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For parents

How parents can influence teenage drinking

Introduction

Young people are influenced by a lot of different factors including the media, their peers and siblings; however, it is important to remember that parents remain the greatest influence on their children. Researchers have identified a number of ways in which parents can influence their teenager's alcohol intake, and we can use this information to reduce the likelihood that young people will become involved in unsafe drinking. It has been found that a supportive, warm relationship with a significant adult helps protect against all kinds of adverse events in young peoples' lives, including unsafe drinking. Encouraging open communication within the family is a good place to begin.

Start early

From a very young age, your child will be aware of alcoholic drinks and patterns of drinking in your home. This can influence their ideas about alcohol and when, where and how, they will drink in the future.

The influence of parents is greatest early on, when children have less exposure to alcohol advertising and peers who are drinking. It is never too early to start talking to your child about the effects of alcohol, and thinking about how your behaviour might be influencing them.

Be aware of how you speak about, and behave around, alcohol. If they see you stagger in the door each night moaning, "I need a drink!" or reaching for the champagne and shouting, "This calls for a drink!" every time there is something to celebrate, they are receiving strong messages about the role of alcohol.

Let them see you model sensible drinking behaviour such as:

- › sometimes refusing a drink when it is offered
- › counting the number of standard drinks you are consuming
- › enjoying non-alcoholic drinks
- › refusing to drink when you are driving
- › not drinking to intoxication.

You may find that, in our culture, some of these behaviours are not as easy as you might think they would be. If we expect our young people not to drink at all, or to drink sensibly later on, we need to show them how it is done.

How much influence do parents really have?

Keep in mind that one of the important stages of growing up and becoming independent is for young people to shift their emotional attachments from parents towards their peer group. This is normal, but maintaining a strong family connection is still important in providing a safe base for your teenager to return to.

Ways that parents can influence teenage drinking include:

- › Parental disapproval of teenage drinking has been linked with reduced consumption in this age group, so don't hesitate to make this known.
- › Setting clear boundaries for your child, which support your particular beliefs and values about alcohol, gives your child a consistent message, and makes it more likely that they will respect your boundaries.

- › Early initiation to drinking is related to an increase in alcohol use, alcohol dependence, early binge drinking and social problems associated with drinking, so aim to keep young people away from alcohol for as long as possible.
- › Make sure they understand the reasons it is not a good idea for young people, in particular, to drink. Apart from effects on the developing brain, there are risks involved with aggression, reduced inhibition, poor judgement and regret or embarrassment about their actions the next day. For more information on the effects of alcohol on adolescents, see our fact sheets on *Prevention of alcohol-related harms* (www.druginfo.adf.org.au/browse.asp?ContainerID=prevention_of_alcoholrelated_)

Should parents give their teenagers alcohol?

Many parents think it might be a good idea to provide alcohol for young people at home so that they can be supervised, and won't go somewhere else to get it. This is not a good idea, as providing young people with alcohol has been shown to be a major cause of alcohol-related problems—even more than poor communication with parents, or poor parental control.

The most effective way of protecting your child from the problems related to drinking alcohol, is to negotiate and communicate clear, alcohol-specific rules that aim to discourage them from drinking alcohol for as long as possible.

Once they have started to drink it is difficult to go back—research shows that, by then, your influence is diminished and your alcohol-related rules will not prevent further use.

More information

For more information on this topic see our fact sheet, "Talking with your teenager about alcohol". Also, 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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