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For parents

Talking with your teenager about alcohol

Introduction

Many parents are concerned that at some stage they, and their children, will come face to face with the issue of alcohol and teenage drinking. Whether their teenager wants to try their first taste of alcohol, is planning a party, or has arrived home sick and drunk, a parent's most valuable asset is good, open communication within their family.

Sounds easy enough! But as you watch your child grow and become more and more independent, you are likely to worry about their safety and the decisions they might make. At the same time, young people are beginning to experiment, test boundaries and question authority. This is a normal part of building their identity and independence but can make for an overly emotional time where conflict is likely.

Parents can help make the situation easier by following good communication strategies and encouraging open discussion. Most children will not have a problem with alcohol, and a supportive family environment, where they can openly discuss difficult issues, reduces the risk of problems arising.

Make sure you are well informed

- ▶ A good way to do this is to look at current information available from the DrugInfo Clearinghouse (www.druginfo.adf.org.au).
- ▶ If your teenager asks you a question and you aren't sure of the answer don't just guess. Be honest, admit that you don't know, and look for the answer together, using information from books, the internet, or a health professional. This shows them how they can uncover reliable health information in the future.
- ▶ Give your child an informal quiz about issues and scenarios involving alcohol and other drugs, to highlight some of the important information they will need to know. You are likely to learn a lot too.

- ▶ Remember that, as they get older, young people will make their own decisions about whether or not they will drink alcohol. It is important that you teach them how to stay safe, and minimise the effects, if they do end up drinking.

Be involved in their lives

- ▶ Get to know their friends, so that you always know who they are with and where they are going.
- ▶ Make an effort to get to know their friends' parents. This keeps communication open and can be a great support when you are facing difficult situations.

Getting them to talk

Sometimes young people are reluctant to talk to their parents about sensitive issues. Here are some strategies that may help:

- ▶ Start talking openly about alcohol when they are young so they understand it is not a taboo subject when they are older.
- ▶ Pick the right time. Don't try to talk about emotional issues when either of you is hungry, tired, upset, under the influence of alcohol, or if friends are present.
- ▶ Spend time with your children to build your relationship and to allow plenty of time for incidental chats. For example, walking the dog together, travelling in the car or playing a sport or game together are situations where they are more likely to remain present.
- ▶ Try to eat dinner together as a family, and discuss what each of you has been doing.
- ▶ Try to keep a weekly block of time for family activities.
- ▶ Use prompts from television, advertising or newspapers to start a discussion.

- › Take advantage of times when they want you to do something for them, as they may be more likely to be cooperative.
- › Importantly, don't make every quiet time you are together a time for deep discussion or they may begin to avoid those situations.

Set a good example

Teenagers can spot a hypocrite a mile away, so make sure you set a good example if you want them to make good choices. Model sensible drinking practices by:

- › **Drinking sensibly** and keeping track of the number of standard drinks you are consuming.
- › **Showing them how to refuse a drink that is offered by a friend.** Adults can find this hard enough, so imagine how difficult it must be for a young person fighting for acceptance from peers.
- › **Showing them the size of a "standard drink".** Many adults are surprised to see that a standard drink is often a lot smaller than the standard serve in a glass, can or bottle. This will make it easier for them to keep track of how much they are drinking, when the day comes.
- › **Being aware of the words and descriptions you are using when you talk about alcohol.** For example, when you say, "This has been a really tough week, I need a drink!", you are giving a clear message about the role of alcohol.

When you finally get to talk

- › Make sure you listen to them, and don't just do all the talking yourself.
- › Give feedback. Nod and ask questions so they know you are really listening.
- › Try not to preach, as that may just encourage them to rebel.
- › Remember to give positive feedback when they have made good decisions.
- › Resist bringing up past mistakes.
- › Remember that limit testing and experimentation is a normal part of growing up.
- › Consider the pressure they are under from their peers, and from the media and advertising. This doesn't mean you should give in to their demands, but it can help you to understand the pressures they are feeling.

What to talk about

- › Be honest about the enjoyable, and the less enjoyable, sides of drinking alcohol and they are more likely to trust what you say.
- › Talk about the effects of alcohol. The dangers and safety issues such as aggression, reduced inhibitions, poor judgement, and the feeling of regretting their actions the next day.
- › Make sure they understand that no matter what happens, they can call you at any time if they are in trouble or feel unsafe.
- › Talk about how to deal with peer pressure. This is hard enough for adults to deal with, so they could probably use your support.
- › Talk about drink spiking, and the importance of friends looking out for each other.
- › Discuss the types of drinks they might be offered—particularly the "alcopops" that taste sweet but have a high alcohol content.
- › Let them know you don't support their drinking, and that if they drink heavily or frequently they will need to get help from a health professional.
- › Set firm limits, and if two parents are involved, make sure you support each other.

If you can remember these strategies, even during challenging times, you will not only have an easier time dealing with teenage drinking, you will be teaching your young person valuable life skills and building strong relationships for the future of your entire family.

More information

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and the Australian Drug Foundation (ADF) have developed eight fact sheets that support parents to protect children from harms associated with alcohol use. These can be obtained from the DEECD website at www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/drugeducation/forparents.htm.

For more information on drugs and drug prevention contact the DrugInfo Clearinghouse on tel. 1300 85 85 84, email druginfo@adf.org.au.

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