

10 tips for parents of primary school-aged children around alcohol

All parents want their children to have healthy attitudes towards alcohol. The earlier you start the discussion, the greater the chance you have of having a positive influence in this area. There are three basic principles that can lead to their child having a healthy and positive attitude towards alcohol, as well as ensuring they are a little safer if they do choose to drink:

- **Never underestimate the power of role modelling**
- **Authoritative parenting, incorporating rules and consequences bound in unconditional love, reduces the risk of future risky drinking**
- **Delay, delay, delay – try to delay your child’s first drink of alcohol for as long as possible**

Here are 10 practical things that parents of primary school-aged children can do to help them make better choices around alcohol when they get older:

1. **Occasionally decline a drink of alcohol**
2. **Make your views about teen drinking clear**
3. **Create rules around alcohol and parties early**
4. **Sips of alcohol should be avoided**
5. **Find family activities where alcohol is not involved**
6. **Limit the number of invitees to the parties you host for your children**
7. **Identify a non-drinker in your family or friendship group**
8. **Don’t be afraid to say ‘no’ to your child**
9. **Decide on an ‘out’ word or phrase**
10. **Find your own ‘special activity’ that you and your child can do together at least once a week – just the two of you**

All parents want their children to have healthy attitudes towards alcohol. If their child does choose to drink when they are older, they want to do their very best to ensure that they drink responsibly and are as safe as possible. Too often parents wait until their child wants to try alcohol or is invited to a party where alcohol may be available before having a discussion about their expectations when it comes to teen drinking.

The earlier you start the discussion, the greater the chance you have of having a positive influence in this area. In fact, parents of primary school-aged children, in particular, have a great opportunity to make a real impact in this area and if you put effort in early, there is a real possibility that you will not need to work quite as hard in the teen years.

There are three basic principles that can lead to their child having a healthy and positive attitude towards alcohol, as well as ensuring they are a little safer if they do choose to drink:

1. **Never underestimate the power of role modelling**
2. **Authoritative parenting, incorporating rules and consequences bound in unconditional love, reduces the risk of future risky drinking**
3. **Delay, delay, delay – try to delay your child’s first drink of alcohol for as long as possible**

With these three things in mind, here are 10 practical things that parents of primary school-aged children can do to help them make better choices around alcohol when they get older:

1. Occasionally decline a drink of alcohol

Such a simple thing to do but so powerful! If you are a non-drinker then you are already making a very strong statement about your views on alcohol by showing your child that you do not need to drink to socialise. If you do drink alcohol, however, a simple gesture of putting your hand over a glass when you are offered a drink at a family function or out with friends says so much to your child. It demonstrates that you can say ‘no’ when you want to and that you are able to

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socialise with others without having to have a drink. Make a big deal about this or do it begrudgingly, however, and it will have the opposite effect – children will very quickly pick up on actions that are not genuine.

2. Make your views about teen drinking clear

When parents disapprove of teen drinking, adolescents are less likely to drink, and, if they choose to drink, will drink less. Not surprisingly, when parents tolerate or approve of teen drinking, they are likely to drink more. Making your views clear when your children are younger is important, ensuring that at the same time you also clearly explain your reasons for your stance, e.g., you love them and you want them to be healthy and safe.

3. Create rules around alcohol and parties early

If you make these rules before they want to drink or start being invited to parties where alcohol may be present you are going to make your life so much easier in the future. Try to make a rule around a party the first time they get invited to one and you are highly likely to find yourself in all sorts of trouble! On the other hand, if you sit with your 12 year-old and discuss your family rules around alcohol (i.e., “alcohol is adult activity, you’re not to drink!”), well before they’ve even thought about drinking, you’re not going to meet nearly as much resistance. In fact, most 12 year-olds are going to be quite surprised that the issue was raised and will probably accept the rules without question. As your child grows older these rules will change and you need to remember to reward good behaviour, but having something in place early is going to be helpful. It is important to remember that rules around alcohol are not just for teenage parties, they need to be for all events – family functions (dinners and BBQs), special events (weddings, New Year’s Eve) and the like.

4. Sips of alcohol should be avoided

Some people believe that letting a child have a sip of alcohol when they are young could help ‘demystify’ the product and teach them to drink responsibly. This is common practice in European countries such as Italy or Greece but Australian research suggests that we live in a very different culture and giving sips of alcohol to children here simply sends them the message that their parents don’t mind them drinking.

Experts have also found little, if any, evidence of any protective benefits associated with the practice. In fact, there is research that now suggests that sips at an early age could lead to alcohol problems later in life. Some studies have shown that having a sip before 10 leads to having “more than a sip” before age 15. Even though the research is not conclusive, most experts believe it is best to err on the side of caution and avoid providing sips of alcohol to children if at all possible.

5. Find family activities where alcohol is not involved

Sadly this can be one of the most difficult things to do for some parents. Alcohol is such a huge part of our culture and central to many activities we take part in but it is important for children to see that it is possible to have fun with families and friends and not drink alcohol. Of course, there are family excursions such as a visit to a museum or playing in the park where alcohol is highly unlikely to play a role, but trying to find alcohol-free activities involving socialising with other adults where your children are also present can be difficult. As a result, sometimes you just need to make your own rules in the activities you organise for you and your friends and family. Having a child’s birthday party and not making alcohol available for the adults is a great idea but unfortunately is not always popular. Ask for a picnic in a park with friends to be alcohol-free and there may be raised eyebrows at the very least, but it can be worth it in terms of the positive role modelling it provides to the young people present.

6. Limit the number of invitees to the parties you host for your children

The recent trend of inviting your child’s whole class to a birthday party or the like may seem the ‘right thing to do’ (i.e., you don’t want to exclude anyone and you want to ensure your own child doesn’t get excluded from any parties) and it may be almost manageable when there are only 15 children in the group, but fast forward a few years and you could be dealing with 150 teens (and sometimes even far more) in a year group and due to the expectations you have set early, your son or daughter is going to want to invite everyone of them to whatever party you host! A good rule of thumb to go by for any birthday is to invite the same number of guests as there will be candles on the cake – i.e., invite 6 children to a 6 year-old’s party, 10 to a 10 year-old’s and so on. A number of parenting experts also recommend the ‘age plus one’

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rule. Limiting the number of invitees not only makes your life a little easier in the years ahead by reducing your child's expectations, it also teaches your son or daughter a number of important life lessons. At some stage in their life they will either be the inviter, invited or uninvited – they will learn something from each of these experiences.

7. Identify a non-drinker in your family or friendship group

As already said, if you or your partner is a non-drinker then your child is picking up some valuable messages about alcohol and its role in socialising in your family. It's also important to acknowledge that if you drink responsibly you're also practising positive role modelling! If you do drink alcohol, however, finding and identifying a non-drinker in your family or friendship group can be extremely useful in exposing your child to the fact that some people don't drink alcohol and that's absolutely normal. There are three types of drinking – risky drinking, responsible drinking and non-drinking. We discuss the first two but rarely, if ever, acknowledge the third as a valid choice. If it is spoken about it is usually in the context of that person having a problem, i.e., they are an alcoholic. It is important not to make a big deal about the fact that this person doesn't drink – they certainly shouldn't be presented as something 'special' – it's that different adults make different choices around lots of things, including alcohol, some people will drink, others won't – it's a personal choice and that's ok!

8. Don't be afraid to say 'no' to your child

'No' is most probably the most important word a child will hear from their parents apart from 'I love you'. Children learn discipline, self-control and how to delay self-gratification when they are told no by their parents. No child likes being told that they can't do or have something they want and the response parents get from their child when they are told no is why many buckle and give in. Never forget that the only reason you have rules is because you love them and keep them safe – make that clear and then walk away. Always remember that you cannot control how your child feels about the limits you set or how they react to them, so going over and over why you have said no to them, hoping for a change in their response is really a waste of time. You are only able to control yourself and your behaviour. Give up and buckle and you are going to make it so much more difficult for yourself in

the future, establishing that 'no means no' when they are younger lays the foundation for the battles you are bound to have when they hit their teens.

9. Decide on an 'out' word or phrase

Peer influence is starting at a younger and younger age and deciding on an 'out' word or phrase to help them get out of situations and still 'save face' can be extremely helpful, particularly if it's done nice and early. Ask your child if they have ever been in a situation with their friends which they found difficult or uncomfortable. Talk about peer and social pressure and maybe discuss some of the things that you do to help you through difficult situations. Let them know that everyone, even adults, need assistance in trying to deal with peer and social pressure. With your child, come up with an 'out' word or phrase that can be used in either a text message, a phone call or a conversation whenever he or she wants to be taken out of a situation (make sure that it is not a word that is not likely to come up in everyday conversation very often – a person's name or a particular relative can work well). Let them know that you're happy to be the 'bad guy' and will take the blame at any time to help them get out of situations they feel uncomfortable in.

10. Find your own 'special activity' that you and your child can do together at least once a week – just the two of you

We know that the quality of the parent-child relationship is a key factor that influences all interactions that take place – the evidence is clear, high quality parent-adolescent relationships result in lower levels of alcohol use. If you get the foundations built when your child is in primary school and you are able to keep that connection as they enter their teens, they are more likely to talk to you about alcohol and other issues that may arise in their life and you will experience far less conflict as a result. Too often parents think that an activity like this has to take a great deal of time and as a result they don't make the effort to put one into place, in fact, you spend even 5 minutes a week of real quality time with your child and that can work wonders. On the other hand, have an hour of 'Dad-time' with you on your phone for half of it and it won't work! The key to finding the right activity is that it has to be fun for both of you, distraction free (no electronic devices that can interrupt you) and something neither of you does with anyone else!