

# Your kids and **alcohol**

**Facts and advice to  
help you take the  
right approach**



**drinkaware.co.uk**  
for the facts

Switch on the news or open the paper, and you're more than likely to see a story about **young people and alcohol**

**Binge-drinking** teens  
throwing up in the streets

**Alcohol-fuelled**  
**crime and violence**

**Drink-driving**  
**accidents**

# ...It's enough to make any parent **panic**

**The good news is there are fewer young people drinking, so a lot of the media coverage is 'hype'. However, those young people who do drink are drinking more. And let's face it: by the time they're in their early teens, most young people will have had an alcoholic drink.**

That means it's crucial that young people have the most accurate information on the risks and issues surrounding drinking so they can make informed decisions. Parents are in the best position to give this information.

A recent Drinkaware YouGov poll showed over a third of 16 and 17 year-olds would prefer to get information on alcohol from their parents.

It's best to start early. Drinkaware research shows children's openness to their parents' influence changes dramatically as they grow up. Between the ages of eight and 12, children generally accept what their parents say about alcohol. From 13 onwards, young people increasingly pay attention to their friends. However, you may still have more leverage with your children than you might think.

If you're preparing to talk to your kids about alcohol, this leaflet will answer some of the questions you may have.

**Growing numbers of children  
admitted to **hospital** with  
alcohol poisoning**

I got **plastered** last  
Friday night



# How much is **too much** for under-18s to drink?

## There are official guidelines.

There have been government guidelines on alcohol for adults for many years. They recommend that women should not regularly exceed 2-3 units daily and that men should not regularly exceed 3-4 units daily. However, it wasn't until 2009 that the Chief Medical Officer for England issued guidelines on alcohol for under-18s and their parents.

The guidance says:<sup>1</sup>

- An alcohol-free childhood is best. Children shouldn't drink before they're 15.
- If 15 to 17 year-olds drink, it should only be once in a while and definitely no more than once a week.
- If 15 to 17 year-olds drink they should be supervised by a parent or other adult.
- Parents can have a big influence on their children's drinking.
- Support needs to be provided for young people who have alcohol-related problems and their parents.

The Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Executive both promote similar ideas.

But how can you get your children to stick to these guidelines? Read on for information and look out for practical advice in these speech bubbles.

<sup>1</sup> The Department of Health, '5 point plan for an alcohol free childhood' [dh.gov.uk/en/News/Recentstories/DH\\_093912](http://dh.gov.uk/en/News/Recentstories/DH_093912)

# Should I keep alcohol and my **own drinking** out of sight?

**You shouldn't need to – but remember your children are watching and learning from you.**

Studies show the most important thing which you can do to help your children is to provide them with a good model by drinking sensibly yourself.<sup>2</sup> That means staying within the recommended guidelines (3-4 units a day for men, 2-3 for women).

Children will probably be curious and ask questions when they see you drinking. It's best to address these as they come up rather than let them think that alcohol is something mysterious to be kept secret. That could make them even more curious and more likely to drink.

**Make sure your children know the number of units in different drinks.**

There are 1.5 units in a small (125ml) glass of 12% wine and 2-3 units in a pint of standard beer. It's also important for young people to bear in mind that different brands of drinks vary in strength. For example, wine can range from 11-14% alcohol by volume.

The unit calculator on the Drinkaware website lets you see exactly how many units are in different measures and brands of drinks. See [drinkaware.co.uk](http://drinkaware.co.uk).

Your kids may ask why you can drink and they can't. Make sure they know that alcohol is more dangerous for young, developing bodies. For example, it can harm brain development. Also, people with smaller bodies or who aren't used to drinking regularly will feel the effect of alcohol more.

<sup>2</sup> Latendresse SL, Rose RJ, Viken RJ, Pulkkinen L, Kaprio J et al' Parenting Mechanisms in Links Between Parents' and Adolescents' Alcohol Use Behaviors' in Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research, 2008: Vol 32, Issue 2, pp 322-330

# Is it **dangerous** for under-18s to drink?

## **It can be.**

The immediate ill effects may be no more than a hangover, but young people, especially those who aren't used to the effects of alcohol, can easily drink far too much. Their bodies are generally smaller with low tolerance to alcohol, meaning they get drunk very quickly.

Every year, 10,000 young people aged 11 to 17 are admitted to hospital as a result of drinking. Over half of these – 6,000 children in fact – are under 16.

There are more serious concerns too:

- Alcohol plays a big part in antisocial behaviour, crime and violence as well as unprotected sex and teenage pregnancy.
- Alcohol can disrupt adolescent brain development, causing lasting problems with memory, attention span and reaction times.
- In later life, regular drinking can cause brain damage, cancer of the mouth, throat and gullet, cirrhosis of the liver, heart disorders and impotence.

Talk about the effects alcohol will have on your child's appearance (calories, skin dehydration) and relationships (falling out with friends or not being attractive to the opposite sex). It might be more effective than warning them about the long-term risks of drinking, which can seem a world away when you're a teenager.

## **Can I take my kids into a pub?**

The law varies slightly between England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

In general, under-16s are allowed in pubs accompanied by an adult, but can't drink and may have to leave by a certain time. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 16 and 17 year-olds can have wine, cider and beer bought for them to drink with a meal. In Scotland they can buy it themselves with a meal.

# Do children learn about alcohol at **school?**

## Up to a point.

Alcohol will usually be discussed in science lessons and in Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education or Citizenship (or equivalent) classes. However, with 101 other topics competing for attention, teachers are rarely able to devote that much time to it. That's why it's important for you to talk to your children about alcohol.

Ask your child if they've talked about alcohol in school. Finding out what they've learnt can be a good starting point for your own discussion.

Talk to your children about the risks of alcohol. Because alcohol is legal and socially acceptable, young people aren't always aware of how dangerous it can be. Most parents hear 'But all my friends do it' at one time or another! With their lack of experience, teenagers are more likely to take risks, so it's important to discuss the dangers with them.

It's worth reminding your child that if they are caught drinking in a public place, police can seize their alcohol and are likely to take their details and contact their parents.

Do you know what your  
child is **taught** at school?



What sort of **games** do  
your teenage kids play?



# Is it OK to let my kids drink at **home**?

## Opinions vary.

Legally you can let your children drink alcohol in your own home from age five onwards. Although that obviously doesn't mean you should be giving them champagne on their fifth birthday.

We've all heard the debate over whether it's better to take a 'continental' approach to alcohol, letting children have a small amount with meals from an early age, or whether we should be encouraging them to hold off as long as possible before having their first drink.

If you have older teenagers who are already drinking, you might prefer them to be somewhere you can keep an eye on them. Allowing them to have some low strength beer at home with their friends may be better than them being out on the streets drinking.

There is some evidence that the younger someone is when they start drinking, the more likely they are to develop alcohol-related problems. To avoid children leaving themselves vulnerable, the important thing is to make sure they have the facts and know they feel able to talk to you about alcohol.

# My teenager **drinks a lot** – should I be worried?

If your child's drinking is getting out of control, seek professional help. Talk to your doctor, contact Drinkline on 0800 917 8282, or try one of the organisations listed at the back of this leaflet.

## **You should if your teenager drinks regularly or heavily.**

They aren't necessarily going to turn into an alcoholic overnight, but if they're drinking too much, they will be putting their health at risk.

It's important to understand why they're drinking a lot. There may be underlying issues you need to address.

Alcohol use has been linked to bullying and depression. Or maybe your child has fallen in with the dreaded 'wrong crowd'. There is an 'Alcohol and emotional health' factsheet on the Drinkaware website with more information.

Whatever the reasons, it's better to get these issues out in the open. Talk about why you're concerned and see if there's anything you can do.

Did your child get  
**trolled** last night?

ACCIDENT & EMERGENCY



# I know my teenager gets drunk when they go out. What can I do to make sure they stay **safe**?

**Even the most sensible child can be made vulnerable as a result of alcohol. Here are some tips you can give to your child to stay safe:**

- Make sure they eat before they go out. This will slow the alcohol getting into their system, meaning they won't get drunk so quickly.
- Drinking plenty of water and alternating soft drinks with alcoholic ones when out will also slow your teenager's drinking.
- Tell them not to mix their drinks, as this makes it harder to keep track of what they've had.
- Remind them to plan how they are going to get home. If they're getting a taxi, tell them to get a licensed one. Make sure they let you know where they are going and who with.
- Tell them to never get into a car with someone who has been drinking. It may seem obvious when sober, but people are more likely to take risks when drunk.

## **What can I do to stop my child giving in to peer pressure?**

When it comes to drinking, aside from you, your child's friends are probably the biggest influence on their behaviour. It's seen by most teenagers as normal to drink. They want to fit in, and alcohol is often part of that.

It's important to talk to your child about how they can say 'no'. Saying they'll have a drink in a little while will usually deter those pushing alcohol. Being involved in sporting events is seen as a credible excuse, so saying they have a match they want to be fit for the next day might also work.

- It might also be an idea to let them know that, if they're ever in trouble or can't get home safely, they can call you at any time to pick them up – and you won't be really angry.
- Remind them to go out with a fully charged mobile phone with plenty of credit, so if they do get into trouble, they can call you.
- If your child's sexually active, or you think they might be, make sure that they understand about safe sex. You should warn girls especially about the risk of being sexually assaulted or someone spiking their drink.
- Remind them that having a good night out doesn't have to mean getting drunk. In fact, it's usually much more fun if you don't.

# Talking about alcohol

## ...top 5 tips

1

Children see alcohol products and adults drinking when they're very young. They're likely to be curious, so it's never too early to start talking about it.

2

The effects of alcohol often crop up in soap operas, films and news stories, as well as in magazines and newspapers. This can be a good opportunity to introduce the topic.

3

Alcohol should be something you and your children can talk about naturally. Nobody wants to sit down and have 'The Alcohol Talk'. If your child's curious about alcohol and asks you about it, answer frankly and honestly.

4

Find a natural time to talk. Just as your child is stepping out the door on the way to a party isn't the time to warn of the dangers of drinking.

5

If your child does get drunk try not to overreact. Talk to them about it the next morning: listen to what they have to say and try to understand their situation.

# Contacts

## For more information:

Visit [drinkaware.co.uk](http://drinkaware.co.uk) for information about all aspects of drinking and alcohol or alternatively the NHS website [units.nhs.uk](http://units.nhs.uk)

Targeted support and advice is available to help you at [direct.gov.uk/whyletdrinkdecide](http://direct.gov.uk/whyletdrinkdecide)

Parentline plus can help with parenting advice. Visit [parentlineplus.org.uk](http://parentlineplus.org.uk) or call 0808 800 2222.

To talk to other parents about how they deal with talking to their children about alcohol, you can visit the forum pages [dadtalk.co.uk](http://dadtalk.co.uk)  
[mumsnet.com](http://mumsnet.com)  
[netmums.com](http://netmums.com)

Brook provides sexual health advice. Visit [brook.org.uk](http://brook.org.uk) or call 0808 802 1234.

[thesite.org](http://thesite.org) and [need2know.co.uk](http://need2know.co.uk) have sections with advice and information about alcohol for young people.

YoungMinds provides information and advice around young people and mental health. Visit [youngminds.org.uk](http://youngminds.org.uk) or call 0808 802 5544.

To order more of these leaflets please call 0845 60 222 60, quoting reference: 00076-2010DOM-EN. Alternatively to download further copies please go to <http://whyletdrinkdecide.direct.gov.uk/stakeholders>

[drinkaware.co.uk](http://drinkaware.co.uk)  
for the facts

