

New Avatar-Based, Online Role-Play Tool Helps U.S. Parents



The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) introduces *Start the Talk*, its new videogame-like tool that helps parents practice tough conversations about underage drinking in a risk-free virtual environment.

Start the Talk comes at a crucial time as the rate of youth using alcohol for the first time doubles in the month of December and remains high into January.¹

Start the Talk is the newest component of *Talk. They Hear You.*, SAMHSA's underage drinking prevention campaign that launched last May.

The campaign equips parents and caregivers with the information, tools, and confidence they need to start talking to youth early—as early as 9 years old—about the dangers of alcohol.

Start the Talk is an evidence-based behavioral tool that uses life-like avatars to engage in interactive conversations. The simulation is based on research in social cognition, learning theory, and neuroscience.

Each virtual role-play conversation is structured as a 10- to 15-minute interactive, videogame-like experience. Users enter a risk-free practice environment, assume a parental role, and engage in a conversation with an intelligent, fully animated, emotionally responsive avatar that models human behavior and adapts its responses and behaviors to the user's conversation decisions.

"The holiday season is a time of year when families come together," said Frances M. Harding, Director of SAMHSA's Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. "Now is the perfect time for parents and caregivers to connect with their children and talk about the dangers of drinking alcohol. Short, frequent discussions can make all the difference. Start the Talk provides a safe place to practice these conversations and build confidence."

"Ongoing, open, and calm conversations between children and their parents and caregivers are important to preventing underage alcohol use," added Harding. "Even when children seem like they aren't listening, they really do hear us."

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Studies have shown that parents have a significant influence on young people's decisions about alcohol consumption,² especially when they create supportive and nurturing environments in which their children can make their own decisions.³

This is why talking to children early and often can have a significant impact on how a child thinks about alcohol. Equipping parents with a tool such as *Start the Talk* can foster these discussions.

Raising children is one of the most challenging roles that any man, woman or couple can ever experience in life. Much joy as well as significant heartache can come from being a parent. Being a parent requires **patience, nurturing, discipline, support and, most important, love and support**. As our children go through their developmental stages from infants, to toddlers, to teenagers, to young adults and adulthood, the challenges and rewards change. [Click here](#) to learn how parents can Take an Active Role in their children's lives.

¹. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2012). *The NSDUH report: Monthly variation in substance use initiation among adolescents*.

². Nash, S. G., McQueen, A., & Bray, J. H. (2005). *Pathways to adolescent alcohol use: Family environment, peer influence, and parental expectations*. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 37*(1), 19–28.

³. Barnes, G. M., Reifman, A. S., Farrell, M. P., & Dintcheff, B. A. (2000). *The effects of parenting on the development of adolescent alcohol misuse: A six-wave latent growth model*. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 62*(1), 175–186.