Your kids and alcohol

Facts and advice to help you take the right approach

for the facts
drinkaware.co.uk
When it comes to talking to your child about alcohol, it might feel like there's never a 'right time'...

- What age should I start talking to my child about alcohol?
- What should I tell them?
- Does my own drinking affect my child?
- If I'm strict, will they just rebel?
- Is there evidence alcohol is bad for kids?
- Will they listen to me?
...but approaching the topic doesn’t have to mean the daunting ‘Alcohol Talk’

It may be that you have already started having conversations with your child about alcohol. Or you might not have thought about how you’ll talk to them about drinking yet or think it’s being covered at school. No matter what your situation, when it comes to alcohol, the more information your child has, and the earlier they get it, the better. Friends are important in shaping your child’s views but not as important as you.

Obviously every child is different and your conversations will vary, but this leaflet will help explain why, when and how to start talking to your child about alcohol, whatever their age. It will also give you the facts you need to feel more confident in keeping up an ongoing dialogue about responsible drinking throughout your child’s teenage years.

56% of parents think it’s inevitable that most children will drink before the age of 16, yet 55% of 11–15 year olds have never drunk alcohol and this percentage has gone up in recent years.
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Some things you should know...

Not all young people drink
We might see pictures and headlines in the news that make it look like all young people are drinking, but in reality more than half (55%) of 11 to 15 year olds have never drunk alcohol and this percentage has gone up in recent years. So underage drinking isn’t inevitable and choosing not to drink doesn’t make them different.

Talk to your children before their friends do
As children grow up, the influence of their peers gets stronger, so it’s important to talk to them before their friends do. Giving your child the facts from an early age makes sure they have accurate information to understand or challenge what their friends tell them and make responsible drinking decisions on their own when they’re faced with them.

You have more influence than you think
Sometimes it can seem like they don’t listen to a word you say, but research shows parents have the most influence on young children’s attitudes and behaviour towards alcohol.

Nearly three quarters of children aged 9-17 would turn to their parents first for information and advice on drinking alcohol.
Children are aware of alcohol from a very young age
Research shows that children as young as seven understand about alcohol and its effects. From this age children can recognise drunkenness and addiction and can tell the difference between acceptable and unacceptable drinking behaviour. That's why it's important to start talking to them early about alcohol.

One size doesn't fit all
Every child is different so there isn't a 'one size fits all' approach to talking about alcohol. You know them better than anyone, so this leaflet is designed to give you the facts and the confidence to be able to pass them on to your child in the way that suits you both best.

Alcohol-free childhood is best
No matter what ideas, guidelines or experiences you grew up with, the current guidance on the consumption of alcohol by children and young people is that an alcohol-free childhood is best.

Alcohol isn't all bad
There's no point pretending drinking alcohol is all bad. It's important to teach your child that there are two sides to alcohol — it can be enjoyed in moderation but if they go too far there can be risks too.

The average age of a child's first unsupervised drink is 14 years and it's really important to talk to your kids before they start drinking.

Evidence shows that young people who start drinking at an early age drink more, and more frequently, than those who delay their first alcoholic drink.
Why and when to talk to your children

Talk before they are teens
Knowing when to start talking to your child about alcohol can be tricky. Children's attitudes to alcohol change as they grow up, particularly during the transition from primary to secondary school, so it's a good idea to talk to them before the teen years and before their friends do.

The earlier you start the conversation the better, even if they seem too young. And once you've started, it's important to keep the conversation going.

It's never too late
It might sound like a cliché but it's never too late to start talking to your child about alcohol. Even if they've already started drinking it's important to have open discussions about handling peer pressure, avoiding risky behaviour and how to stay safe.

No time like the present
80% of parents say they'll "deal with it when it happens" when it comes to talking to their child about alcohol. But it's best to talk about the risks associated with drinking before your child unknowingly puts themselves in a risky situation.

Will it encourage my children to drink if I talk to them about alcohol?
Children see and hear about alcohol from a very early age, whether at home, at school, from friends or in the media.

Even though you might be concerned about planting ideas about drinking in their heads, even if you talk to your children before their teen years, it's likely they'll already have their own thoughts about drinking. It's best to check their ideas are right, and encourage them to talk openly with you in the future to avoid making alcohol a taboo.

Peer pressure
As children get older they are more influenced by their friends and this can turn into pressure to drink. Prepare them for this by letting them know not everyone their age is drinking and they shouldn't ever feel they have to drink to fit in. Despite the growing influence of their friends, you can still have a positive effect on your child's attitudes and behaviour towards alcohol.
After bullying, alcohol is the issue most experienced by children aged 10–17 — even more than smoking and drugs.

More than 6 in 10 children aged 10–17 have asked their parents questions about alcohol.
Your kids and alcohol

What do they learn about alcohol at school?

Although you might think school is the best place for children to learn about alcohol, alcohol education is not compulsory. So while alcohol may be mentioned in science classes, children might not get as much information as you think.

Finding out what your child has learnt about alcohol at school, and discussing it in more depth at home, can be a good way to start a conversation about drinking.

Drinkaware has a free life skills programme available for primary and secondary school teachers – In:tuition.

The programme aims to build young people’s confidence, personal and social skills and help them explore how they make decisions and what might influence them. Visit intuitionkit.com

Three fifths (61%) of young people think too many under 18s drink alcohol.
Nearly all 10 year olds (93%) believe it is not ok for someone their age to drink alcohol once a week.

At secondary school children start to view alcohol differently – a fifth of 11–15 year olds believe it’s not a problem for someone their age to drink alcohol once a week.

54% of young people drink alcohol as a result of peer pressure or because they want to fit in.
The facts about children and alcohol

Children can make more responsible decisions about drinking if they have the facts to base them on and feel confident to say "no" if they want to. Because alcohol is legal and children will see it on the television, in magazines, at home or at their friend's houses, they aren't always aware it could leave a person vulnerable so it's important they know the facts from an early age. If you understand the risks, you can help your child understand them too.

While the immediate effects of getting drunk at a young age may be no more than being sick or having a hangover, alcohol can leave children emotionally, physically and sexually vulnerable. So the most important thing is to talk to your child early and often about the different risks associated with drinking alcohol.

Long term risks

Liver damage
You might think that only lifelong alcoholics get liver disease, but regularly drinking too much can increase a young person's chances of damaging their liver. And as there aren't many warning signs of liver damage, a problem might only be discovered when it's very serious.

Brain development
The areas of the brain responsible for behaviour, emotions, reasoning and judgement are still developing throughout childhood and into the teenage years. Drinking during this time can have a long-term impact on memory, reactions and attention span. This could affect their performance at school and stop them reaching their full potential.

Drinking later in life
If young people binge drink, they are more likely to be binge drinkers as adults. Drinking frequently at a young age is also linked to an increased risk of developing alcohol dependence in young adulthood. Regularly drinking in later life can lead to cancer, stroke, heart disease and infertility.
Short term risks

The future can seem a million miles away for children, so talking to them about the short term risks of drinking might be easier for them to relate to.

Vulnerability
The hormonal changes children go through at puberty make them more likely to take risks. Alcohol can further impair children's judgement, leaving them vulnerable. If they've been drinking they might unintentionally put themselves in risky situations like getting involved in a fight, or walking home alone.

Unprotected sex
Alcohol affects children's rational decision-making skills. When children drink they feel more confident and have lower inhibitions. This can mean they make decisions which are out of character, such as having unprotected sex.

Alcohol poisoning
Alcohol can be poisonous to anyone that drinks too much in a short space of time but children are especially vulnerable because of their smaller size. If children's blood alcohol levels get too high their brain can stop controlling their body's vital functions and in the worst-case scenario they could stop breathing, fall into a coma or choke on their own vomit.

Appearance
Alcohol has almost as many calories as pure fat so drinking can cause weight gain. It is also a diuretic so it dehydrates the body and can make skin look pale and grey. Drinking affects normal sleep patterns too, leading to restless nights and tiredness.

20,000
From 2007-2010, 20,000 under 18s were admitted to hospital in England as a result of drinking alcohol.

A third (32%) of teenagers have been a passenger in a car with a driver who was drunk.