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# **Underage drinking - How to handle and prevent the situation**

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## **When and how do you get talking about alcohol?**

Medical guidance, is that an alcohol free childhood until the age of at least 15 is advised, and this is for very good reasons, as teenagers brains and livers are not fully developed, so they cannot break down alcohol. Alcohol has more of an effect so the risk of accidents and injury to themselves or others is high, and perhaps most importantly exam predictions suffer, falling by 20 points among those who drink weekly, that’s the difference between an A\* and a C. The key thing to remember as parents or carers however, is the more relaxed we are about alcohol in the home, the more likely our kids are to drink outside of it, at parties and in public places, and that’s where risk taking is most likely to happen. The same amount of alcohol has a much greater effect on the body and organs of a child or young person than on an adult, because their bodies (especially their brains and liver) are still growing and developing.

## **When and how to talk about alcohol**

Just 1% of 11 year olds think it is okay to get drunk or have been drunk, but by age 13 teenagers are looking more towards their peers and friends, so it’s important to get talking. Children as young as seven can recognise the difference between relaxed social drinking and drunkenness too, so we have to set a good example ourselves! Obviously the approach depends on the age of our children, but don’t leave it too late, age 11 is a great time to start talking, up to age 13, depending on the nature of your child and keep the conversation going.

Try to make the conversation natural, using something like a TV programmes and magazines can be a good place to start. If a celebrity has been photographed drunk after a night out, talk to your child about their perception of this, and whether they think it's glamorous or embarrassing. It’s an important conversation to have. "I use soaps, like Hollyoaks or Eastenders, to talk about how alcohol can alter characters' personalities and cause them to regret their actions when drunk," says Sarah Kelly, 45, from Staines, Kent, mum to Louise, 16 and Kate, 14. Car journeys are great too, as your child can avoid eye contact, and they can’t escape.

* Find a relaxed time when you can both chat, such as when you are giving them a lift, or watching TV rather than when they are half way out the door or with their friends.
* Talk about how they may feel or what they may do under pressure, in difficult situations such as being offered a drink, or being offered a lift home by a friend who has been drinking.
* Talk openly and honestly about the potential dangers of binge drinking. Make it an inclusive discussion, not a lecture.
* If you do drink, be honest about your own choices, rather than just presenting the negatives.
* Talk about how alcohol can influence people's judgement and help them to think through how it might feel to regret something the next day.
* Make them aware of drinks being spiked and how to avoid putting themselves in vulnerable situations. Encourage them and their friends to look out for each other.
* Explore how alcohol affects people in different ways, and how it can make some people aggressive and violent. Talk through ways of keeping safe and walking away from trouble.
* Ensure your teen knows that, no matter how angry you may be with them, you are there for them, and that they can call you if someone gets hurt or they are worried about something.
* Try not to take it personally or feel downhearted if they don't take your advice. Sometimes teens have to make their own mistakes to realise that what you have said is true.

## **Will they listen to me?**

You may think they don’t listen, but 70% of children ages 8 to 17 say their parents are the number one influence on whether they drink alcohol. Parents weren’t seen by most teenagers as good role models, or set ground rules that they stuck to. Only 21% said their parents were good role models. 55% of young people say that their school provides clear rules but only 27% say they have to abide by clear rules and consequences in their family, or that their parents keep track of where they are. So what can you do? There are some really practical ways to delay teenage drinking.

* Encourage sports, hobbies, clubs and social activities that keep your kids busy. Kids say hanging around with nothing to do is a key reason for drinking.
* If you work, try and share child care with friends during holidays, could they volunteer? Odd jobs for friends? Public places such as parks or the beach is where young people drink outside of the home (other than at private parties).
* Make sure that you know the facts and laws about alcohol and can talk in a balanced way about the pros and cons of drinking, then you’ll be more equipped to talk and listen to your teenager and to understand the pressures they’re facing from their peers and wanting to fit in.
* Make sure that the house rules are clear, agree them together and what will happen if they are broken, they should change as they mature and you feel they can be trusted more too.
* If your teenager is going to a party, drop them off and pick them up, or book a taxi. It’s hard to hide having had too much to drink and it shortens the time spent at the party. Try and avoid sleepovers after parties in particular.
* Although your teenager will hate it, check where they are going and who they are with and if their plans are genuine.
* Be careful where you leave alcohol in the house.

Aside from the health risks associated with underage drinking, drinking to get drunk (40% of 15 year olds say they’ve been drunk at least once) means many teens are risking their sexual health. Experts say 14 and 15 year olds who drink are more likely to engage in sexual activity with 11% of 15 to 16 year olds admitting to unprotected sex while drunk. These are not the only problems. Helena Conibear of The Alcohol Education Trust says: "There are strong links between drinking high levels of alcohol and youth offending, teenage pregnancy, truancy and exclusion from school." Nearly half of all 10 to 17 years’ old who drink once a week or more admit to some sort of criminal activity or disorderly behaviour, around two-thirds get into an argument and about a fifth get into a fight.

## **Setting a good example**

Parents' drinking habits are an important factor in the way children experience alcohol. Almost half (49%) of 16 and 17 year-olds questioned by Drinkaware charity said they had seen their parents drunk, and therefore think this approach to booze is normal. A recent Finnish study found that where parents drank a lot, their teenagers tended to as well either following their parent's example or because drinking made the parent laxer in monitoring their children's comings and goings, and more heavy-handed in disciplining them. That, in turn, increased the children's likelihood of drinking and getting drunk.

Look at your own behaviour around drink. Do you come home from work and reach for a bottle? Drink every day? Only feel relaxed with a glass in your hand? These gestures send a powerful message to your children, so try and cut down.

Source: <https://www.familylives.org.uk/advice/teenagers/drugs-alcohol/underage-drinking/>