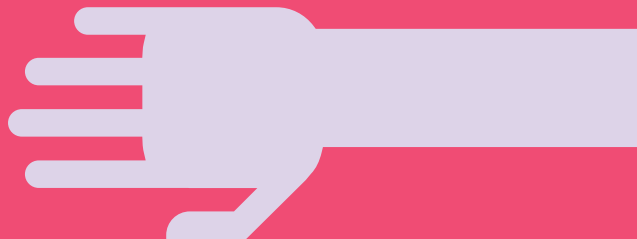


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# Your kids and **alcohol.**



Facts and advice  
to help you take  
the right approach.



for the facts  
**drinkaware.co.uk**

## Introduction

You may have already had a chat with your child about alcohol or plan to do so in the future. It is never too early or late to discuss underage drinking. Research shows meaningful conversations about alcohol between parents and their children can help the child develop a sensible relationship with drink.<sup>iii</sup>

This leaflet can help you to prepare for these conversations. You'll find information on the risks associated with children drinking alcohol, along with tips and advice on how to talk to your child.

56% of parents think that most children will drink before the age of 16<sup>iii</sup> but 61% of 11-15 year-olds have never drunk alcohol at all. In fact the number of children drinking underage has dropped every year since 2003.<sup>iv</sup>

for the facts  
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# Why do children drink alcohol?

There are different reasons why children might want to drink alcohol. As a parent it's important to understand these so that your child does not come to harm from alcohol.



## Risky behaviour is higher in puberty

Children or teenagers going through puberty can experience strong emotions, impulsive behaviour and a need for sensations. It's why young people take risks even when they 'know better'.

## They copy your drinking habits

Young children will copy what they see mum and dad doing. This continues as they grow older. If you come home and say, 'Oh, I could do with a drink!' you may be setting the example that alcohol is an essential part of life.<sup>v viii</sup>

The likelihood that a young person drinks alcohol regularly rises with age. In the latest national survey:

- 1% for 11 year-olds
- 4% for 13 year-olds
- 11% for 14 year-olds and
- 22% for 15 year-olds reported drinking alcohol in the last week.<sup>viii</sup>

Young people are most likely to think that people of their age drink to:

- look cool in front of their friends (77%)
- because it gives them a rush or 'buzz' (68%)
- to be more sociable with friends (66%) or
- because their friends pressure them into it (61%).<sup>ix</sup>

## Teenagers drink alcohol to be like their friends

From a very early age children want to fit in. If drinking is seen to be normal, your teenager may want to join in to feel part of the crowd.



## Why do children drink alcohol?

### Young people see alcohol and drinking all around them

Young people see examples of people drinking alcohol everywhere such as on TV, in magazines and on social media. This teaches children that it is normal behaviour in our society and this could make them want to drink.



### Young people want to test you, your rules, your boundaries and their limits

Children will sometimes push the limits you set. This is not because they want you to let them have their own way but because they need you to say no. Other times, their pushing is a sign that it's time to speak to them again about the rules.



### They may have problems – with themselves, family, school or friends

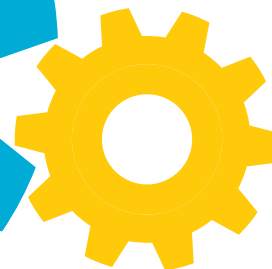
We'd like to think our children don't have problems but even young children stress over friends, school and family and they might feel alcohol could be a solution.

### Teenagers want to prove they're grown up

Teenagers aren't children so they may feel they need to prove they are no longer kids. If drinking is for adults they might try to show that they are adults by drinking alcohol.

### They want to be like their older siblings

The influence of brothers and sisters is powerful. A younger child will often want to act like their older brother or sister, and if they see them drinking alcohol they might want to try it too.



# Understanding the **risks.**



In Britain, people have died with alcoholic liver disease in their twenties.<sup>x</sup>

## Liver Damage

Think only alcoholics get liver damage? Not true. Young people who drink regularly are equally at risk. They may start to damage their livers without realising it.



## Alcohol Poisoning

Anyone who drinks a lot in a short space of time can suffer from alcohol poisoning. The level of alcohol gets so high that the brain's vital functions become blocked. Nearly 4,000 children were hospitalised with alcohol poisoning in 2014.<sup>xi</sup>



## Unprotected Sex

When children drink, their decision-making skills are affected and they're more likely to take big risks like having unprotected sex. This can lead to sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy. Research shows that even getting drunk just once is linked with an increased risk of teenage pregnancy, with the UK's rates amongst the highest in Western Europe.<sup>xii</sup>



Over a third of 16 and 17 year-olds have walked home alone at night whilst drunk.<sup>xiii</sup>

## Vulnerability

In puberty young people are more likely to experiment and take risks. Drinking alcohol can put young people in vulnerable or dangerous situations.



## Appearance and Side Effects

Research shows that underage drinkers are more likely to suffer from a range of health issues including major weight gain or weight loss, bad skin, disturbed sleep and headaches.<sup>xiv</sup>



## Drug Use

Young people drinking a lot can be linked to other harmful behaviours, like taking illegal drugs. Compared to non-drinkers, underage drinkers are more likely to smoke tobacco, use cannabis or use other hard drugs.<sup>xix</sup> And this link has been found even if they get drunk on just one occasion.



## Brain Development

During childhood and teenage years, the brain is still developing. Adding alcohol to that process can affect memory function, reactions, learning ability and attention span<sup>xx</sup> – all especially important during their school years.



## Education and Truancy

Research shows that children who start to drink by age 13 are more likely to go on to have worse grades, skip school and, in the worst case scenario, be excluded from school.<sup>xv</sup>



From 2010-2013 15,278 under 18s were admitted to hospital in England as a result of drinking alcohol.<sup>xvi</sup>

## Accidents and Injuries

Just as with adults, alcohol can reduce a child's mental and physical abilities, affecting judgment and co-ordination. Research shows young people who tested positive for alcohol were more likely to get injured or have accidents than non-drinkers.<sup>xvii</sup> They're also more likely to be a passenger in a drink-driving incident.<sup>xviii</sup>



## Aggression and Violence

Children and teenagers who drink may behave and react unpredictably. They have less self-control and their brains struggle to recognise 'warning signs'.<sup>xxi</sup> This can lead to aggression and fights. Evidence shows their risk of being involved in violence and serious vandalism increases the more alcohol they drink. This could lead to arrest and a criminal record.



## Mental Health and Suicide

Alcohol doesn't just affect young people physically. Research shows that alcohol misuse and mental disorders are closely related.<sup>xxii</sup> Young people who drink excessively may be more likely to have disturbed mental health or even self-harm.

# Why talk?

There are many reasons why we should talk to our children about drinking. The sooner we do it the better but it's never too late.

## Older children value your advice

Older children may say you don't understand how they feel and so ignore your advice. But they still pay attention to what you say and how you feel.<sup>xxiii</sup>

## Young children listen to their parents

Young children look up to their parents and will listen to what you say. Although teenagers may make their friends their focus, they still need your love and approval.

## If you don't talk to your child about alcohol, someone else will

There are plenty of people who will answer your child's questions about alcohol. Saying nothing doesn't mean your child's questions go away. It just means they may go to someone else for answers.

## Preventing underage drinking is vital for their health and success in life

Underage drinking really can have an impact on the rest of your child's life. Even if they have already tried alcohol, you can still help them to stop drinking by explaining the risks.

## The more you talk about drinking, the happier they will be

Happy families talk. When children feel they can come to you about anything and you'll listen, they'll stay close and come to you more often.

## But won't it encourage them to drink alcohol underage?

No, it won't. Research on sex education shows that children who are given good sex education go on to make safer choices.<sup>xxiv</sup>

## Is my child too young to want to drink?

You need to adapt what you say to the age of your child. Answer their questions and be guided by what they already know.

## Won't they lose respect for me if I tell them it's wrong but I drink alcohol?

Young people's bodies are still developing. This makes them more vulnerable than adults to the risks of even small amounts of alcohol. If you drink alcohol then the best example to set your kids is to drink within the recommended guidelines. That's 3 to 4 units per day for men and 2 to 3 units per day for women.

## Won't my child learn about alcohol in school?

Your child's school may be running lessons on alcohol education but they don't have to as it isn't a compulsory subject. That is why it's important that you speak to them about it.

# So what do I **say**?

When you talk to your child about alcohol, **you don't have to cover everything at once.** You're more likely to have a greater impact on your child's decisions about drinking if you have a number of chats. Think of it as part of an **on-going conversation.**

Remember, use what you feel comfortable with and adapt the advice to your own parenting style.



## Tips for an effective conversation

Here are some tips on how to have an effective chat with your child about alcohol.

### Find out how much they already know

Never think you know exactly how much your child understands about alcohol. Talking to them is the best way to find out how much they know.

### Be honest

Many parents can dread their kids asking them if they drank alcohol underage or asking them about how much they drink now. If they do ask those questions, it is far better to be honest with them. You should talk about the pleasures and the risks of drinking alcohol.

### Use conversation triggers

A soap storyline or the latest celebrity scandal involving drink can be a good way to start a conversation about alcohol.

### Get the timing right

It can help to have a chat in a place where you both feel comfortable. Chatting over a shared meal around a table or on a car journey can be a good time.

### Get the tone right

Make it a two-way conversation rather than a lecture. Listening as much as you talk encourages young people to pay attention and can encourage them to tell you more about the situation too.



# What to say when.

Children's attitudes to alcohol will change over time, so here's a quick guide of **what to say to children at different ages**.

Remember it's never too early to start talking about drinking and never too late to catch up.

74% of parents agree it's important to proactively bring up alcohol with their child, rather than waiting for something to happen.<sup>xxv</sup>



Don't wait for the issue of alcohol to come up; you should start the conversation and talk through what's acceptable and what rules you want to put in place.

## Ages 9-12 Curiosity

### Ages 8-10 Awareness

At this age children usually have a negative view of alcohol. They might start to take notice when people around them are drinking, for example at the dinner table or a family occasion. They may ask simple questions such as, 'What is that?' or 'Why do you drink?'

Explain to them that:

- alcohol is only for adults
- that there is a sociable side to alcohol
- but if you drink too much there can be bad consequences for your health and safety.

It's now that children will become more curious about alcohol and may ask questions like, 'What does it taste like?' or 'What does being drunk feel like?' This is a good time to talk about the impact of alcohol on the body and the risks linked to drinking alcohol. Make sure they understand different types of alcohol have different ABV strengths.

Try ordering a unit measure cup (available from <https://resources.drinkaware.co.uk/products>) and show them what different measures of drink look like.

## Ages 11-14 Experimentation

At this age, children may be experimenting with alcohol. They could be offered drinks by a friend or you may be thinking about giving them a small amount. They might ask for some of your drink or they may ask more difficult questions like, 'Why are you allowed to drink but I'm not?'

You might want to talk about the rules you've set around drinking and agree what will happen if they break these. Research shows that in families where there are rules about drinking, young people are more likely to drink responsibly.<sup>xxvi</sup>

## Ages 13-17 Experienced

By this age your child may have had a number of alcoholic drinks and tested their limits. They might ask more challenging questions like, 'Can I take some drink to a party?' or 'All my friends are drinking, why can't I?'

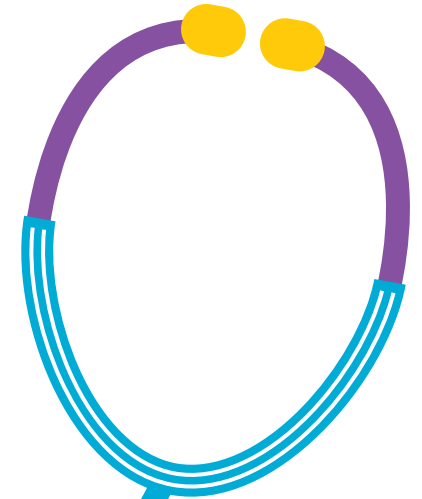
If they're going on a night out with friends, find out who they are with and what they are planning to do. It's also important to be aware of how easy it is for children to find and drink any alcohol that is in your house.

### What if my child comes home drunk or having had drink?

If your child comes home drunk don't talk about it there and then. Pick a time the next day when they can tell you what happened. Then go over all the issues you've discussed about the dangers, your rules and the punishments you've agreed.

### What if I am giving or want to give my child alcohol before they are 15?

Our recommendation to parents is to follow the Chief Medical Officers' guidance that an alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option.



As a parent it is your choice to give alcohol to your child although it is illegal to give alcohol to children under five years old (see the Law on page 23). If you do choose to give your child alcohol, we would always recommend that you or another adult be there so that you can check the amount of alcohol they are drinking.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Research has shown that young people may suffer higher levels of harm if they drink alcohol without a parent or adult with them, compared to children whose parents buy them alcohol.<sup>[i] [ii]</sup>

Some examples of the types of harm children can experience when drinking unsupervised include being involved in violence when drunk, memory loss after drinking or having sex which they regret afterwards.<sup>[iii]</sup>

# Tough **questions** answered.

Here are some examples of tough questions children may ask about alcohol.



**Why do adults drink?**  
You could say:

- because I like the taste and because alcohol can relax you and make you feel good
- but there are other ways of feeling good and relaxing – shall we talk about some of them?

**What does alcohol taste like?** You could say:

- wine tastes a bit like sour grape juice, cider like sour apple juice and beer can be bitter
- since taste buds change as you get older you might find alcohol doesn't taste very nice.

**Can I try a sip of your drink?**

It is not illegal for a parent or guardian to give their child alcohol at home if they are aged over five years old.

**However, if you don't want to, you could say:**

- no, not even a sip
- you may feel grown up but your body is still developing, and alcohol can harm you at your age.

You can find more examples and suggested answers at [drinkaware.co.uk/toughquestions](http://drinkaware.co.uk/toughquestions)

# Is it OK to drink in front of my **child**?

Research shows that from a young age children learn about acceptable behaviour by watching and copying their parents.<sup>xxviii</sup>

So when it comes to drinking, it really is a case of leading by example.

There's evidence that children whose parents drink a small amount of alcohol in front of them are less likely to drink too much alcohol themselves.



## You can follow these simple tips to show your own responsible attitude to drinking.

- Drink within the daily unit guidelines. This shows your child that adults can enjoy alcohol in small amounts.
- Talk to them about different drinks having different ABV strengths and let them know alcohol is measured in units. Try ordering a unit measure cup (available from <https://resources.drinkaware.co.uk/products>) and show them what different measures of drink look like.
- If you drink, don't feel guilty for telling your children they can't. Instead, explain that alcohol is only for adults because their bodies have finished growing. But even adults still have rules about how much they can drink.
- Children notice if their parents have different drinking patterns at special occasions or on holiday. To avoid confusing them, keep talking to them and explain that you normally stick to the daily unit guidelines.

If you do drink too much every now and again and have a hangover, don't try and hide the symptoms. Instead talk openly to your child about how you're feeling. This way they know too much alcohol can have bad outcomes.

In 2013-2014, there were 2,864 counselling sessions where a young person contacted ChildLine to talk about a parent drinking.<sup>xxix</sup>



# The law on alcohol and under 18s.

It is important to be clear on the law around alcohol and children.



The UK Chief Medical Officers recommend that an alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option. For further information, visit [drinkaware.co.uk/the-law](https://drinkaware.co.uk/the-law)

If you're under 18 and drinking alcohol in public, you can be stopped, fined or arrested by police.

## It is against the law:

- to sell alcohol to someone under 18 anywhere
- for someone under 18 to buy or try to buy alcohol
- for an adult to buy or try to buy alcohol on behalf of someone under 18
- for someone under 18 to drink alcohol in licensed premises (e.g. a pub or restaurant), except where the child is 16 or 17 and accompanied by an adult. In this case, it is legal for them to drink (but not buy) beer, wine or cider with a meal
- to give alcohol to children under five.

## It is not illegal:

- for a child aged five to 16 to drink alcohol at home or on other private premises
- for someone over 18 to buy a child over 16 beer, wine or cider if they are eating at a table meal together in a licensed premises
- for children aged 16 to go to a pub (or premises primarily used to sell alcohol) if accompanied by an adult. However, this isn't always the case. It can also depend on the specific conditions for that premises and the licensable activities taking place there.



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# Other useful contacts.

Visit [drinkaware.co.uk/underageddrinking](https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/underageddrinking)  
for more information on young people and alcohol

## General advice on alcohol

- Drinkaware offers a range of information, tips and advice about alcohol including downloadable resources such as factsheets and leaflets, as well as practical tools such as unit measure cups and unit and calorie calculators. We also have a mobile app to track and calculate the units and calories in your drinks.

Visit [drinkaware.co.uk/resources](https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/resources) to find out more

- The NHS website has more information on alcohol and its effects.

Visit [nhs.uk/livewell/alcohol](https://www.nhs.uk/livewell/alcohol)

## For young people

- [thesite.org](https://www.thesite.org) and [talktofrank.com](https://www.talktofrank.com) have sections with advice and information about alcohol and young people.

## Drug and alcohol services

- If you think your child is drinking too much, contact your GP, phone Drinkline on 0300 123 1110 or visit [www.addaction.org.uk](https://www.addaction.org.uk) to find local Addaction services.
- **Dan 24/7** is a free and bilingual helpline offering information on drugs and alcohol. Contact an advisor on 0808 808 2234.

## Parenting

- Family Lives is a national charity providing help and support in all aspects of family life. Visit [familylives.org.uk](https://www.familylives.org.uk) or call Family Lives 24/7 Parentline advice line on 0808 800 2222.
- To talk to other parents about how they deal with talking to their children about alcohol you can visit the forum pages at [mumsnet.com](https://www.mumsnet.com), [netmums.com](https://www.netmums.com) or [dad.info](https://www.dad.info)

## Mental health

- YoungMinds provides information and advice on young people and mental health. Visit [youngminds.org.uk](https://www.youngminds.org.uk) or call 020 7089 5050.

## Sexual health

- Brook provides sexual health advice. Visit [brook.org.uk](https://www.brook.org.uk) or text an Ask Brook advisor on 07717 989 023 (standard SMS rates).
- FPA provides information, advice and support on sexual health, sex and relationships. Visit [fpa.org.uk](https://www.fpa.org.uk) or call 0845 122 8690.