you make those differentiations.

A Few Particularly Harmful Expectancies to Avoid

1. The more, the better
A common expectancy is that the more alcohol someone consumes, the more fun they’ll have. Physiologically, alcohol has what is known as a biphasic effect: at low to moderate levels (one drink or fewer per hour), it is experienced as a stimulant. At higher levels (more than one drink per hour), alcohol acts as a depressant, making the drinker drowsy, sad, and lethargic. More is almost never better!

2. Losing control
Another expectancy is that drinking causes significant loss of cognitive capacities. While this can happen in extreme situations, as when someone has severe alcohol poisoning, many of our cognitive capacities are unaffected by low to moderate levels of alcohol. The out-of-control behaviors we associate with drunkenness are almost always the product of expectancies.

3. Alcohol completely transforms us
Another perilous expectancy is that alcohol drastically changes who we are, what we want, or how we act. Alcohol does suppress some inhibitions, but it does not produce new desires within us, nor does it give us new skills. Anything “unlocked” by intoxication was almost certainly there to begin with: if it’s something a person wants, there are doubtless safer ways to get there.
Other strategies for effective family conversations

Strive for open, supportive communication
As students make the transition to college, they have the opportunity to leave behind any teenage eye-rolling and establish mature relationships with their families. Similarly, parents and guardians have the chance to acknowledge and celebrate students’ increasing independence. This transition involves listening respectfully to each other’s opinions about and experiences with alcohol.

Supportive engagement is easiest when distractions like TV and phones are set aside. Body language and paraphrasing (“It sounds like you’re saying…”) can demonstrate genuine listening, even if you don’t agree with what you’re hearing. It’s especially important not to interrupt or tell someone an experience is wrong—that can lead to family members withdrawing from the conversation. Instead, if you disagree, try saying something like, “I can see that you feel that way, and I am trying to understand why. In my experience, though…”

Set clear expectations and limits
Some parents and guardians let their teenagers drink safe amounts of alcohol at home. They may also suggest “harm-reduction” strategies, like counting drinks or staying hydrated. These decisions are usually intended to teach young adults to drink moderately and safely. Studies show that these strategies are most effective when combined with explicit messages about avoiding high-risk drinking.

Parents and guardians should set clear limits for what kind of alcohol use is acceptable, whether that limit is no drinking at all or drinking only in moderation. If your family approves of drinking in moderation, it is important to emphasize the difference between safe and high-risk drinking. For instance, parents might ask that students drink no more than one drink per hour, and no more than two or three drinks over the course of an evening.

Focus on realistic consequences
It can be tempting to stress high-risk drinking’s most extreme consequences, such as chronic illness or death, to dissuade students from drinking heavily. However, research shows that these fear tactics often backfire; they can actually lead to riskier drinking behavior.

Conversations are most effective when they focus on more mundane, day-to-day outcomes of high-risk drinking. For instance, you might discuss common consequences such as embarrassing oneself in front of new friends, or feeling too sick the next day to get any schoolwork done.

Establish positive goals
Family conversations can be a great space for students to think through their goals for college social life and the impact of various hypothetical patterns of drinking or not drinking. Focusing on achieving positive goals motivates students more than the desire to avoid negative consequences. What relationship with alcohol does your student eventually want to develop, and why? How and when might that be achieved?
Alcohol, Mindful Choices, and Family Priorities

Most new students and their families have goals for college. These goals will differ from one student to the next—and from one family to another—and they offer helpful frameworks for discussions about drinking. In the section below, this guide highlights examples of areas that Yale students feel are important and examines the potential impact of using alcohol. This is not a comprehensive list, but we hope it will be a useful starting point.

Families may not agree on how alcohol relates to each area, or even on which priorities are most important. You don’t have to agree or convince one another. Just take the time to listen to each person’s point of view and do your best to understand. For students, this is an opportunity to understand the reasoning behind their parents’ or guardians’ beliefs about alcohol, health, and safety. For parents and guardians, this can be a chance to show respect for students’ opinions and independence. Establishing honest communication now makes it easier for parents to offer support once college begins.

Friendships and relationships

Alcohol can sometimes be part of activities that bring friends together. Mixing interesting cocktails (alcoholic and non-alcoholic ones) is a common way to theme an event; wine and beer are easy dinner party contributions; many students of legal drinking age enjoy spending time together in New Haven’s thriving bar scene. Students find that drinking works best when it is just one component of these gatherings, not the center of them.

In addition, most students have some friends who drink very little or not at all—friends whom they won’t want to exclude. It’s always important to have non-alcoholic options available when students are hanging out in a group, in order to enable friends who don’t drink to participate fully, and for friends who drink to do so safely.

Drinking in moderation also makes it clear that a group is hanging out to spend time together, not as an excuse to get drunk. Besides, conversations with drunk people are a bore, especially (but not only) for the sober people!

Heavy drinking can put a strain on friendships in other ways, too. Choosing to drink too much isn’t fair to the friends who end up dealing with the consequences, like walking someone home or getting them to the hospital. Taking care of a drunk friend can put a damper on an evening! Moreover, drinking too much makes it harder to stay aware of friends’ needs. Friends might be tired, sick, bothering others, or being harassed, and might need someone to step in and get them home. Intoxication can make it difficult to notice what’s happening and intervene.

Finally, heavy drinking can fuel volatile interpersonal experiences, such as fights with friends, unplanned sexual activity, or inappropriately sharing confidential information about other people. Intoxication also correlates with interpersonal violence, though the relationship between the two is complex and not fully understood.

Health

When establishing goals for alcohol use, think about them in the context of other long-term health decisions like choosing to exercise regularly, eat healthy food, and avoid smoking cigarettes. For most adults, responsible alcohol use (usually averaging less than one drink a day, and no more than three drinks at one time) is generally safe. In some cases, light to moderate use may even have health benefits, though the medical evidence is not yet robust.
High-risk drinking, though, can harm health in the short- and long-term. In the long run, heavy alcohol use is associated with an increased risk of cancer, especially breast cancer, colorectal cancer, liver cancer, and oral cancer. It also causes liver disease, which can be disabling and deadly.

In the short term, heavy drinking frequently leads to accidents. Drunk driving accidents are the most widely known, and potentially carry the gravest consequences. Even without driving, being drunk increases the risk of getting hit by a car, having a minor or serious fall, getting a concussion, and spraining or injuring a limb. These kinds of injuries can take a long time to heal, and they can interfere with academics, athletics, extracurriculars, or just getting around campus.

Lawfulness
For most people, taking laws and policies seriously is an important way to show community respect. Connecticut state law and Yale University policy prohibit students under the age of 21 from buying or consuming alcohol. Underage drinking can have serious legal and disciplinary consequences.

Community
Especially in groups, some people use drinking to excuse misbehavior that directly harms others in our communities, from making noise to damaging property. Yalies live in close proximity to each other. Irresponsible drinking makes for poor relationships with neighbors and undermines communal spaces.

If students choose to drink, they should consider the effect of their drinking on other people, and they should ask their friends to do the same thing. That may mean drinking less or taking greater responsibility for one’s actions.

First impressions
Simply put, getting drunk is a poor strategy for making friends. Students sometimes think that drinking will help them interact more smoothly with others. But personal traits such as sense of humor or communication skills are not improved by alcohol. In reality, intoxication tends to make people more awkward – and more likely to say things that are embarrassing or even hurtful. This can be particularly uncomfortable when others in the conversation are sober.

Leadership
Demonstrating responsible alcohol use earns peers’ respect and confidence. The best leaders on campus not only avoid high-risk drinking, but make it easy for others to do so as well. They set a tone that is welcoming to all, especially newer members, by building safe, pressure-free social environments and events.

Academics and athletics
Yalies are, first and foremost, students. While it’s great to take a Saturday night break from academics, a Sunday morning hangover can make it difficult to get work done. Similarly, heavy drinking on a school night makes it less likely that a student will get out of bed for class or pay attention once they’re there.

Heavy drinking will also interfere with sleep. Someone might nod right off, but high levels of alcohol make it harder to reach REM sleep, which is crucial for remembering material you’ve learned and for paying attention the next day. In contrast to heavy drinking, having one or two drinks won’t hurt REM sleep and is unlikely to cause a hangover.

High-risk drinking is also a big barrier to athletic success, from varsity sports to intramurals. Alcohol can interfere with muscle building, hydration, injury healing, and endurance.
Students’ goals will evolve as they experience college life, as will their understanding of how alcohol relates to those goals. Your conversations will evolve once your first year begins.

Once students leave home for college, parents and guardians take on new roles, with less responsibility for tracking students’ day-to-day activities. On the other hand, most students miss their families and will be eager to discuss life at Yale with them.

After college begins, it’s particularly important to respect students’ levels of comfort in conversations about alcohol. Students who are willing to speak openly about their experiences with alcohol during college give families an opportunity to encourage the discussion. Parents and guardians can continue to communicate their values and priorities, but helping students think about drinking decisions in terms of the students’ own goals and values has the greatest impact. Either way, encouraging students to talk about their experiences will give them the chance to reflect on their choices.

Students who are not comfortable discussing alcohol in specific terms often find it helpful for their families to take an interest in their social lives more broadly, and for them to listen to and support students as they try out different groups of friends. Ask about the people they’re spending time with, what they like about the group, and what they’re not so sure about. If the group has spent time drinking or “going out” on weekends, you can talk together about whether that style matches your values.
For instance, friends in one group might drink alcohol in moderation and look out for one another at parties, while members of another might drink heavily and show less support. A conversation about these experiences can help students examine their own priorities and commitments.

If it sounds like a student’s friends are making poor decisions about alcohol use, parents and guardians can encourage taking the lead with responsible behavior. Simple actions, like saying “no thanks” to another drink, serving beer or wine instead of hard liquor, or planning an alcohol-free night out such as going to a movie or a restaurant, can set the tone for the entire group. Students should know that their peers look to them as an example, as much as the other way around. In some cases, a student might consider finding a different friend group or skipping activities that make them uncomfortable. Friendships and groups evolve over the course of college, and finding the right friends is a long-term investment in one’s own happiness.

Recommendations for Further Reading

We developed this booklet based on research findings and similar materials created at other universities. We were influenced in particular by the work of Dr. Robert Turrisi, whose research explores how family conversations can help incoming college students avoid high-risk drinking.

For those interested in exploring the research that informed this booklet, we particularly recommend the following academic articles.

**How parents help students make decisions about alcohol**


How parental permissiveness affects students’ alcohol decisions


Alcohol outcome expectancies
