

Influencing your child's alcohol consumption

Parents and carers can make a real difference when it comes to positively influencing their child's alcohol use, particularly if they follow some effective parenting strategies.

Those that have been shown to have a positive impact on protecting children from alcohol harm, include:

- **monitoring your child's activities**
- **maintaining a good quality parent-child relationship**

- **using positive behaviour management techniques**
- **understanding how your drinking behaviour influences your child's drinking behaviour**
- **delaying the introduction of alcohol to your child**

Unfortunately, many parents believe that they can do little to influence their child's drinking behaviour. Some believe that drinking and getting drunk occasionally is just a phase that all teenagers go through and that it is simply a rite of passage into adulthood. This is not true. Some young people choose not to drink alcohol. Sending the message that all young people do is misleading and potentially harmful.

Research has shown that parents can make a real difference when it comes to positively influencing their child's alcohol consumption. Parents who are aware of what activities their teenagers take part in; take an active interest in what their child does; who talk and listen to their children and model positive behaviour towards alcohol, are likely to have a positive effect on their child's drinking behaviour now and in the future. Of course, parents don't operate in a vacuum and there are many other social influences that come into play. However, parents should never underestimate the very real influence they can have in this area.

The following parenting strategies have been shown to have a positive impact on protecting children from alcohol harm:

Monitoring your child's activities

Parents of primary school children are far more likely to monitor their children closely, making sure they know their movements, as well as who their friends are. This often changes in the early years of high school as parents either become tired or identify other priorities. Others believe that their child is

getting older and needs to be treated more like an adult. Evidence suggests, however, that it is worth the effort to continue to monitor your teenager in an age-appropriate manner. Young people, raised by parents who are well-aware of what their child is up to and who they are with, have been shown to start drinking at a later age; tend to drink less and are less likely to develop problematic drinking patterns in the future.

For more information on parental monitoring, please see the fact sheet 'Parental monitoring and its impact on alcohol and other drug use'.

Maintaining a good quality parent-child relationship

It is vital that parents try to maintain a positive and open relationship with their child through adolescence. It's not always easy but the ability to communicate any concerns you may have about your child's activities is vital. Children who feel they are able to communicate and talk openly with their parents about a range of issues are more likely not to drink, or drink in moderation, compared to those who do not have such positive relationships.

Using positive behaviour management techniques

Most parents use a range of strategies for managing their child's behaviour. These strategies can include the use of incentives, positive reinforcement and simply making sure their child knows that there are consequences for misbehaviour. Research

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has shown that parents who set positive family standards and rules; reward good behaviour and use negotiation skills appear to be able to delay the age their child starts to drink. On the other hand, strict discipline and lots of conflict in the home is linked to higher rates of teenage alcohol use. Also, the children of parents who appear to be more accepting of teenage drinking tend to drink more.

Understanding how your drinking behaviour influences your child's drinking behaviour

From a very early age, young people are bombarded with messages, both positive and negative, from the people around them regarding acceptable behaviour. Young people's drinking behaviour is no exception and often emulates that of their parents. Children raised in environments where parents get drunk are more likely to engage in alcohol-related risk behaviours. Arguably, positive role modeling is the most important tool a parent has to convey information to their child about alcohol and its use.

Delaying the introduction of alcohol to your child

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.

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!

For more information on this topic, please see the fact sheet 'Introducing your child to alcohol'.