

Alcohol and parenting: what's the best advice?

For parents and carers



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 parents with evidence-based advice as to the best approach.

Should children ever drink?

The Chief Medical Officers in England and Wales advise parents and carers that an alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option. If children do drink alcohol, it should not be until at least the age of 15 years. 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.

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 impact on their development, affecting learning skills and long-term memory.

What are other parents doing?

Many parents see giving alcohol to their children as a way of helping them learn about alcohol in a safe environment. A UK survey in 2009 of over 2,000 parents found most were happy for children to have a weak or watered down drink from the age of 14, and a full-strength drink from the age of 16.

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 in adolescence than those who don't.



Is it legal to give my child alcohol?

It is illegal to give an alcoholic drink to a child under five, even on private premises.

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 for a meal.

So 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, they can have a real influence on their children's behaviour, even older teenagers.

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

What about my 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. If you occasionally get drunk around your children, you will be sending a strong message that this is normal behaviour of which you approve.

How often parents drink around their children also matters. 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 in front of their children may also be displaying signs of alcohol dependency, which might mean that they can't provide their children with the practical and emotional support they need. If you are worried about your drinking, contact your GP for confidential advice.

Conclusion

Wider influences, such as advertising, peer pressure and the desire to experiment, will always be important factors in young people's drinking. Nevertheless, parents and carers can play a crucial role in developing their children's knowledge, skills and resilience around alcohol.



Tips for parents

- 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

Further support

- If you think you and/or your children may be drinking too much, contact **Drinkline** (England) on **0300 123 1110** or **Dan24/7** (Wales) on **0808 808 2234**
- For more general parenting advice, contact **Family Lives**, a national charity providing help and support in all aspects of family life. Visit **familylives.org.uk** or call Family Lives 24/7 Parentline advice line on **0808 800 2222**
- **Al-Anon** family groups provide support to anyone whose life is, or has been, affected by someone else's drinking, regardless of whether that person is still drinking or not. Visit **al-anonuk.org.uk**
- You can find more support services through **Adfam**. Visit **adfam.org.uk**
- To read our other factsheets about alcohol and families visit **alcoholconcern.org.uk/alcohol-awareness-week**