

Introducing your child to alcohol

Health professionals and parenting experts are still finding out the best way for parents to introduce alcohol to their children. What is clear is that alcohol consumption during childhood can have a detrimental effect on development and drinking during the teenage years is related to a wide range of health and social problems.

This means that the earlier a child starts using alcohol, the greater the risk of problems in the future. An important message to parents about the introduction of alcohol is clear: hold off for as long as you can!

The research evidence is unclear about the potential benefits and risks of allowing children to have small amounts of alcohol.

Key steps to follow when considering introducing alcohol to your child include:

- **delay your child's first drink of alcohol for as long as possible**
- **be honest about your own alcohol use and be a good role model**
- **create rules and boundaries**
- **create meaningful consequences**
- **make sure your child knows that rules are negotiable as they get older**

Health professionals and parenting experts are still finding out the best way for parents to introduce alcohol to their children. At present, research findings are contradictory. 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 to act responsibly and drink in moderation. Other studies, however, have found that introducing your child to alcohol within a family context does not necessarily result in a responsible attitude to drinking. In fact, if parents do not set clear boundaries around drinking at the same time, their child is likely to drink more.

Alcohol plays a different role in every family. However, no matter whether you are teetotalers or you drink regularly, there are a few steps parents need to follow when considering introducing alcohol to your child.

Delay your child's first drink of alcohol for as long as possible

It is now clear that alcohol consumption during childhood can have a detrimental effect on the developing brain and drinking during the teenage years is related to a wide range of health and social problems. Put simply, the earlier a child starts using alcohol, the greater the risk of problems with the drug in the future. It is therefore important to delay

the initiation of alcohol for as long as possible. As a result, experts agree that teenagers under 16 years of age should avoid alcohol.

The advice to parents about the introduction of alcohol is clear. 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 want to try to ensure that their child's first drink isn't one that takes place in 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 problematic in other ways.

Be honest about your own alcohol use and be a good role model

If you are considering introducing your child to alcohol, it is important to firstly examine your relationship with the drug. 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? Regardless of whether you have a glass of wine with every family meal, or you have a brown paper bag containing a couple of bottles under your arm each time you go out to socialize – 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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Once you have established what role it does play in your family, talk about that relationship with your child and discuss what you believe is appropriate adult behaviour around alcohol and drinking.

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, don't always work particularly 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. It is also important to remember that young people usually have short memories. As a result they quickly forget what they did wrong and end up simply resenting you and the lengthy punishment you gave to them.

Removal of a mobile phone and loss of computer privileges are two consequences that are currently popular with parents. Begin with short periods of time that they lose these 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 with your child from around 12 years of age. It'll be much easier at this time as your child will not be as interested in alcohol and parties or gatherings compared to later years. It is best to revisit the rules every six months or so.

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 you want them to be home? 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 that parents can do is examine the role alcohol plays in their family life and what messages this is sending to their child. 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) is for parents and others to set the example of how, when, where and why to consume alcohol. Most importantly, this includes the valid and often ignored option of choosing not to drink at all.