Your kids and alcohol

Facts and advice to help you take the right approach

drinkaware.co.uk
for the facts
Switch on the news or open the paper, and you’re more than likely to see a story about young people and alcohol.

Binge-drinking teens throwing up in the streets

Alcohol-fuelled crime and violence

Drink-driving accidents
...It's enough to make any parent **panic**

The good news is there are fewer young people drinking, so a lot of the media coverage is 'hype'. However, those young people who do drink are drinking more. And let's face it: by the time they're in their early teens, most young people will have had an alcoholic drink.

A recent Drinkaware YouGov poll showed over a third of 16 and 17 year-olds would prefer to get information on alcohol from their parents.

It's best to start early. Drinkaware research shows children's openness to their parents' influence changes dramatically as they grow up. Between the ages of eight and 12, children generally accept what their parents say about alcohol. From 13 onwards, young people increasingly pay attention to their friends. However, you may still have more leverage with your children than you might think.

If you're preparing to talk to your kids about alcohol, this leaflet will answer some of the questions you may have.

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Growing numbers of children admitted to **hospital** with alcohol poisoning
I got plastered last Friday night
How much is **too much** for under-18s to drink?

There are official guidelines.

There have been government guidelines on alcohol for adults for many years. They recommend that women should not regularly exceed 2-3 units daily and that men should not regularly exceed 3-4 units daily. However, it wasn’t until 2009 that the Chief Medical Officer for England and Wales issued guidelines on alcohol for under-18s and their parents.

The guidance says:

- An alcohol-free childhood is best. Children shouldn’t drink before they’re 15.
- If 15 to 17 year-olds drink, it should only be once in a while and definitely no more than once a week.
- If 15 to 17 year-olds drink they should be supervised by a parent or other adult.
- Parents can have a big influence on their children’s drinking.
- Support needs to be provided for young people who have alcohol-related problems and their parents.

The Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Executive both promote similar ideas.

But how can you get your children to stick to these guidelines? Read on for information and look out for practical advice in these speech bubbles.

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1 The Department of Health, ‘5 point plan for an alcohol-free childhood’ dh.gov.uk/en/News/Recentstories/DH_000812
Should I keep alcohol and my own drinking out of sight?

You shouldn't need to—but remember your children are watching and learning from you.

Studies show the most important thing which you can do to help your children is to provide them with a good model by drinking sensibly yourself. That means staying within the recommended guidelines (3-4 units a day for men, 2-3 for women).

Children will probably be curious and ask questions when they see you drinking. It's best to address these as they come up rather than let them think that alcohol is something mysterious to be kept secret. That could make them even more curious and more likely to drink.

Make sure your children know the number of units in different drinks.

There are 1.5 units in a small (125ml) glass of 12% wine and 2-3 units in a pint of standard beer. It's also important for young people to bear in mind that different brands of drinks vary in strength. For example, wine can range from 11-14% alcohol by volume.

The unit calculator on the Drinkaware website lets you see exactly how many units are in different measures and brands of drinks. See drinkaware.co.uk.

Your kids may ask why you can drink and they can't. Make sure they know that alcohol is more dangerous for young, developing bodies. For example, it can harm brain development. Also, people with smaller bodies or who aren't used to drinking regularly will feel the effect of alcohol more.

Is it dangerous for under-18s to drink?

It can be.

The immediate ill effects may be no more than a hangover, but young people, especially those who aren't used to the effects of alcohol, can easily drink far too much. Their bodies are generally smaller with low tolerance to alcohol, meaning they get drunk very quickly.

Every year, 10,000 young people aged 11 to 17 are admitted to hospital as a result of drinking. Over half of these – 6,000 children in fact – are under 16.

There are more serious concerns too:

- Alcohol plays a big part in antisocial behaviour, crime and violence as well as unprotected sex and teenage pregnancy.
- Alcohol can disrupt adolescent brain development, causing lasting problems with memory, attention span and reaction times.
- In later life, regular drinking can cause brain damage, cancer of the mouth, throat and gullet, cirrhosis of the liver, heart disorders and impotence.

Talk about the effects alcohol will have on your child’s appearance (calories, skin dehydration) and relationships (failing out with friends or not being attractive to the opposite sex). It might be more effective than warning them about the long-term risks of drinking, which can seem a world away when you’re a teenager.

Can I take my kids into a pub?

The law varies slightly between England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

In general, under-16s are allowed in pubs accompanied by an adult, but can’t drink and may have to leave by a certain time. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 16 and 17 year-olds can have wine, cider and beer bought for them to drink with a meal. In Scotland they can buy it themselves with a meal.
Do children learn about alcohol at school?

Up to a point.

Alcohol will usually be discussed in science lessons and in Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) or Citizenship (or equivalent) classes. However, with 101 other topics competing for attention, teachers are rarely able to devote that much time to it. That’s why it’s important for you to talk to your children about alcohol.

Ask your child if they’ve talked about alcohol in school. Finding out what they’ve learnt can be a good starting point for your own discussion.

Talk to your children about the risks of alcohol. Because alcohol is legal and socially acceptable, young people aren’t always aware of how dangerous it can be. Most parents hear “But all my friends do it” at one time or another! With their lack of experience, teenagers are more likely to take risks, so it’s important to discuss the dangers with them.

It’s worth reminding your child that if they are caught drinking in a public place, police can seize their alcohol and are likely to take their details and contact their parents.
Do you know what your child is taught at school?