



YOU, YOUR CHILD AND ALCOHOL





In Northern Ireland over half of young people aged between 11 and 16 say they've had an alcoholic drink at some point in their lives. This means that as a parent the subject of your child and alcohol is likely to come up.

You may think that you have little influence on your child, but the truth is parents often underestimate how much influence they have on their children. Studies have shown that even from an early age children develop ideas and attitudes about alcohol. Parents and carers can play a key role in promoting a responsible attitude to alcohol.

Research shows that children may be protected from the negative effects of drinking if they have strong bonds with family and if their parents:

- recognise and praise positive behaviour;
- set healthy examples;
- have accurate knowledge of the negative effects of alcohol.



The risks to your child

Some parents may feel that giving their child a small amount of alcohol in their early teens will give them a responsible attitude to alcohol, but there is no scientific evidence to support this.

In fact, research shows that the earlier a child starts drinking, the higher his or her risk of serious alcohol-related problems later in life.

There are many other risks associated with alcohol you should also be aware of:

- During late adolescence the brain is still growing. There are parts that will not be fully developed until their early 20s. The part of the brain that is involved in planning and judgment matures late, as well as the part relating to long-term memory and learning. By drinking, young people could prevent these parts of the brain developing properly.
- Young people are generally smaller and weigh less than adults, so alcohol is more concentrated in their bodies and they feel the effects of alcohol more quickly and for longer. Young people may also be less able to judge or control their drinking.
- Alcohol is linked with depression.



1 in 10 young people who have drunk alcohol have ended up in trouble with the police.

Alcohol can reduce your child's inhibitions and make them do things that are out of character.



They can get involved in anti-social/criminal behaviour such as fights, damaging property or causing annoyance within a community. This could lead to your child being involved with the police.

This type of behaviour could get your child a criminal record, which can make it harder for them to get a job when they're older. It can also affect them if they are going abroad because some countries may refuse entry to people with a criminal record.

Alcohol can make your child more likely to be:

- a victim of a violent assault or other crimes.

It has been found that the younger people are when they drink the more likely they are to be a victim of violence.

It can also make them more vulnerable to:

- injuries from accidents, for example falls and road accidents;
- using other drugs or solvents;
- unwanted sexual activity;
- unsafe sexual activity, which can lead to sexually transmitted infections (STI) or unplanned pregnancy;
- problems at school, such as poorer school performance or truancy;
- having difficulties in relationships with family or friends.



Talking to your child about alcohol

The tips below can help you talk with your child about alcohol and establish boundaries around drinking. Remember, it is best not to wait until your child starts drinking before you talk to them about alcohol.

Talking with your child about alcohol

Do

- Make the first move and bring up the topic of alcohol. Don't wait until there's a problem to talk.
- Make time to listen to what they have to say.
- Respect their views if you want the same in return.
- Discuss the risks associated with drinking alcohol.
- Discuss the possible consequences of their actions and support them to make the right choices.

Don't

- Assume your child doesn't want to talk. Not talking to your child about alcohol could be interpreted as your approval of them drinking.
- Assume they already know everything.
- Interrupt or be judgmental, even if you don't agree with their opinion.

Agreeing alcohol rules and boundaries

Do

- Set realistic rules and boundaries and stick to them.
- Agree rules together with your child. Rules are more likely to be kept if they are negotiated, understood and agreed.
- Discuss why you need the rules. This can help your child see that you care about their wellbeing.
- Reach an agreement on consequences for breaking rules. Make sure it's something fair and appropriate and something you are prepared to follow through on.
- Reward your child when they keep to the set boundaries.

Don't

- Impose rules that you haven't discussed with your child.

If your child comes home drunk

Do

- Stay calm.
- Wait until the next day to discuss things.
- Choose a good time to talk.
- If you're worried, always seek medical advice.

Don't

- Talk things through when your child is under the influence of alcohol.
- Get drawn into arguments.

Supervising your child

Do

- Know who your child is with and what they're doing.
- Show an interest in what your child's interests are, who their friends are, and where they like to hang out.
- Get to know your child's friends – if your child's friends drink alcohol, your child is more likely to drink too.
- Talk to the parents of your child's friends and agree boundaries together.
- When asking about your child's activities, friends and whereabouts – make sure your child knows it's because you care about them, not because you distrust them.
- If you store alcohol in the home, be aware of how accessible it is.

Don't

- Assume other parents have the same ideas as you regarding children and alcohol – find out their views.

Does your drinking influence your child?

Children often copy what their parents do and how they act. What you do may influence your child as much as what you say. It may be useful to think about your own relationship with alcohol and what messages it could be sending to your child. Think about your own drinking habits, even if you aren't a heavy drinker.

Do you ever	Situation	Possible message to your child
drink to relax or relieve stress?	After a hard day at work the first thing you do is open a bottle of wine or beer.	Could your child see alcohol as an adult way to relieve stress or anxiety and think drinking would be a grown up way of coping with exam pressure or other difficulties in their life?
drink to get drunk?	You tend to use alcohol to get drunk and don't pay much attention to recommended guidelines (see page 12).	Would your child think alcohol is for getting you drunk and that advice on recommended guidelines is meaningless and can just be ignored?
joke about being drunk?	You enjoy having a joke about things you or others have done while drunk.	Could your child think you approve of people getting drunk and doing silly things? Might they think, if you find it funny when people get drunk, you won't mind too much if they do it?
ignore your own advice?	You've advised your child about the risks associated with drinking too much, but when it comes to your own drinking you ignore this advice.	Could your child think guidelines and boundaries around drinking aren't important and don't need to be kept to?



How much do you know about alcohol?

There are recommended guidelines for adults, and drinking above these increases the risk of damage to your health. Risks include cancer, heart attack and stroke.

What are the recommended guidelines for adults?

To keep health risks from alcohol to a low level, it is safest not to drink more than 14 units a week on a regular basis.

If you regularly drink as much as 14 units per week, it is best to spread your drinking evenly over 3 or more days. If you have one or two heavy drinking episodes a week, you increase your risks of death from long-term illness and from accidents and injuries.

These guidelines are for adult drinkers – they do not apply to people under 18, people on medication, pregnant women or older people, who should seek further advice from their GP.



14 units of alcohol
is roughly:



6 pints of beer (4%),

OR



6 large glasses of wine (12%),

OR



10 pub measures of spirits (40%),

OR



10 alcopops (5%)

Your child's mind and body is still developing, and drinking can be hazardous to their health.

An alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option.

For more information

- For information on alcohol and its effects, and specialist alcohol services go to www.drugsandalcoholni.info
- For support and advice for parents, contact the Parents' Line free helpline on **0808 8020 400** or go to www.ci-ni.org.uk/parentline
- If you are worried about poor mental health, either your own or that of your child, or interested in maintaining good mental health, go to www.mindingyourhead.info
- If you are in distress or despair, contact Lifeline, a free and confidential 24 hour helpline on **0808 808 8000**

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Public Health Agency

12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.

Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).

www.publichealth.hscni.net

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