

Influencing your child's alcohol consumption

Unfortunately, many parents believe that they can do little to influence their child's drinking behaviour. Research has shown us, however, that parents can make a real difference when it comes to alcohol consumption, particularly if they follow some positive parenting strategies.

The following areas have been identified as having an impact on a child's future drinking behaviour:

- **Parental monitoring**
- **Parental relationship**
- **Parental behaviour management**
- **Parents' drinking behaviour**
- **Parents' involvement in the introduction of alcohol to their children**

Unfortunately, many parents believe that they can do little to influence their child's drinking behaviour. Some believe that drinking and getting drunk occasionally is just a phase that all teenagers go through and that it is simply a rite of passage into adulthood. This is not true. We know that there are some young people who choose not to drink alcohol and sending the message that all do is dangerous. Research has shown us that parents can make a real difference when it comes to alcohol consumption, particularly if they follow some positive parenting strategies.

Parents who are aware of what activities their teenagers take part in and take an active interest in what their child does, who talk and listen to their children and model positive behaviour towards alcohol, are likely to have a positive effect on their child's future drinking. Of course, parents don't operate in a vacuum and there are many other social influences that come into play. However, parents should never underestimate the very real influence they can have on their child's attitude towards alcohol.

The following areas have been identified as having an impact on a child's future drinking behaviour:

Parental monitoring

Parents of primary school children are much more likely to monitor their children closely, making sure they know their movements, as well as who their friends are. This often begins to change in the early years of high school.

Many parents say they get tired or are busy and their child is older and needs to be treated more like an adult. However, the evidence suggests that it is worth the effort to continue to monitor your teenager in an age-appropriate manner. Young people raised by parents who are well aware of what their child is up to and who they are with have been shown to start drinking at a later age, tend to drink less, and are less likely to develop problematic drinking patterns in the future.

For more information on parental monitoring, please see the fact sheet 'Parental monitoring and its impact on alcohol and other drug use'.

Parental relationship

It is vital that parents try to maintain a positive and open relationship with their child through adolescence. It's not always going to be easy but the ability to communicate any concerns you may have about the activities they are involved in is vital. Children who feel they are able to communicate and talk openly with their parents about a range of issues are more likely not to drink or drink in moderation compared to young people who do not have such good relationships with their parents.

Parental behaviour management

Most parents use one or more of a range of strategies for managing their child's behaviour. These strategies can include the use of incentives, positive reinforcement and simply making sure their child knows that there are consequences for misbehaviour. Research has shown that parents

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who set positive family standards and rules, reward good behaviour and use negotiation skills appear to be able to delay the age their child starts to drink. On the other hand, strict discipline and lots of conflict in the home is linked to higher rates of teenage alcohol use. Also, the children of parents who appear to be more accepting of teenage drinking tend to drink more.

Parents' drinking behaviour

From a very early age young people are bombarded with messages, both positive and negative, from the people around them regarding acceptable behaviour. Young people's drinking behaviour is no exception and often emulates that of their parents, i.e., if adults drink more, so too do their children. Positive role-modelling is possibly the most important tool a parent has to convey information to their child about alcohol and its use.

Parents' involvement in the introduction of alcohol to their children

We are still finding out the best way for parents to introduce alcohol to their children. On the one hand, there is research to suggest that parents can have a positive influence on their child's drinking behaviour by allowing them small amounts of alcohol and trusting their child's ability to act responsibly and drink in moderation. That said, it is important to bear in mind that if parents do not set clear boundaries around drinking at the same time, their child is likely to drink more. On the other hand, findings from other studies suggest that introducing your child to alcohol at an early age, even in a family context, could lead to future binge drinking.

One thing, however, is now becoming extremely clear and that is the age that alcohol should not be introduced to adolescents. We now know more than we have ever done before on the effect of alcohol on the developing brain, and as result all experts agree that teenagers under 16 years of age should avoid alcohol. We now know that is important to delay the initiation of alcohol for as long as you can. The earlier a child starts using alcohol, the greater the possibility that they will develop problems with the drug in the future. This together with the information on the effect on adolescent brain development sends a very strong message to parents about the introduction of alcohol. Hold off for as long as you can!

For more information on this topic, please see the fact sheet 'Introducing your child to alcohol'.