

# be the influence

A new way to talk with our kids  
about alcohol and underage drinking.

have meaningful conversations | build trust | start today



PARENT GUIDE

Dave, Labatt employee

FAMILY TALK PARENT GUIDE >

# Let's be real.



Vince, Labatt employee, and daughter, Chelsea

**Preventing underage drinking requires more than “having the talk.”** We can't sit our kids down and say, “Don't drink until you're of legal drinking age,” and leave it at that. It's not that simple.


**We also know that each child is different.** What works for one might not work for another. There is no one-size-fits-all formula for preventing underage drinking. For every parent, it's a custom job, requiring the love, influence and experience only *you* have with your children.

**This guide won't preach.** It won't prescribe a step-by-step plan for success. The goal is simply to offer some practical, ongoing strategies for having deeper, more meaningful conversations about alcohol with your children – no matter how old they are.

**Let's get started.**

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How do I make them responsible?  
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At what point should I say no?  
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## Where do I start?

**As parents, the first step in talking to our kids about underage drinking doesn't involve our kids at all. Instead, it's about sitting ourselves down with our parenting partner and asking ourselves some tough questions:**

What do we really think about alcohol and underage drinking?

What rules do we want to communicate?

Are we prepared to back up our advice with our own actions?

When it comes to conversations with our kids, what are we really trying to achieve?

Are we trying to protect our kids from the world, or are we trying to give them the skills they need to make smart decisions?

**Before we can take the next step, we have to be honest with ourselves.**

Charlotte, Labatt employee

# a new way forward

“Work the relationship and the behaviour will take care of itself.”

Dr. Gordon Neufeld, Canadian Developmental Psychologist based in Vancouver, B.C.

Building a relationship is a unique and powerful way for us to connect with our kids. When we are more respectful in our approach, we can create the right atmosphere for deeper, more meaningful conversations about underage drinking.

The good news is that, as parents, we don't need to reinvent ourselves or memorize a list of rules. With the relationship building approach, and using the three stages of parenting – teaching, facilitating and coaching – we just need to sharpen the tools we already have. If you're reading this, it's because you genuinely want your children to make smart decisions in this adult world. The relationship model is a different approach that really works, as long as we're willing to leave the traditional approach behind.



Sean, Labatt employee, and son, Ryan

Examples

Traditional Approach	Relationship Building Approach
<b>Yes-or-No Questions</b> “Will there be drinking at the party?” “Have you ever tried alcohol?” “Do your friends drink?” “Will his/her parents be home?”	<b>Open-ended Questions</b> “If there's drinking at the party, what will you do?” “What do you think about kids who drink?” “If your friends wanted to drink, how would you handle it?” “Tell me about Tim's parents. What are they like?”
<b>Leading with Assumptions or Agenda</b> “I know what it's like to be your age.” “You are forbidden from drinking.”	<b>Curiosity and Active Listening</b> “It must be confusing to be a teenager these days?” “What's the hardest thing you deal with when it comes to just being yourself around your friends?”
<b>General, Non-specific Statements</b> “You know the right thing to do.” “You know what we expect.” “Make me proud of you.” “Don't do anything stupid.”	<b>Ending with a Clear Statement</b> “I expect that you won't drink alcohol.” “If you ever have a question about alcohol, you can count on me to listen and answer honestly.” “If you're ever in a situation where you have to choose between getting in a car with a drunk driver or calling me, I want you to know you can call me and I'll come get you with no questions asked.”

## Levels of Listening

Even at a young age, kids have a pretty sophisticated ability to know when they're being truly listened to, and when they're just being tolerated. Our kids — especially teens — have a deep need to be heard. In fact, it's one of the most critical aspects of a parent-child relationship. If kids don't think we're listening, they'll stop talking to us. Therefore, as parents, we need to understand the three distinct "levels of listening."

Chances are, most of our conversations with our kids involve listening with an agenda, which is Level 1 listening. That's perfectly understandable. However, if we can elevate our conversations and listen with an open mind, Level 3 listening, we have a much better chance of uncovering our children's true thoughts, fears and opinions about underage drinking. In some ways, listening is the most powerful tool we have for preventing underage drinking.



Charlene, Labatt employee, and son, Carter

### LEVEL 1 "LISTENING WITH AN AGENDA"

At this level, we aren't really listening at all; we're just reciting a script we have in our minds.

**For example, we might say:**

"Sit down. Your mother and I want to talk to you about underage drinking. You know you're not supposed to drink, right?"

In other words, we've come to the conversation with a specific outcome in mind. We aren't really open to ideas that stray from our original agenda. Level 1 listening is usually characterized by yes-or-no answers and interruptions, which can lead to misinterpretations, misunderstanding and hurt feelings.

### LEVEL 2 "LISTENING FROM YOUR PERSPECTIVE"

This level of listening is better, but it still lacks true openness. At Level 2, we're listening to what our kids say, but we're instantly relating it to our own views and experiences.

**For example:**

**Teenager:** "Mom, you just don't understand how hard it is to be the only one of my friends that has such strict rules."

**Parent:** "I know it's hard to be a teenager. When I was your age...(etc)."

When we listen like this, our kids feel as though their comments are just a platform for us to remind them that we know what's best. On the surface, it may seem like we're having a conversation, but actually we're not. We're just waiting for our turn to talk.

### LEVEL 3 "LISTENING WITH AN OPEN MIND"

True listening means listening without judgment or criticism, and responding to the specific ideas, fears and opinions expressed by our kids in the present moment. In other words, we focus on what they're saying and feeling, not on what they've said in the past, or what we believe, or what we think they should be saying.

**For example:**

**Teenager:** "Mom, you just don't understand how hard it is to be the only one of my friends that has such strict rules."

**Parent:** "I understand it must be hard to feel singled out like that. What makes it difficult? How have you been dealing with it?"

As parents, it's always tempting to discount the way our kids feel, because we don't believe they have "real" problems. But their problems certainly feel real to them. By responding to their comments with an open mind, we show them respect, which helps build trust and a higher level of involvement in their lives.

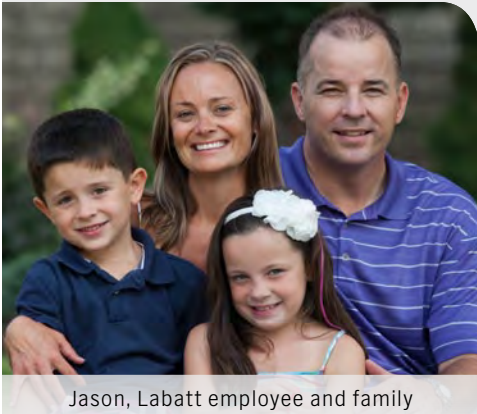
HOW TO

# Be REAL: ideas for deeper connections

## **Believe that we are the influence.**

When they're young, it's easy to see the influence we have on our children. They repeat the things we say, they copy our mannerisms, they dress up in our clothes. But as they get older, they copy their friends and try on other influences so they can begin to express their own individuality.

However, research proves that parents still have a significant influence in their decisions about alcohol. \*And, if we have a close and strong relationship, our influence with them grows.



Jason, Labatt employee and family

*"Children are much more likely to learn from parenting modeling if their relationship with the parent is a good one. Children adopt the values of the people they admire, respect and love."*

Dr. Thomas Gordon, Clinical Psychologist

### **Realize our children need to have a connection with us.**

Our children want and need a close relationship with us. We recognize this when they're younger and less sure of the world. As they become more independent, we may feel left behind. But their need for a deep connection with us hasn't disappeared; it's just changed. Our job now is to find new ways to connect so they always feel supported and our influence is never lost.

### **Examine our own assumptions and prejudices.**

We may think we know what our children are going through, but chances are, we don't. Kids today are dealing with distractions, temptations and pressures that are unique to their generation. When we set out to create deeper conversations about underage drinking, we should ask ourselves: "Are my own experiences getting in the way? Am I really prepared to listen to my child's point of view?"

### **Always be aware of the other influences in our kids' lives.**

As parents, it's natural to fight against the influences of our children's peers, other role models, the media, etc. As these things enter our kids' lives, we feel like our influence will be diminished. But the surest way to lose our influence is to fail to show our children that we can relate to their world. We should get to know their friends — not just who they are, but why they matter to our kids. By embracing their concerns and taking them seriously, we encourage them to see that our advice is based on true understanding.

### **Listen, because all kids (especially teens!) have a deep need to be heard.**

As they get older, our children begin to feel that their ideas and opinions deserve consideration. When our kids evaluate our rules and advice, they need to know that we're basing our words on a real understanding of what they're thinking and feeling. If they feel unheard, they are more likely to turn to peers for validation.

\*Emmanuel Kuntsche, et al., "The earlier the more? Differences in the Links Between Age at First Drink and Adolescent Alcohol Use and Related Problems According to Quality of Parent - Child Relationship," Journal of Studies of Alcohol and Drugs, 2009.

# understanding the stages of parenting



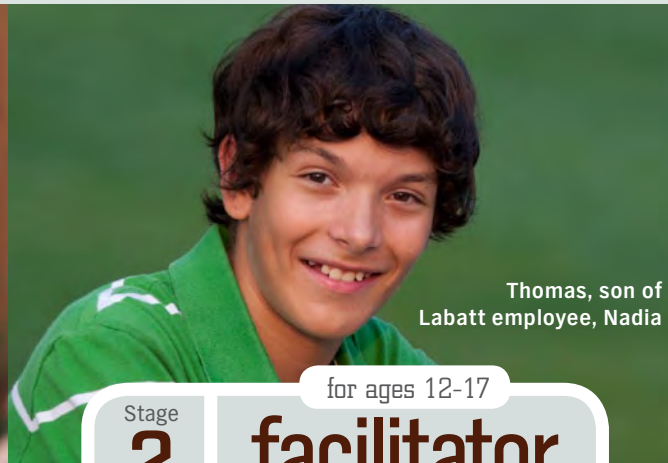
Lauryn, daughter of  
Labatt employee, Jason

for ages 1-11

Stage

1

teacher



Thomas, son of  
Labatt employee, Nadia

for ages 12-17

Stage

2

facilitator



Jessica, daughter of  
Labatt employee, Grace

for ages 18-21

Stage

3

coach

As our kids grow up, their brains develop and change. To a very large degree, these changes are obvious. But some aspects of our children's mental growth are harder to spot. To have more effective conversations about underage drinking, we have to tune in to our children's cognitive needs, and develop skills that help keep us on the same wavelength.

Simply put, the concept of parenting stages is about learning to adjust our parenting behaviour to match our children's cognitive development.

According to leading experts,\* there are three main parenting stages: teacher, facilitator and coach.

Later, we'll cover these three stages in greater detail. For now, it may help to look at a brief overview of our kids' cognitive development and how it relates to the issues of alcohol and underage drinking.

\*Including Judy Arnall, Labatt's family life education consultant and author.

## From learning rules...

Until children are about 11 years old, the part of their brains that will eventually handle abstract thought – the cortex – isn't fully developed. Their understanding of the world is limited to what they experience directly, including what they already know, see, touch and hear. Our job, as parents, is to set clear boundaries and limits.

When it comes to underage drinking, we can answer questions as they come up. We can also clearly outline our values and rules. We can say, "Alcohol is for adults."

## ...To making choices

But, after age 11, their brains have developed to the point where they have started to develop their critical thinking skills. They begin to notice inconsistencies ("Why does Dad get to eat dinner on the couch, but I don't?"). Our kids begin to make choices based on our rules *and* their own opinions. This is normal, healthy cognitive growth.

When it comes to the discussion of underage drinking, however, it certainly makes things more complicated. We need to take the time for more intense two-way conversations about the grey areas in life situations.

*"Don't be a friend. Be a friendly parent."*

Wendy Froberg, Canadian  
Child Psychologist



Nadia, Labatt employee and family



for ages 1-11

Stage  
**1**

**teacher**

### What's happening?

Up to age 11 or so, our kids are developing a sense of the world around them. They are very concrete and literal by nature. Most of their new ideas come to them in the form of direct experience and they believe what we tell them about the world.

### What do our kids need?

More than anything, they need a trustworthy teacher to explain the world around them. If our kids believe they can come to us with questions about alcohol — even tough questions — and get honest answers, we'll start to form a connection over the issue. This means they'll be more likely to share drinking-related information with us as they grow up.

Lauryn, daughter of  
Labatt employee, Jason



## suggested steps

**Our main parenting goal for this stage:**

Become their number one, go-to source for information about alcohol.

### Set boundaries

Using clear “teaching” statements.

#### Examples:

“Drinking alcohol is for adults only.”

“You have to be 18/19\* to drink.”

“It’s wrong to drink before you’re legally allowed to.”

\*The legal drinking age varies by province in Canada

### Check for understanding

It’s not enough to just state the rules. We have to make sure they’re sticking. From time to time, we should follow up with questions that help us gauge our children’s level of understanding.

#### Examples:

“When we talked before, what did we say about alcohol?”

“How old do you have to be to drink?”

“Is it okay for kids to drink alcohol?”

### Be consistent

In our words and actions. When it comes to alcohol, we should make sure we don’t send mixed signals by applying different rules for different situations (such as allowing teens to drink in your house), or acting in a way that doesn’t match our stated rules and beliefs. Otherwise, they may grow up believing that underage drinking is kind of a “grey area,” in which the rules are flexible.

Young kids need to know that when we give rules about alcohol, we mean them, and we really believe them.

### Start the conversation with those teachable moments

Children are learning about alcohol usage all around them in society, from books, movies, internet, and songs, even if parents never bring up the subject. Use these teachable moments to start the discussion.



for ages 12-17

Stage

2

facilitator

### What's happening?

Our kids' brains are developing rapidly, moving from concrete thought to abstract, intellectual thought. Day to day, they're starting to question rules and test boundaries. They may notice and complain about inconsistencies, for example: "Why does Matt's dad let him taste beer, but you don't let me?" The world is presenting them with a lot of complex, contradictory information, and they're trying hard to make sense of it all.

During this stage, our kids are becoming susceptible to outside influences. Friends, family members and neighbours are taking on important roles in their lives. As parents, this can be very scary. We may even feel like we're losing control, which is natural. However, we gain our influence if our relationship is respectful.

### What do our kids need?

Our job now is to help them analyze and process the world around them. We should shift our focus from concrete rules to becoming facilitators, helping our kids understand new experiences and friendships within the context of our personal beliefs and values.

Kids crave information and opinions but don't want to be told what to do. We need to hand over age-appropriate decision-making and allow safe, natural consequences to occur.

We also need to help our children manage negative peer pressure, and learn assertiveness and problem-solving skills that will equip them to deal with life and the challenges it presents.



Thomas, son of  
Labatt employee, Nadia

## suggested steps

### Our main parenting goal for this stage:

Help them make sense of a complicated world and incorporate family values into their decisions about alcohol.

#### Shift to value statements

Help them understand rules in the context of our personal beliefs and expectations.

##### Examples:

"I know that some parents let their kids drink alcohol. But in our family, we don't drink until we're legal drinking age."

"In some countries, the rules about alcohol are different. But in our country, it's against the law to drink until you're an adult. I believe it's important to respect the law."

#### Allow them to trust the power of "no" and grow their assertiveness skills

Important skills take time to develop. Pretty soon, our kids will have to resist one of the most powerful forces in the world: peer pressure. In practical terms, we want them to have the tremendous confidence it takes to say, "No thanks, I don't want to drink."

But the fact is, most teens don't have a lot of practice asserting their willpower in high-stress situations. Sure, our kids disagree with us all the time about small things like bedtime, food, chores, etc. But most of the time, who wins? Parents. This means that in a subtle but constant way, we're telling our kids that their "no" doesn't mean very much.

As our children get older, it's a good idea to look for opportunities to let them disagree with us...and win. Of course, we shouldn't reinforce bad decisions. But when it comes to low-risk situations such as music, fashion or whether or not they'll join us for a trip to the supermarket (for example), it pays to honour their personal choices. It's an easy way to help them see that when they take a stand on something that's important to them, people should take them seriously. They'll be better equipped to assert themselves when a friend offers them alcohol.

#### Ask questions and have conversations that respect their maturity

##### Examples:

"Do you have any questions about alcohol?"

"OK, I'm going to tell you everything I know about alcohol and what it does to your body."

"If you ever have questions about alcohol or drinking, here are some people you can turn to...[list of mentors]"

#### Problem-solve, don't punish

As our kids begin to question our authority, it's tempting to crack down with stricter rules and harsher penalties. But this can push our kids away at the worst possible moment — right as they're turning to peers for information and support. Our priority should be to help them come up with possible solutions to meet their needs and parents' needs.

##### The Problem-solving Process:

1. What is the problem?
2. What are parents' needs and child's needs?
3. Brainstorm solutions together.
4. Evaluate those solutions.
5. Choose a win-win solution that meets everyone's needs.
6. Check back and evaluate if it is working.

for ages 18-21

Stage

3

coach

### What's happening?

This is the stage at which teens have developed a sense of who they are and what they believe. They've also decided whether underage drinking is right or wrong, based on the foundation you have laid, in conjunction with other influences in their lives. What is important about this stage is staying connected and being an active listener — even when it seems like our teens and young adults aren't really interested in talking.

### What do young adults need?

Young adults continue to count on you as a parent. But, unlike when they were younger, they have moved completely into independent thinking, which means you can't rely simply on rules and regulations. Your influence depends upon the strength of your relationship. Are you really listening to their concerns and ideas? When you talk about alcohol and related issues like driving under the influence, are you asking yes or no questions, or are you asking the kind of open-ended questions that lead to reflection and a sense of accountability for their actions?

This is one of the most critical times. Even though it's legal for them to drink, they still aren't fully adept at making informed choices about alcohol. A lot of young adults go out on their birthdays when they are of legal drinking age and make poor decisions just out of inexperience. They drink too much, too fast or drink shots, mix different types of alcohol or drink on an empty stomach. They don't know their limits, simply because they lack experience.

A big part of the coaching approach is helping our children make a healthy and safe transition into adults who, if they choose to drink when they're of legal age, do so responsibly. This involves asking good, open-ended questions that can help them think about what might happen in alcohol-related situations.



Jessica, daughter of  
Labatt employee, Grace

## suggested steps

### Our main parenting goal for this stage:

Encourage smart decisions by helping them think through possible scenarios that involve alcohol.

#### Listen with an open mind

One of the biggest barriers to communication with our young adults is our belief that their problems – with friends, school, peer pressure, love interests, etc. – are trivial. They may seem trivial to us, but to young adults they can feel like life or death. If we discount the importance of the pressures they face – especially when it comes to alcohol – we give them a perfect excuse to shut us out.

To keep the lines of communication open, we should work on our listening skills (refer to “The Levels of Listening”). If our teens and young adults see that we are listening without an agenda, they’ll feel respected. This means they’re more likely to show us respect in return.

#### Avoid communication stoppers

At the same time we’re building our constructive conversation skills, we should work on eliminating destructive conversation tendencies.

##### Examples:

Accusations – “I know that you’re drinking.”

Interruptions – “I don’t want to hear your excuses.”

Starting with an agenda or deciding what’s going to be discussed before our kids have a chance to talk – “I want to get to the bottom of your disobedience/lying/etc.”

If you really need to give your opinion, ask first if they want to receive it. If they say “no” let it drop. The timing of conversations is everything and the timing might not be correct for the moment. If they say “yes,” give your opinion by expressing your concerns and needs and encourage more discussion.

#### Get curious; ask better questions

Now is the time to start asking open-ended questions that help our young adults think through potential scenarios involving alcohol, as well as the potential consequences. The more curious we are about their lives, the more relevant and effective our questions will be.

##### Examples:

“What would you do if your best friend asked you to drink?”

“What do you think would happen if your ride home from the party started drinking? What would your plan be?”

“Can I ask your opinion? What are some of the reasons kids drink?”

“What are some of the things you’re looking forward to after graduation? How do you think those would be affected if you make mistakes with alcohol?”

#### Don’t give up your influence!

As parents, we can sometimes feel frustrated and powerless. In times of frustration, we should remind ourselves that no one will ever have a greater influence on our kids’ decisions about alcohol than we do. We just have to trust ourselves and keep applying the principles of the coaching approach.

# putting it into practice

“There are times, many times, when a quiet, loving, reconnection with a child is more effective than a consequence or punishment.”

Holly Bennett and Teresa Pitman,  
Canadian authors and journalists  
for *Today's Parent Magazine*.



Jason, Labatt employee with Mason and Lauryn

## Recognizing windows of opportunity

Traditionally, programs designed to help prevent underage drinking have advised us to talk with our children at specific ages or moments in their lives. But as we've seen through our examination of parenting stages, children of all ages can benefit from on-going honest discussions about alcohol. To have meaning, these conversations have to be relevant, and relevance can't be scheduled.

In our lives as parents, there are windows of opportunity we can use to help strengthen our influence. Sometimes these windows open predictably, such as right after a school assembly about underage drinking. Sometimes they open when we least expect them. Perhaps we're driving home after a holiday party at a relative's house at which an aunt or uncle had too much to drink. Or there's a story about alcohol on the news. Or our son or daughter is invited to his or her first party.

In these moments, when our children's minds are thrown open, our guidance and advice can blow in naturally, without resistance. To preserve our influence, we have to be on the lookout for these opportunities, and when we spot them, we should seize the moment.

## The importance of follow-up questions

Even after we've begun to have deeper and more meaningful conversations about alcohol, we have to remember that kids have a lot on their minds. To make sure our advice and expectations are clear, we should get in the habit of asking good follow-up questions. For younger kids, this can be something as simple as “How old do we have to be to drink?” For teenagers and young adults, it may be “Now, tell me again what you'll do if your ride home has been drinking?” These types of follow-up questions are important for several reasons:

- They help create accountability.
- They show you have a genuine concern for the end result.
- They create new opportunities for communication.
- They are another way to check in and stay connected with our kids, especially teens.

## How to know if it's working...

In the beginning, the victories may be small ones. Our children may want to hang out with us a little more. They may disappear into their rooms a little less often. Then, after a while, we'll start to notice more conversation, more sharing of information. Our kids will ask us more questions. When we ask them questions, they'll give longer answers because they trust we won't interrupt or judge them. As our relationships progress, success will become more obvious. Our connections will feel stronger and our children will begin to trust us with new information about their lives. There will be a level of mutual respect that lets us know we're on the right track.

## ...or if it's not

If things aren't working, it will be obvious. There will be more distance in our relationships, the level of trust will decrease and conversations will continue to occur on a "need to know basis." In some cases, our kids may develop problems with alcohol or other substances. If this happens – or if we suspect it is happening – we will need some additional information or outside help. In the following sections of this guide, there are recommendations for additional reading, along with a list of resources to contact for professional support.

The most important thing is to not give up. It's never too late to build our influence and our relationship!

"Everything is connected in parenting. You can't expect to be rigid in one area and not closed in another. These are the years where you really need to know what's going on for your child and keep communications open."

Dr. Elizabeth Miles, Psychologist



Vince, Labatt employee





Charlotte, Labatt employee, and daughter, Claire

## Recommended Reading

Book Title	Author
Parent Effectiveness Training	Thomas Gordon
Non-Violent Communication	Marshall B. Rosenberg
Discipline Without Distress: 135 tools for raising caring, responsible children without time-out, spanking, punishment or bribery	Judy Arnall
Hold On To Your Kids: Why Parents Matter	Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Mate
But Nobody Told Me That I Would Have To Leave Home	Kathy Lynn
How to Talk so Kids Will Listen and How to Listen so Kids Will Talk	Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
Kids Are Worth It!	Barbara Coloroso

## Websites to Visit:

Healthy Canadians <http://healthycanadians.gc.ca/init/kids-enfants/index-eng.php>

Canadian Paediatric Society [www.cps.ca](http://www.cps.ca)

Canadian Institute of Child Health [www.cich.ca](http://www.cich.ca)

Safe Kids Canada <http://www.safekidscanada.ca>

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health [http://camh.net/About\\_Addiction\\_Mental\\_Health/Drug\\_and\\_Addiction\\_Information/about\\_alcohol.html](http://camh.net/About_Addiction_Mental_Health/Drug_and_Addiction_Information/about_alcohol.html)

Statistics Canada <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/subject-sujet/theme-theme.action?pid=20000&lang=eng&more=0>

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