

Fact Sheet

Young people and alcohol

Introduction

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends that children and young people under the age of 18 do not drink.

This fact sheet provides information behind the recommendation and provides some suggestions for how parents can talk with their children about alcohol and reducing the associated risks.

The guidelines

The NHMRC's guidelines state that for children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking is the safest option.

- › Dangerous behaviour is more likely among young people when they drink compared to older drinkers. Young people are more likely to drink more and take risks.
- › The brain is still developing during the teenage years and drinking alcohol during this time may damage the brain and lead to health complications later in life.
- › The earlier a child is introduced to alcohol the more likely they are to develop problems with it later in life. Young people should therefore delay their first drink for as long as possible.

The guidelines were developed using research and evidence to make an assessment of the potential alcohol-related harms (such as injury and disease) that people may experience from drinking.

Risk of injury and self harm

Drinking contributes to the three leading causes of death amongst adolescents – unintentional injuries, homicide and suicide.

Dangerous behaviour is more likely among young people when they drink than older drinkers. For example, the evidence indicates that drinking alcohol when young is associated with risky behaviours such as:

- › riding in a car with a drunk driver
- › risky sexual behaviour and increased risk of sexual coercion
- › violence
- › using illicit drugs
- › self harm.

Young people are also generally smaller and have a lower tolerance for alcohol. All of which can contribute to the risk of death due to an alcohol overdose.

Effect on brain development

The brain is still developing in the teenage years. Drinking alcohol during this time may damage the brain and lead to health complications later in life.

Drinking early may damage the area of the brain that is responsible for decision making, memory, and emotions. If the brain is damaged by drinking early, it could affect a person's:

- › memory
- › ability to learn
- › problem solving skills
- › mood and mental health (e.g. depression).

Mental health

Drinking alcohol increases the risk of developing mental health and social problems, especially when a person starts drinking at a young age.

There is some evidence to suggest that:

- › Drinking alcohol may contribute to poor mental health.
- › Young people with certain mental health problems are more likely to start drinking and drink at high levels.
- › Young people who drink to cope with their problems are more likely to suffer from mental health problems such as depression.

Age young people start to drink

The earlier a child is introduced to alcohol the more likely they are to develop problems with alcohol later in life. Young people should therefore delay their first drink for as long as possible.

Research has suggested that young people who drink before 18 years of age are at increased risk of:

- › being a heavy drinker later in life
- › experiencing alcohol dependence.

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What can parents do?

While young people are influenced by many groups, such as the media, their friends and siblings, parents continue to be the greatest influence. Parents can play an important role in their children's attitudes towards, and use of, alcohol and other drugs.

Be the world's expert on your child: How much your child is influenced by others is important when weighing up the risk of them consuming alcohol and drugs. Think about how susceptible your child is to the influence of peers and the attitudes and behaviours of their friends.

Get the facts: There are a lot of myths about alcohol and other drugs. Use evidence-based sources like TheOtherTalk.org.au to give your child the most accurate information.

Be clear in your beliefs: Based on the evidence, clarify your view of alcohol and other drugs. For example, it's up to you whether your child drinks or not, but when making your decision consider the NHMRC's guidelines, which state that the safest option for children and people under 18 is not to drink. The guidelines show evidence that parental monitoring and family rules about alcohol do reduce the likelihood of young people drinking.

Look for opportunities to start a conversation with your child: Keep conversations about alcohol and other drugs relaxed. Use relevant topics on the TV or radio and events as an opportunity to talk. It's best to start talking about these issues early. Try to have the conversation in a quiet place or in a comfortable environment e.g. the family dinner table. It's never too early to have the conversation and there is no limit to the number of conversations you can have.

Ask questions: Find out your child's views about alcohol and other drugs. Talk about what they would do in different situations.

Make sure they understand the harms: Using TheOtherTalk.org.au, make sure your child has the right information about alcohol and other drugs and correct any myths. Talk about the benefits as well as the harms of different drugs and why someone might use them. Don't exaggerate the harms as it will make you sound less credible.

Set rules and consequences: Explain your views on alcohol and other drugs and use the facts to back them up. Let your

child know your rules and the consequences for breaking them. Help them develop ways of getting out of situations where their friends are using alcohol or other drugs and they don't want to be embarrassed by not taking part.

Set a good example: You influence your child's attitudes and behaviours, so if you drink responsibly your child is more likely to do the same later in life. Role modelling responsible drinking means:

- › Following the NHMRC's guidelines for adults – no more than two standard drinks a day to reduce long-term harm and no more than four drinks on any one occasion to avoid immediate alcohol-related injury.
- › Keeping track of how many standard drinks you've had, even when you aren't driving.
- › Showing you don't always need a drink to have fun or wind down.
- › Demonstrating that you can refuse a drink from a friend if you don't feel like it or you've had enough.

More information

NHMRC guidelines:
Alcohol.gov.au

Talking with your children about alcohol and drugs, safe partying and relevant laws:
TheOtherTalk.org.au

Get the effects of any drug by text:
0439 TELL ME (0439 835 563)

Blog about preventing alcohol-related harm in families and communities:
GrogWatch.adf.org.au



druginfo.adf.org.au



1300 85 85 84



druginfo@adf.org.au

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