

THE RIGHT MESSAGE FOR THE RIGHT AGE - ALCOHOL

Get talking... when do you start?

Children are naturally curious about alcohol – they see people drinking and they want to know more. Their friends, their teachers, TV, films and the media – influence them but in most cases, parents have the biggest effect on their children’s behaviour, including how they drink alcohol. So you’re in a good position to make sure they have the facts about alcohol and drinking, and can make sensible choices in the future.

The UK chief medical officers recommend an alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option as research shows that the earlier a child starts drinking, the higher their chances of developing alcohol abuse or dependence in their teenage years and adult life.

The reality is that as parents, we are the first people kids turn to for advice on alcohol. We have a crucial role to play in delaying the age at which our children have their first drink.

As a parent when should I talk about drinking?

It is illegal to give a child under five alcohol and by the time a child is aged five, research shows they have already formed basic attitudes and opinions about alcohol. If you drink at home, your children are bound to ask questions at an early age about what you are drinking and what it tastes like. It is tempting to just say ‘wait until you are older’, but it is worth explaining to your child that little bodies can’t digest alcohol, which is ‘strong’ so that is why they should wait until they are older.

Almost 65,000 young people every year need treatment in hospital A&E departments because of alcohol

11 – 13 year-olds

It is important to talk at an early age and for your child to have an understanding of units, how alcohol affects the body and liver, why young bodies cannot cope with alcohol and the risks they run by experimenting. UK Chief Medical Officers states children under 15 should not drink alcohol, as their brains and livers are not fully developed and are more liable to damage than adults. At age 11 children see it as unacceptable to get drunk, and 99% don’t drink regularly, but age 13 is what we call ‘the tipping point’. Growing up is an awkward time, reaching puberty, their social lives changing, relationships and peer pressure growing – and probably being

less open with you. Try not to force the subject, wait until the subject comes up via the TV, the media or similar. Put a conversation about drinking in context with other ‘life skills’, such as staying safe, talking about drugs and what sex is all about. A good approach is often to talk about an embarrassing or dangerous situation you, or someone you know, got into when young and the consequences.

UK teenagers are amongst those most likely in Europe to report frequently drinking heavily and being intoxicated

71% of 15 year-olds across Nottinghamshire have tried an alcoholic drink with 8.2% of those admitting to being regular drinkers

64% of parents agree it’s inevitable that most children will drink alcohol before 16 years old

Older teenagers

Finding the right balance between protecting your child and giving them freedom is not easy. You can't be by their side all the time, and they wouldn't thank you for it anyway. However, with communication and trust, you can help them to make the right decision in a tricky situation, learn from their mistakes, come to you for advice when needed and still stay safe. Research shows that older teenagers often experiment with alcohol in the company of their friends, but if their parents have been good and open role models, they are less likely to develop bad habits with respect to alcohol.

37% of parents of 10-17 year-olds think that an acceptable age for a young person to have their first drink of alcohol is before the age of 16

The average age of a first whole drink in the UK is between the ages of 13-14

Young adults

Once your child has gone to college or is living away from home for the first time, it is harder to influence them and you have no control over the time they come home or how they drink and eat. The path to self-respect and independence should have been properly laid already, but the following advice might help:

Highlight the dangers of drunkenness, such as:

- Not getting home safely, looking a fool in front of their friends or partners and the risk of unprotected sex, assault and theft.
- Encourage them to pace themselves by alternating with soft drinks, to eat before going out and to be aware of the alcohol levels of different drinks.
- Tell them to keep their mobiles fully charged and with them when going out and to work out how they will get home before they go.

Remind them to never to:

- Leave their drink as it could be spiked
- Drink and drive
- Take a lift from someone they suspect has taken drink or drugs
- Leave a party or venue on their own at night.

