

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 talking with your child about drinking, as well as demonstrating a good example, the greater the likelihood that you will have a positive influence in this area.

There are three basic principles that help ensure your child has a healthy and positive attitude towards alcohol and is safer if they do choose to drink in the future:

- **be a good role model**
- **use an authoritative parenting approach that combines strictness and warmth**
- **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 in support of these principles:

1. **Set a good example**
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. **Spend quality time with your child – perhaps find a 'special activity' that you both can do together each week**

All parents want their children to have healthy attitudes towards alcohol and, if their child does choose to drink when they are older, they want 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 on your child's attitude and behaviour in relation to alcohol. 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 help ensure your child has a healthy and positive attitude towards alcohol and is safer if they do choose to drink in the future:

- **be a good role model**
- **use an authoritative parenting approach that combines strictness and warmth**

- **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 in support of these principles:

1. Set a good example

If you are a non-drinker then you are already making a 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, there are things you can do to positively influence your child's attitude and behaviour. Limit your alcohol use in front of your children, and occasionally, decline the offer of a drink. The 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 socialise without alcohol.

It is also important not to give the impression that alcohol is fun or that alcohol is a good way to deal with stress. It is especially important not to get drunk

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

in front of your children. It becomes much more difficult to positively influence your child if you do not set a good example.

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 rules before your child wants to drink or starts being invited to parties where alcohol may be present, you are going to make your life easier in the future. Creating rules the first time your child gets invited to a party will be much more difficult. For example, if you talk with your 12-year-old and discuss your family rules around alcohol (i.e. "Alcohol is an adult activity, you're not to drink!"), before they've even thought about drinking, you're less likely to meet resistance. In fact, most 12-year-olds are going to be surprised that the issue was raised and are more likely to accept the rules without question. As your child grows older, these rules will change 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 should apply to all events including family dinners and BBQs, as well as special occasions, such as weddings and New Year's Eve.

4. Sips of alcohol should be avoided

Some people believe that letting a child have a sip of alcohol when they are can help 'demystify' the substance and teach them to drink responsibly. This is common practice in European countries such as Italy or Greece. Australian research, however, suggests that we live in a very different culture and giving sips of alcohol to children here simply sends 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, research 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

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 family and friends and not drink. Of course, there are family excursions such as a visit to a museum or playing in the park where alcohol is unlikely to play a role, but trying to find alcohol-free activities involving socializing 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. Similarly, an alcohol-free picnic in a park with friends may cause raised eyebrows, 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 may seem the 'right thing to do', i.e., you don't want to exclude anyone and you want to ensure your child gets invited to future events. While this may be manageable when there are only 15 children in the group, fast forward a few years and you could be dealing with 150 teens or more in a year group.

A good rule of thumb for any birthday is to invite the same number of guests as there are 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' 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

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

or uninvited – they will learn something from each of these experiences.

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

If you do drink alcohol, 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 and that's absolutely normal. 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'. Different adults make different choices around lots of things, including alcohol and 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 and self-control 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 want to keep them safe – make that clear and then walk away.

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 usually a waste of time. You are only able to control yourself and your behaviour. Give up 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 disputes 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 discuss strategies that you use to help yourself

get 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 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. Spend quality time with your child – perhaps find a 'special activity' that you can do together each week

The quality of the parent-child relationship is a key factor that influences all aspects of parenting. Evidence shows that high quality, warm and supportive 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 are less likely to experience conflict as a result.

Spending quality time with your child is important. Children feel more loved when they are listened to and taken seriously and they are also more likely to follow rules if they feel they've been involved in creating them. Too often parents think that this has to take a great deal of time and, because of busy lifestyles, struggle to connect with their children on a regular basis. However, five minutes here and there, perhaps in the car or last thing at night each day, can work wonders.

Finding a special activity that you and your child can do once a week is also a great way of ensuring you spend quality time together. This need not involve vast amounts of time or money. Twenty minutes of quality time is much better than 1-2 hours of time spent with either you or your child distracted by a smartphone. Talk with your child and find an activity that is fun for both of you, distraction free (no electronic devices that can interrupt you) and something neither of you does with anyone else!