

# Introducing your child to alcohol

**We are still finding out the best way for parents to introduce alcohol to their children. At present, the results from research are often contradictory.**

It is clear, however, that it is important to delay the initiation of alcohol for as long as possible. Put simply, the earlier a child starts using alcohol, the greater the possibility that they will develop problems with the drug in the future. One message to parents about the introduction of alcohol is clear - hold off for as long as you can!

With that in mind, here are some simple steps to follow when considering introducing alcohol to your child:

- **Be honest about your own alcohol use**
- **Create rules and boundaries**
- **Create meaningful consequences**
- **Make sure your child knows that rules are negotiable as they get older**

We are still finding out the best way for parents to introduce alcohol to their children. At present, the results from research are often contradictory. On the one hand, there is some 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, there are an increasing number of studies that suggest 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 about the effect of alcohol on the developing brain, and as a result all experts agree that teenagers under 16 years of age should avoid alcohol.

It is therefore important to delay the initiation of alcohol for as long as possible. Put simply, 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 its 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!

This is a comparatively new message and can be confusing for some parents who are desperate to do the 'right thing'. Parents still want to try to ensure that their child's first drink isn't one that takes place at a park late on a Saturday night, but providing it too early, even in the family home with a meal, without clear rules and boundaries, is likely to be just as problematic in other ways.

The most important factor to remember here is 'individual difference'. Alcohol plays a different role in every family and that needs to be considered when planning how to introduce alcohol to your child.

No matter what your family's relationship with alcohol – whether you are teetotalers, whether you have a glass of wine with every family meal, or you simply have a brown paper bag under your arm with a couple of bottles in it every time you go out to socialise – there are a few simple steps to follow when considering introducing alcohol to your child:

## Be honest about your own alcohol use

Have a discussion with your partner about the role alcohol plays in your family's life – i.e., does it play an important part? Are you teetotalers or regular drinkers? You need to remember that your child has learnt a great deal about the role alcohol plays in the family simply by watching you.

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### Create rules and boundaries

Based on that discussion, create your family rules and boundaries around alcohol. Rules should always be made with your children present as they need to have some degree of ownership of the rules that will affect their lives, as well as understanding why they exist, i.e., you want to keep them safe.

Too often parents are fearful that they can't make restrictive rules around alcohol for their child as they will be seen as hypocritical. It needs to be remembered that drinking alcohol is an adult activity, similar to driving a car, and as a result, it is entirely appropriate for there to be different rules for young people than there are for adults.

### Create meaningful consequences

Unfortunately, many consequences that parents put into place when their child breaks rules are often made in anger and as a result usually don't work very well. This is particularly true of the favourite punishment of many parents – 'grounding'.

Whatever consequence a parent decides to use, make sure it is meaningful to the child and that it can be carried out with comparative ease. Grounding for days, weeks or months is simply going to be too difficult to carry out and it is important to remember that many young people have short memories and will quickly forget what they did wrong and then will end up simply resenting you and the lengthy punishment you gave to them.

Removal of mobile phone and loss of computer privileges are two of the best consequences that are currently popular with parents. Begin with short periods of time that they lose privileges – you will find this is just as effective and much easier for you to carry out.

### Make sure that your child knows that rules are negotiable as they get older

It is important to remember that the rules you set for a 15 year-old are not necessarily going to be as effective, or appropriate, when they reach the age of 17.

Start discussions about alcohol rules from around 12 years of age (it'll be much easier then – they're not interested and not yet going to parties or gatherings where they may be exposed to drinking at this point) and then revisit the rules every six months. It is important to reward good behaviour and so the rules should be slightly adjusted each time you meet. A parent's best negotiating tool is a curfew – i.e., what time do they need to be home by? But it is vital that the starting point is realistic – if your first curfew is midnight, where is there left to go?

### Every family will have a different way of dealing with this issue

While the jury is still out on the best way to introduce alcohol to young people, the best parents can do is examine the place that alcohol holds in their home and how use has and is being modelled. When you have that information, negotiate appropriate rules and boundaries with your teenager.

Obviously, young people need to learn to drink responsibly but they are most probably more likely to learn that from watching you and your family and friends over a period of time than from a teenage party they are going to attend on a Saturday night. One of the best ways to achieve a positive outcome (i.e., a healthy attitude towards alcohol) may be for parents and others to set the example of how, where and why to consume alcohol. Most importantly, this includes the valid and often ignored option of choosing not to drink at all.