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For parents

Teenagers and alcohol: a quick guide for parents

Introduction

Although a range of factors influence alcohol use by teenagers, most parents are surprised to learn that they can play a critical role in introducing children to alcohol and also in discouraging early or excessive use. Currently in Australia parents are the main source of alcohol for young people.

Research has shown that children who first use alcohol before age 15 are five times more likely to abuse alcohol than those who first use alcohol at age 21 or older. It has also been found that clearly defined rules about alcohol use and high monitoring of children from 10 years of age results in lower levels of alcohol use and dependence at 21 years. It appears that a good parent-child relationship determines how effective parents are at influencing their child's use of alcohol.

Alcohol use is very risky for young people and the longer children delay alcohol use, the less likely they are to develop any problems associated with it. That is why it is so important to help your child avoid or limit any alcohol use. This fact sheet provides some general tips for you to use when trying to set limits on your child's use of alcohol.

Adolescence: a challenge for parents

As children approach adolescence, friends and "fitting in" become extremely important. Teenagers tend to question the boundaries laid down by their parents and start to look to friends and the media for clues on how to behave. As a result of these changes there can often be conflict between parents and children. This can be a difficult time and provides a challenge for parents who have to try to respect their child's growing desire for independence while still providing support and appropriate limits.

Develop a good relationship with your child

The best way to influence your child's use of alcohol is to have a good relationship with him or her. Research shows that teenagers are much more likely to delay drinking when they feel they have a close, supportive tie with a parent or guardian. If you do have a good relationship with your child, you will be in a better position to protect your son or daughter if he or she eventually does begin to drink.

Good reasons not to drink

It is important to tell your child why you don't want him or her to drink alcohol.

Explain the dangerous situations they can get into if they drink, such as accidental injuries, violent behaviours and risky sexual behaviour.

Describe the negative physical effects of alcohol on their health and appearance (e.g. liver damage, heart and blood disorders, brain damage and damage to reproductive organs). Teens can be very concerned about their physical appearance and are more likely to avoid the pressure to drink if they believe that alcohol will impair their looks.

Appeal to their self-respect. Explain that alcohol might cause them to do something embarrassing that might damage their self-respect and their friendships.

Make your position clear

Setting up and enforcing limits on teenagers is not easy. You need to make your limits clear, whether they are that you do not want your child to drink alcohol before the legal age or that he or she must only drink at home when you are there. Adolescents are less likely to use alcohol if their parents have established clear boundaries.

It is a good idea to discuss the boundaries with your child before anything happens. You may handle this differently depending on the age of your child. With younger teenagers (12–14 years) you may want to set the rules and clearly outline the consequences of breaking the rules, what the punishment will be and how it will be carried out. With older teenagers (15–17 years) you may want to negotiate an agreement about what is acceptable behaviour. However, if they step outside the established guidelines and you have agreed on the consequences, make sure that you follow through with the action.

Set clear boundaries

It is up to you to decide the limits that you are comfortable with. Some examples of limits that you may consider for your family are:

- › Teenagers will not drink alcohol until they are 18 years old.
- › Older siblings will not encourage younger brothers or sisters to drink and will not give them alcohol.
- › Teenagers will not attend or stay at teen parties where alcohol is served.
- › Teenagers will not get into a car with a driver who has been drinking.

Is it possible to teach teenagers to drink safely?

Due to the increased risks of harm related to alcohol the current Australian alcohol guidelines recommend that young people under 18 years of age should not drink alcohol. Many parents believe that allowing teenagers to drink will help them to learn to drink safely, but young people do not need to drink to learn how to use alcohol safely. The best way to teach your child about the safe use of alcohol is by being a good role model and identifying other role models within the community, particularly sporting or entertainment celebrities.

Being a good role model

The most important thing you can do is to set a good example about where, how and why you use alcohol. Young people are very good at identifying double standards, so being aware of how you use alcohol may help establish your credibility.

What about peer pressure?

Adolescence is a time of enormous change for young people. They can become very insecure about themselves and are more likely to do things to try to please their friends. This is a vulnerable time for your child. You need to be supportive and prepare your child to deal with peer pressure. A way to begin discussions about alcohol may be to role-play scenarios that may occur at a party and give your children examples of what they can say or do.

What to say:

- › No thanks.
- › I don't feel like it.
- › Alcohol is not my thing.

What to do:

- › "Lose" unwanted drinks that are given to them. For example, set them down and later walk away.
- › Try to stay away from people who give them a hard time about not drinking.

Where to get more information, support and referral

- › DrugInfo website, www.druginfo.com.au
- › Victorian Government's alcohol website, www.alcohol.vic.gov.au
- › DirectLine, tel. 1800 888 236 Confidential alcohol and drug counselling and referral, 24 hours, 7 days
- › Youth Substance Abuse Service, tel. 1800 014 446 24-hour counselling, support and referral for 12–21-year-olds
- › Family Drug Help, tel. 1300 660 068 A support service staffed by trained volunteers and professional counsellors
- › Parentline Victoria, www.parentline.vic.gov.au tel. 13 22 89.

More information

For more information on drugs and drug prevention contact the DrugInfo Clearinghouse on tel. 1300 8585 84, email druginfo@adf.org.au, or see our website www.druginfo.adf.org.au