"Why should I be worrying about alcohol now?"

10 simple things primary school parents can do to help ensure their child makes healthy decisions around alcohol in the future

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Outline of presentation

- my observations of parenting practices – what are some parents thinking?
- how many young people drink alcohol?
- what do we know now about the impact of alcohol on young people that we didn't know in the past?
- three basic parenting principles around alcohol
- 10 practical tips for parents
Does any parent really want their teen to drink?

Most probably not ... however ...

- small minority simply don't care – abusive in their response
- there are certainly cultural issues to consider – drinking small amounts in a family context is a 'tradition'
- some desperately want to be their child's friend and are frightened of saying 'no'
- "we all did it ... there's nothing wrong with us!"
- others may want to relive their adolescence by drinking with their teens or 'becoming one of the gang'
- it's just too hard and whatever they do, it won't make a difference

What does the evidence say – can you make a difference?
Of course you can, if you put some effort into it and be a parent!

No parent wants to be 'hated' but giving your child everything they want to avoid conflict is problematic

They need to hear 'no' regularly ... there also needs to be age-appropriate monitoring

Allowing your 14 year-old son or daughter to go to a sleepover without checking up on them is not appropriate!

Put simply, if you want to prevent or delay drinking and/or illicit drug use

- know where your child is
- know who they're with, and
- know when they'll be home

On what planet does this story make any sense?
Is it any surprise that teens expect so much at their parties?

Details of a 1 year old birthday party as reported in a recent media story ...

- Pocahontas and teepees
- a balloon artist and a face painter
- a petting zoo with 35 animals
- a cowboy and Indian photo booth
- Wild West themed snacks, plus "gorgeous champagne and incredible food" for adults

"You know how you have bridezillas who want everything because their best friend had it? We now get people calling and asking what their friends had for their kids party, and then asking for the next level up. If their friend had two entertainers, they want three. If their friend spent $2000 they want to spend $3000."

Sunday Herald, 2 November 2014
"School leavers wanting to impress are treating the year 12 formal as a dress rehearsal for their wedding day, spending six months planning their outfits and parting with large amounts of money to get the perfect look for the night. They are even arriving by helicopter at the venue, a practice begun in other states.

Red carpet looks have become the new standard for many Canberra school girls, while interstate students are increasingly eschewing limousine hire in favour of helicopter charters to take them to the formal venue in style ... The practice has become big business in Queensland and parts of NSW ..."
Alcohol

How about school-based young people? Is it getting worse?
The majority of young people across all age groups have tried alcohol, with use increasing as they get older. That said, it is important to remember that almost one in five Year 10 students have never consumed alcohol.
Australian secondary school students who describe themselves as non-drinkers (%), 2011

2011 ASSAD Survey (White & Bariola, 2011)

Even though many of them have tried alcohol, the vast majority of them still regard themselves as 'non-drinkers' until they reach 16 years of age.
Respondents were classified as 'non-drinkers' (never had a glass of alcohol), 'moderate drinkers' (had a full glass but not more than four drinks on a single occasion in the last month) or 'risky drinkers' (had more than four drinks on one or more occasions in the last month). Although there are more small numbers of 'risky drinkers' in Years 8 and 9, it is Year 10 where things begin to change.
So what does this mean for a parent of a primary school-aged child?

Just under half of all 12 year-olds have drunk alcohol

Many of these have simply had a sip of alcohol but a small group have had much more, with some even drinking regularly

'Non-drinking' is the norm however ...

- they continue to be exposed to alcohol, advertising and marketing, as well as a range of drinking behaviours
- perfect time to reinforce positive and healthy attitudes towards alcohol
Average number of drinks consumed by current drinkers in past seven days, by age and gender, 2011

2011 ASSAD Survey (White & Bariola, 2011)

Unfortunately 'current drinkers' consumed a lot of alcohol. Across all ages, average drinking levels reported exceeded recommended levels for adults.
Why shouldn't young people be drinking?

Growing evidence that we should be delaying alcohol use for as long as possible – key concerns …

- the developing brain
- increased risk of liver disease
- increased cancer risk, particularly breast cancer in young women
- the earlier you drink, the greater risk of future alcohol problems, including dependency
- more likely to be sexually active at earlier ages, to have sexual intercourse more often, and to have unprotected sex
- more likely to be victims of violent crime, including rape, aggravated assault, and robbery
Alcohol

What is the impact on the developing brain?
Alcohol and the developing brain

Alcohol damages two areas of the brain that undergo major changes in adolescence

- the hippocampus deals with memory and learning - suffers the worst damage. Those who drink more and for longer have significantly smaller hippocampi (up to 10% smaller)
- the prefrontal area undergoes most change during adolescence - teen drinking could cause severe changes, affecting the formation of adult personality and behaviour

If a young person is going to drink alcohol at this time - make sure it is a small amount and that they do not drink regularly. However, the evidence clearly indicates that they should not drink at all
Alcohol and the developing brain

These brain scans show the possible impact that alcohol can have on the adolescent brain

- The first shows a 15 year-old non-drinker - the pink and orange indicates healthy activity, particularly in the prefrontal area and the hippocampus

- The bottom one shows a 15 year-old heavy drinker - an unhealthy brain with little or no activity in the key areas
Three simple parenting principles around alcohol

Research shows that parents have a major influence on their child's drinking behaviour, even during adolescence:

- **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
What has your teen learnt about alcohol and socializing from watching you?

Role-modelling
Different parenting styles have been identified, with one being the most effective in limiting future risky drinking.
Different types of parenting styles have been identified:

- **authoritarian** (strictness but not warmth)
- **authoritative** (warmth and strictness)
- **indulgent** (warmth but not strictness)
- **neglectful** (neither warmth nor strictness)
"The single most important thing parents can do to raise healthy, happy and successful kids is to practice authoritative parenting"

Laurence Steinberg in 'Age of Opportunity'

Steinberg says it's crucial that parents excel in three areas:

- **be warm** – "you can't spoil a child with love" – you want to build your child's sense of feeling loved, valued and protected
- **be firm** – "set rules that are grounded in logic and purpose" and make adjustments as they get older and reward good behaviour
- **be supportive** – "gradually relinquish control and try to permit – rather than protect – when you can". If you decide to say 'no', explain why
10 practical tips

1. Occasionally decline a drink of alcohol
   - by simply putting your hand over a glass and saying "I'm not drinking tonight" – you're making a very strong statement. Don't make a big deal about it and do it because you want to ...

2. Make your views about teen drinking clearly understood
   - work out what your stand is, explain it to your child and your reasons behind it

3. Create rules around alcohol and parties early
   - wait until they first get invited to a party where alcohol may be present and it'll be a nightmare. Alcohol rules for this age group are simple – 'No!' Rules need to apply to all events, including family parties, NYE and the like ...
10 practical tips

4. Sips of alcohol should be avoided
   - little, if any, evidence that this has a protective benefit. Research has found having a 'sip' before the 10 leads to riskier drinking by 15

5. Find family activities where alcohol is not involved
   - can be hard if you're socializing with other adults – shows children that you don't need alcohol to have a 'good time'

6. Limit number of invitees to parties you host for your children
   - inviting whole classes sets up expectations for the future- it may only be a class of 15 in pre-school but it becomes a year group of 150 by Year 10. They also learn a lot from being the inviter, the invitee and the non-invited
10 practical tips

7. Identify a non-drinker in your family or friendship group
   - let's them know that choosing not to drink is an option – don't make a big deal about it – it's normal and it's ok!

8. Don't be afraid to say 'no' to your child
   - say 'no' when appropriate, explain why you say it and establish early that 'no means no' – you're not going to buckle

9. Decide on an 'out' word or phrase
   - peer influence starts early and sometimes they need help getting out of situations and still 'save face'. Decide on an 'out' word or phrase early and stick to it and it can help them (and you) through their whole teen years
10 practical tips

10. Find a 'special activity' for you and your child to do together at least once a week

- higher quality parent-adolescent relationships result in lower levels of alcohol use – get it right early and maintain it is the best way forward ...
- as they get older your relationship will change – it has to so don't fight it! Find new ways of staying connected, particularly as they enter high school and peers start to become much more influential
For further information
or you are interested in more of what I have to say ...

*Teenagers, Alcohol and Drugs* is available at your local bookstore or on-line

For a PDF copy of this presentation or a list of references and supporting information, please go to my website - [www.darta.net.au](http://www.darta.net.au)

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