

Alcohol and parenting

Should I give my child alcohol? Should I drink around my child? How should I talk to my child about drinking? How parents should best help their children to develop a healthy relationship with alcohol is a hotly-debated topic. This factsheet aims to untangle some of the complexities and provide evidence-based advice as to the best approach.

The Chief Medical Officers (the top doctors) in England and Wales advise parents and carers that an alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option.¹ If children do drink alcohol, it should not be until they are at least 15. This is because children younger than 15 are particularly vulnerable to the effects of alcohol and are more at risk of developing alcohol-related problems when they are older.

Children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of alcohol and, if they drink, may be more at risk of developing alcohol-related problems when they're older.

There are also risks associated with alcohol for older teenagers. For example, during adolescence parts of the brain are still growing, and drinking alcohol could prevent these from growing properly, affecting learning skills and long-term memory.²

Still, many parents think that giving their children at least small amounts of alcohol is a way of helping them to learn about alcohol in a safe environment.³

Should I give my child alcohol?

While parents may feel that providing small amounts of alcohol may help their children develop a better relationship with alcohol, there is actually no strong evidence to show that this is the case. On top of that, if children drink regularly with their parents, or get intoxicated at a young age, they are more likely to drink heavily during their teens, and to drink later in life.⁴

There's no strong evidence to show that parents giving teenagers small amounts of alcohol helps them to drink more responsibly.

How often parents drink with, or around, their children also matters. One recent study suggested that, while parents drinking too much is known to be linked to a range of negative outcomes for children, even relatively low-level alcohol consumption can sometimes impact negatively on parenting.⁵ A number of recent studies have found that where parents regularly drink with their children, as opposed to only on special occasions, this increased the risk that their children would go on to adopt risky drinking behaviours themselves.⁶

Is it legal to give my child alcohol?

It is illegal to give an alcoholic drink to a child under five, except under medical supervision in an emergency. It is not illegal for a child aged five and over to be given alcohol at home or on other private premises – but it's a bad idea!

Children under 16 are usually allowed in licensed premises (pubs and restaurants) with an adult, but they cannot have any alcoholic drinks. It is illegal to buy alcohol for anyone under 18 to drink in a pub or any other public place – the only exception is that young people aged 16 or 17 can drink beer, wine or cider bought by an accompanying adult to drink with a meal.

How can I help my child to develop a healthy relationship with alcohol?

Although parents may feel powerless in the face of peer pressure and alcohol marketing, research suggests that they can have a real influence on their children's behaviour, even older teenagers.⁷

Two approaches in particular are linked to lower risks of harmful drinking in adolescence:

- An authoritative parenting style. This means setting clear boundaries for behaviour, but also being open in discussing why those boundaries exist and the difficulties in sticking to them
- Parental monitoring. This doesn't mean keeping a constant eye on your children, but knowing where your children go, what kinds of things they get up to, and who their friends are

You can also think about your own drinking. Teenagers' attitudes to drinking are based in part on their ideas about how others use alcohol, and are often modelled on their parents' behaviour. They are the first to spot the difference between what parents say and do. A number of recent studies have found that where parents regularly drink with their children this increased the risk that their children would go on to adopt risky drinking behaviours themselves.

Parents who are regularly drunk around their children might not be able to provide them with the practical and emotional support they need. If you are worried about your drinking, contact your GP for confidential advice.

What if my child starts drinking too much?

Family members can feel isolated, anxious and even guilty when a loved one is experiencing drinking problems. There will be many other people in a similar situation, and help is available for you and your child, whether they are under 18 or an adult. Charities such as Adfam, DrugFam, Al-Anon and Nacoa exist to provide advice and support.



Tips for parents and carers

Here are some headline tips to help you support your children to have a healthy relationship with alcohol.

- Where possible, try to ensure that your children maintain an alcohol-free childhood, at the very least up to the age of 15
- Discuss with your children the pleasures and dangers associated with drinking, and be honest about your own drinking – children can spot hypocrisy a mile off
- Set consistent rules around drinking – talking to the parents of your children's friends and agreeing boundaries together might help
- Be aware of your own drinking behaviour – is binge drinking or appearing drunk in front of your children, or even drinking to reduce stress, setting an example that you would want them to follow?
- If you keep alcohol in the home, be aware of how accessible it is to your children

www.alcoholchange.org.uk

1 Department of Health (2009). Guidance on the consumption of alcohol by children and young people.

2 Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (2014). Alcohol and the developing adolescent brain: an evidence review.

3 Valentine, G. et al. (2010). Alcohol consumption and family life. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

4 Rossow, I. et al. (2015). Does parental drinking influence children's drinking: a systematic review of prospective cohort studies. *Addiction* 111.2.

5 Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (2018). Parental alcohol misuse and children; Institute of Alcohol Studies (2018). Like sugar for adults: the effect of non-dependent parental drinking on children and families.

6 Degenhardt, L. (2015). Does the social context of early alcohol use affect risky drinking in adolescents: prospective cohort study. *BMC Public Health* 15:1137.

7 Yap, M. et al. (2017). Modifiable parenting factors associated with alcohol misuse: a systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *Addiction* 112.7.