CAP
Community Alcohol Partnerships



A PARENT'S GUIDE TO PREVENTING UNDERAGE DRINKING

Being a parent isn't always easy. We all want the best for our children but when it comes to alcohol, many are confused about the right approach.

Our research found that less than one third of parents are aware of the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) guidance on drinking for children and young people.[1] And just one in ten know what the guidance is.[2]

More than 70% of teens say their parents are the number one influence.[11]

SO, WHAT IS THE GUIDANCE?

The CMO medical advice is that it's healthiest and best for children to drink no alcohol at all before they are 18. And it's especially important that children do not drink before the age of 15.

The NHS recommends that if a 15 to 17-year-old is permitted to drink alcohol underage – it should be rarely, and never more than one drink a week, and should always be supervised by a parent or guardian.

The safest option for children and young people under 18 is always not to drink.



WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

- Alcohol can have serious effects on developing brains and bodies.
- Children and young people are at increased risk of acute alcohol poisoning and regular drinking can cause longer-term damage to many organs, including the liver and heart, and several cancers.
- Hormonal changes during puberty make children more likely to take risks. Teens under the influence are more likely to have unprotected sex, try drugs and become a victim or perpetrator of crime and drink spiking.
- One in six children under 16 were identified as having a mental health problem in 2021[3] and more than four out of ten young people who drink alcohol report they are drinking to cope.[4] But alcohol will only worsen depression and anxiety, and poor mental health is also linked to higher rates of self-harm and suicide.
- Early and regular drinking also increases the risk of harmful drinking in later life.[5] While regular drinking by age 14 is linked to a 20 point drop in GCSE grades.[6]

Why do some parents allow their children to drink early?

As well as being largely unaware of the medical advice, our research showed how much parents overestimated the prevalence of teen drinking.

Parents in our survey believed 27% of 13-15-year-olds drank regularly (once a week or more often) whereas in fact only 8% do so.[7]

It seems that many of us are recalling what we were doing at that age, when behaviours have significantly changed over the past 20 years, during which time rates of underage drinking have halved.[8]

BUSTING THE MYTHS

There are also some widespread myths[9]

MYTH

In France, it's common to give their children alcohol and they don't have any problems.

REALITY

In France, its customary to add a splash of wine to water to introduce children to the flavour without the intoxicating effects. And while France may not have a binge drinking culture, a recent study[10] found that up to 30% of the adult population is drinking at harmful levels.

MYTH

It's OK to give kids drinks like fruity ciders and alcopops – they aren't as strong as beer, wine or spirits.

REALITY

Fruity ciders and alcopops are as strong as many beers.

MYTH

If I am too strict about alcohol my child will rebel and drink to excess.

REALITY

Teenagers who consider their parents to be permissive are much more likely to binge drink. When parents don't allow their children (aged 11-15) to drink, 89% choose not to drink.[11]

MYTH

If I give my child alcohol at a younger age, they will develop better habits and will be less likely to binge drink when they are older.

REALITY

Some recent studies have shown that the parental supply of alcohol to children can actually increase the frequency of consumption by adolescents.[12]

Top tips to keep your child safe

Be aware of the importance of your influence as an educator and role model. Many parents believe their children – especially teenagers - are more influenced by their peer group while in fact, more than 70% of teens say their parents are the number one influence.[13]

- Good communication is key. Start conversations about alcohol before your child becomes a teenager. The conversation will need to change as they get older. Check out Drinkaware's advice or the Alcohol Education Trust and Family Lives for helpful suggestions on how to talk about alcohol with your child.
- Reassure them it's fine to say no to alcohol
- Make sure you have clear ground rules you both agree on and stick to them. Talk to other parents and make sure they understand your stance on alcohol. Know where your children are on Friday and Saturday night in particular.
- Do your research. The Alcohol Education Trust has really helpful tips on how to hold a great alcohol-free teen party as well as preparing for house parties at friends' houses. Don't forget to praise your teen when it all goes well!
- If your teenager does get drunk, first and foremost make sure they are safe. And when they are sober, talk to them about the risks.
- Lead by example. If you want to prevent your children drinking underage, you need to set a good example. If you are struggling to control your own drinking, there is support available.
- As your child gets older, think about what you will say if they ask you for alcohol. This will mean you don't feel pressurised into giving your child alcohol when they tell you they are going to a house party that night and everyone else's parents are giving them alcohol - which won't be the case anyway! Some of the other tips here will help you think about what you will say, so you are not put 'on the spot' when the time comes.

FIND OUT MORE

Alcohol and the law

The risks of underage drinking

Teenage drinking

Talking to your child about alcohol



References

1. Guidance on the consumption of alcohol by children and young people (2009), Department of Health and Social Care.
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3. NHS Digital (2021): Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2021
4. Drinkaware Monitor (2016).
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6. Department for Education (2010): Young people's alcohol consumption and its relationship to other outcomes and behaviour.
7. CAP (2022): An alcohol-free childhood – action to ensure parents keep their children free from alcohol harm.
8. NHS Digital (2020): Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England 2018.
9. Balance North East (2018): Alcohol before 18. What's the harm? A guide for parents.
10. INSERM (2021): Réduction des dommages associés à la consommation d'alcool.
11. NHS Digital (2020): Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England 2018.
12. Alexandra Aiken, Monika Wadolowski, Raimondo Bruno, Jackob Najman, Kypros Kypri, Tim Slade, Delyse Hutchinson, Nyanda McBride, Richard P Mattick. Cohort Profile: The Australian Parental Supply of Alcohol Longitudinal Study (APSALS). International Journal of Epidemiology, Volume 46, Issue 2, April 2017
13. NHS Digital (2020): Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England 2018.

Further sources of advice or parents and carers

Alcohol Change UK is a charity and campaign group whose aim is to reduce the harm caused by alcohol. Alcohol and parenting | Alcohol Change UK

The Alcohol Education Trust (AET) works across the UK to keep young people safe around alcohol. Parent Area - Alcohol Education Trust

Drinkaware is an independent charity which aims to reduce alcohol-related harm by helping people make better choices about their drinking. www.drinkaware.co.uk/news/why-should-you-talk-to-your-children-about-alcohol

Spectrum Community Health is a community interest company based in Wakefield. It has published this useful guide for parents: Young_People__Alcohol_Guide_-_Spectrum_-_2022.pdf (communityalcoholpartnerships.co.uk)

The Public Health Agency for Northern Ireland You, your child and alcohol | HSC Public Health Agency (hscni.net)

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