



PARENTS' GUIDE

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

Let's have positive and honest conversations
about alcohol with young people.

WHY IS UNDERAGE DRINKING SO DANGEROUS?

The UK Chief Medical Officers recommend that an alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option and for good

reason. Statistics show that a young person who consumes alcohol underage is at increased risk of the 7 factors presented here:

1

LONG-TERM DAMAGE TO A STILL-DEVELOPING BRAIN

Your child's brain will continue developing until their early twenties. Drinking alcohol can damage young people's brain development, especially the critical parts that help them with learning, planning, concentration, emotional stability and memory, all of which are still growing and forming.

2

EXPOSURE TO RISKY SITUATIONS

Alcohol can lower inhibitions which can make it more likely for young people to make risky decisions and find themselves in vulnerable or dangerous situations such as getting into fights, engaging in anti-social behaviour or having unprotected sex. They are also more likely to be victims of crime, particularly muggings or physical or sexual assault.

3

PROBLEMS WITH MENTAL HEALTH AND ANXIETY

43% of young people who drink alcohol have reported they are drinking to cheer themselves up or to forget about problems. However, evidence suggests alcohol intake in itself can lead to increased anxiety, depression and other mental health problems.

4

BEING INJURED OR INVOLVED IN AN ACCIDENT

Lower body weight and limited ability to metabolise alcohol can severely affect young people's mental and physical abilities, especially judgment and co-ordination which can often lead to accidents and injuries.

5

UNDER-PERFORMING AT SCHOOL

Because of the impact of alcohol on memory function, reaction times, learning ability and attention span in young developing brains, underage drinking can significantly affect school grades.

6

ALCOHOL POISONING

Anyone who drinks a lot in a short space of time can suffer alcohol poisoning and this can be fatal; in 2014 there were nearly 4,000 admissions of under-18s to A&E in England with alcohol poisoning.

7

ORGAN DAMAGE

Sustained and regular intake of alcohol can damage many organs, including the liver, heart, stomach and brain. Those who begin drinking in their teens are at particular risk of developing alcoholic liver disease at a young age.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TALK ABOUT UNDERAGE DRINKING?

As parents or carers, you are in a unique position to positively influence your children's attitude towards underage drinking as well as their relationship with alcohol once they reach legal drinking age.

Your child will adopt a healthier attitude towards alcohol the more you talk to them about it and the sooner you start the conversation the better. You can make sure they understand the risks and dangers associated with underage drinking and help them make informed and responsible decisions around alcohol as they grow older.

WHY MIGHT MY CHILD WANT TO DRINK ALCOHOL?

PEER PRESSURE


Peer pressure can be a major factor in underage drinking as young people try to keep up with their friends to fit in. A key element of growing up is forming new social bonds outside of the family and so if drinking alcohol is seen to be the norm, your child may want to join in to feel accepted by their peers. Helping them develop strategies to overcome peer pressure is very important.

RISKY BEHAVIOURS

Risky behaviour is higher in teenagers and young people because the part of the brain that assesses risks and consequences and governs self-control is not fully developed yet. Hormonal changes also switch on the sensation-seeking part of the brain which can lead to impulsive behaviours and is why young people may take risks deliberately even when they 'know better'. That's why they need you to help them until they grow into their ability to be sensible.

COPYING ADULTS

Young people may copy your drinking habits so if they regularly see you reach for an alcoholic drink at the end of a long day to relieve stress and tiredness, or to calm you down if you're upset, or to celebrate success with friends, they may subconsciously start to think that alcohol is the answer for everything. The example you set can be very important in protecting them against underage drinking.



Understanding why your child may want to drink alcohol can help you influence them to make sensible choices.

WORRIES AND STRESS

Teenagers may have worries or problems they want to escape from and wrongly think alcohol is a way to cope with stress. Growing up can be difficult and young people can have worries about many things including friends, school, family, body image, social media and so on. We need to recognise they might feel alcohol could be the solution and then we can help them find other ways of dealing with these issues. Again, parents play an important role in helping children learn to solve problems and in building resilience, confidence and positive self-esteem.

GROWING UP

Teenagers want to prove they are no longer children so if drinking is for adults only, they'll want to show you and everyone else they are adults... by drinking! The more you acknowledge and respect their growing maturity and give them appropriate independence and responsibility, the more they will accept the rationale behind your boundaries around underage drinking.

KNOW THE LAW IN THE UK

Being clear on the law around alcohol is important for both parents and children. The law isn't simply about knowing right from wrong. It's a reminder of the potential consequence of drinking alcohol underage.



If you're under 18, it's against the law:

- For someone to sell you alcohol
- To buy or try to buy alcohol
- For an adult to buy or try to buy alcohol for you
- To drink alcohol in licensed premises (e.g. a pub or restaurant)



If a person is under 18 and drinking alcohol in public, they can be stopped, fined or arrested by police.



If someone is 16 or 17 and accompanied by an adult, they can drink (but not buy) beer, wine or cider with a meal.

TOP TIPS FOR TALKING ABOUT ALCOHOL WITH YOUR CHILD

GET THE TONE RIGHT

The best way to talk with your child about alcohol is to sit down and have an open, honest talk. Make sure it's a conversation rather than a lecture and listen as much as you talk and without judgement or criticism. This encourages young people to open up too and when they feel that you'll listen with respect and answer honestly, they'll come to you more often with their challenges and issues.

ADDRESS PEER PRESSURE

Talk to your child about how they can manage peer pressure and help them develop the confidence to say no, explaining this doesn't mean they are being rude or boring. Show them how to avoid being pressured to do something by learning to be assertive. Help them try out different strategies such as coming up with ideas for other things they can do with their friends and peers. Most importantly, make sure they know this is all part of them learning to look after themselves.

GIVE THEM INFORMATION AND FACTS

Young people at this age are learning to make more decisions for themselves. By sharing information about the risks, dangers and potential consequences of drinking underage and supporting them in making their own decisions, you will help them to become independent and take responsibility for themselves.

EXPLAIN WHY IT MATTERS TO YOU

No matter what they might say, your children will pay attention to what you say and value your advice, especially if you work hard to listen to them and value their ideas, thoughts and opinions too. Make sure they understand you are not trying to spoil their fun but that you want the best for them and for them to reach their full potential and be happy, healthy and successful in life.

BE A ROLE MODEL FOR THEM

Parents can have a very positive influence through their own approach to alcohol. If you choose to drink, role model an approach to your drinking habits that you would be happy for your child to replicate when they are 18 and above. Research shows that children are more likely to drink underage if their parents drink excessively. Try to avoid talking about alcohol as a cure for stress or as a tool for relaxation.

BE HONEST

Talk openly to your children about how alcohol can make you feel. Explain that feeling poorly the day after drinking or trying to remember the silly things you did while you were drinking aren't fun. Let them know these effects would be worse for them as they're smaller and their bodies are still developing.



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TIPS FOR RESPONDING TO YOUR CHILD'S TRICKIEST QUESTIONS

Why do you and/or other adults drink alcohol?

YOU COULD SAY:

I sometimes enjoy having a drink when I'm out for dinner or catching up with friends. It's about drinking responsibly, I know the dangers of drinking too much and I avoid that.

YOU COULD SAY:

I did sometimes but looking back now I realise how risky it was and I wish I hadn't. I was nowhere near mature enough to really understand some of the vulnerable positions I placed myself in. We know so much more about the dangers of teenagers drinking now and the long-term damage it can cause.

Did you drink when you were underage?

My friends have all tried alcohol, so what's the big deal?

YOU COULD SAY:

To me it's a big deal because I know you're too young and that drinking at your age could put you in a dangerous situation and it's my job to keep you safe. I can't decide what other kids do but I know that even a small amount of alcohol could harm you at your age and I love you far too much to risk that.

**What if my
friends pressure
me to drink?**

YOU COULD SAY:

Peer pressure's tough, I remember how hard it can be, especially when you want to fit in. I hope you'll feel confident enough to be honest with your friends, tell them you don't want to drink and that you hope they'll respect your choice. Try and avoid situations where you think you might get pressured or suggest something else like going to the park or seeing a movie.

YOU COULD SAY:

It can be, especially at your age as your body is still developing. Drinking alcohol can make you less aware of danger, so you're more likely to find yourself in a vulnerable situation where you could get hurt or suffer some other consequence that could impact you well into the future. In the long-term, drinking alcohol on a regular basis increases the risk of developing a range of illnesses such as cancer, stroke, heart disease and liver disease.

**Is
drinking alcohol
dangerous?**

**Why can you drink
but I can't?**

It's not fair!

YOU COULD SAY:

It's not about fairness, there are plenty of things that aren't appropriate for children and teenagers for good reason. Your body and brain are still developing which means even small amounts of alcohol can be dangerous to you. It's also illegal to drink underage and making responsible decisions about alcohol isn't something that most teenagers are ready for. Alcohol is only for adults because their bodies have finished growing and even when your body is fully grown, too much alcohol can lead to problems.

THANKS FOR READING

Smashed Live is an empowering and relatable live theatre performance in schools, with interactive workshops for students, and resources for teachers and parents. Our goal is to reach five million young people by 2025.

Smashed is delivered by Collingwood Learning, an award-winning UK educational organisation.

Many thanks to Drinkaware for the facts & statistics contained in this leaflet. For more information about underage drinking and alcohol misuse visit www.drinkaware.co.uk

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