

INSIGHTS

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Teenage drinking

Discouraging teens from under-age drinking takes strong adult leadership involving schools, parents and community groups.



There are few issues currently so perplexing and confusing for parents than how to introduce the notion of alcohol to young people. Many report that they are under extreme pressure from their son or daughter to let them drink before the legal drinking age.

"Everyone else is drinking. Why can't I?" is a mantra that many parents of teens are familiar with.

The current evidence suggests that teenagers are beginning to drink alcohol younger than ever. And they are drinking more. One recent Australian study found that in the previous twelve months, 25.5 per cent of boys and 27.1 per cent of girls had drunk until they blacked out, which is an amount that kills brain cells responsible for high-level functioning.

It's widely acknowledged that binge drinking is a huge problem among young people. It can be argued that young people's drinking reflects the drinking patterns of adults so it's a societal issue as well.

Kids drink for many reasons including to relieve boredom, reduce stress, appease peers and feel more confident. Drinking to excess appears to be a kind of rite of passage for many adolescents.

However, it's also important to remember that not all young people want to drink alcohol. Many young people I've spoken to have described the immense peer and community pressure to drink alcohol. These young people can benefit from strategies that will help them avoid drinking, while maintaining status among their peers.

It's a parent's job to teach their kids about alcohol use or, at the very least, to make sure they have some impact on their kids' thinking and behaviour. It helps to think about your approach before they reach middle adolescence and then be prepared to modify your plan according to the situation.

Here are some guidelines:

1. Delay drinking until the legal drinking age. The evidence is clear that developing teenage brains and alcohol shouldn't mix. Brain research conducted over the last few years leaves little doubt that those who begin drinking under eighteen years-of-age are susceptible to developing dependency problems in their twenties. The younger kids start the greater the potential risk.

Young people can consume more alcohol than adults before it has a sedating effect. So teens can be drinking at harmful levels and they don't know it. Under-age drinking is linked to a variety of risk-taking behaviours, particularly sexual activity, violence and anti-social behaviour.

2. Don't buy them alcohol to take to parties. Most Australian states have secondary supply laws in place making it illegal for adults to purchase alcohol for people under eighteen that's consumed outside the family home. Interestingly, many under-age drinkers who take alcohol to parties claim that part of their supply was given to them by their parents. Research reveals that parents supply alcohol to young people because they believe that are going to drink anyway, so parental supply will have a limiting effect. The evidence doesn't support this view.

Location is a factor in the quantity of alcohol young people consume. Alcohol consumed at parties occurs at higher and riskier levels than when it's consumed at home. Parents should make it hard, not easy, for kids to drink, particularly outside the family home.

3. Examine your own drinking habits. Genetics and environmental factors play a part in problem drinking. There is little you can do about the former, but parental modeling is something you can control. Parents who drink heavily and have permissive attitudes about alcohol are more likely to have teenagers who drink at risky levels.

4. Talk with your kids about drinking. While many fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds seem to think their parents' sole job is to spoil their fun, your expectations do affect the way they behave. Parental disapproval is still a strong deterrent for teenage risk-taking, particularly if you have a strong relationship. In the long-term discuss safe drinking habits such as eating before consuming alcohol, not drinking alone and looking out for friends if they drink too much.

There is no evidence that frank and open family discussion about safe drinking behaviour encourages young people to drink at a younger age. On the contrary, it can have a modifying effect on young people's drinking.