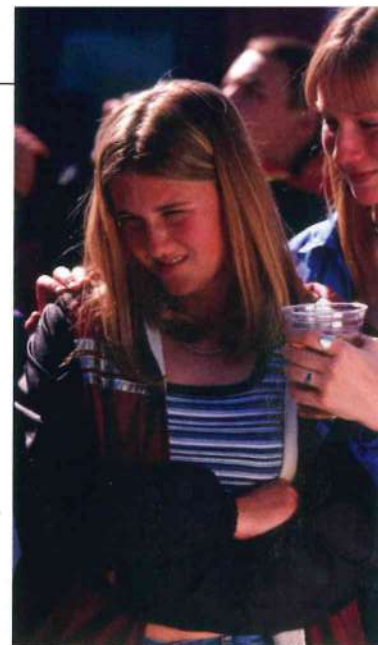


Alcohol

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Young People and Alcohol, can parents have an Influence? by *Mark Morgan* and *Thérèse Hegarty*



THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE IS TO HELP PARENTS TO DISCUSS DRINKING WITH THEIR CHILDREN. Although it is mainly aimed at the parents of teenagers it may also be useful for parents of younger children and, generally, for all adults concerned with the development of children.

This article has been prepared by professionals who have expertise in the area of young people and alcohol but it does not set out to tell parents what they must or must not do. Instead it tries to provide useful information, which may help parents to openly discuss the issues with their children.

- Parents have an important influence on their children's behaviour. Many parents may be surprised by this – but it is true!
- A key guiding idea is that alcohol consumption requires maturity and responsibility. For this reason postponing a first drink to an agreed age has a lot of merit. The exact age will need to be negotiated between children and parents and we take the view that the age of drinking by many young people is too young.
- Better information can help parents to make the right decision. It is important to note that the latest research suggests delaying teenage drinking for as long as possible is the best option. A young person's brain will continue to develop into their early twenties so the potential for damage and poor decision making will be reduced if they start drinking at a later age.
- In Ireland, drinking patterns differ from, for example, wine producing countries – where children are introduced to alcohol in the home. We also differ in where alcohol is drunk, what we drink and in many of our attitudes.

INFLUENCES

Many factors influence the drinking patterns of young people.

FAMILY

Families are of major importance in children's drinking. Your example is important. We are not saying that all parents who abstain from alcohol will have children who are abstinent or temperate. Nor are we suggesting that the children of heavy drinkers will necessarily have drinking problems. What is clear however is that parents who drink moderately have children whose use of alcohol is quite different to the children of those

whose drinking is problematic.

How you react to their drinking is also important. The research shows that a moderate and balanced approach to underage drinking is most likely to bring about positive outcomes. In other words if parents take an indifferent attitude it does not produce positive results and a very strict and authoritarian attitude can also cause problems. Many recovering alcoholics remember their childhood as one where love was not communicated and where they felt they were not valued. The research indicates that children who feel loved and valued are less likely to abuse alcohol.

We often worry that alcohol problems 'run in families' and will be inherited by the children. This is not necessarily true – alcohol problems develop over several years – and we should focus on those conditions in the individuals' lives which give rise to problem drinking.

FRIENDS

Parents identify peers as the most important influence on their children's decision to start to drink. This is understandable – young people who drink regularly are likely to have friends who drink, while those who do not are likely to have friends who do not drink. Whether to drink (or not) is one of the most central decisions during adolescence and influences the selection of friends.

Many of us worry about 'peer pressure', which is often considered to come from all the peer group in the locality and school. The reality however is that it is the peer group of those selected friends, especially best friends, which matters most.

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

You may know about the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme, which is now running in most schools in the country.

This focuses on the health, personal development, decision making and self esteem of young people and it also deals with the use of alcohol. However we cannot leave it all to the schools and, as parents, we can influence our children's attitude to school and to participation.

'She will be taught about alcohol at school soon enough – maybe I should leave alcohol education to the experts. Besides, I don't want to put ideas in her head before she's even a teenager.'

When a young person drinks too much it is usually part of a broad set of behaviours. Here are some suggestions that can help prevent these behaviours:

- Encourage commitment at school – either to study or sport or other activities;
- Find out about your school's policies on alcohol. Partnership between parents and schools is likely to bring about a better outcome than any effort made by either on their own;
- Encourage children to read or to take up a hobby that does not involve drink.

Moving from Primary to Secondary school is a stressful time – new subjects, new teachers, possibly new classmates and making new friends. If the transition isn't smooth young people are more likely to become involved in underage drinking. Our children may want to appear 'grown up' at this time but in fact they are very vulnerable and we need to be alert to any changes and be available for a chat.

Teachers have insights into our children which we may not have. Many are parents themselves and they all play a significant role in our children's formation.

Do talk to them if you have concerns about alcohol abuse.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Alcohol abuse is not confined to any particular sector in society. You can be sure that your teenager (or preteen) will be offered alcohol. You cannot be sure that your children will not make silly mistakes with alcohol. Young people who come through all this with responsible drinking habits often share many of the following characteristics:

Healthy self esteem. They know their own strengths and weaknesses and have the confidence to know they are liked and to like themselves. Because of this they are unlikely to harm or abuse themselves. Parents can encourage self-esteem by being supportive of their children's efforts from an early age and being willing and interested listeners to their ups and downs.

They can make decisions. There are many influences on young people, often with conflicting messages. These young people can make up their minds without worrying too much what others think. Parents walk a fine line here. Too much control and children have no opportunity to think for themselves – too little and they may feel that

decisions are not important. What young people need is encouragement to think on their feet, follow their own advice and resist following the herd at times. They understand that some rules are necessary. Through learning to live with clear and reasonable rules young people develop personal responsibility. Parents can help by having a few clear rules at home and by explaining the values behind the rules. A rule about telling those at home where you are going and what time you will be home is a great protection.

They appreciate the value of money. They realise that they must manage on a limited amount of money. Parents can limit their children's pocket money or control the amount available from part-time jobs - by, for example, requiring a contribution to collective household expenses from income earned outside the home.

They are busy with interesting lives. Some are involved in school, others in sport, dancing, music or youth clubs. They do not have much time to be bored. Boredom is one of the greatest causes of alcohol abuse. Try to spot their talents early and give them every encouragement to develop them.

Their families drink in moderation, if they choose to drink, or are open about their problems. They have seen their adult relatives drink in a moderate way, and have seen them choose not to drink on occasion (e.g. when driving). Alternatively, if there are problem drinkers in the family, these issues have been openly and frankly discussed with them. Children of alcoholic parents can use lessons from frank and compassionate discussion of the issue to help protect themselves and their friends.

Children are not taken in by appearances - they are more influenced by what we do than by what we say. Teenagers in particular are rarely fooled at home and honesty is certainly the best policy.

PARENTS' WORRIES

"How do I explain the dangers of drink?" Most adults in Ireland take a drink when relaxing and socialising and it is helpful to acknowledge the enjoyable aspect of this. It is also helpful to discuss with young people the harmful aspects such as losing control, taking risks and wasting money.

A good time to bring up these discussions is when watching TV when the issue arises. We can talk to our teenagers, listen to their views and convey information and guidance in a distanced way that is not too threatening for them. This has proven more useful than scare tactics or punishment, which can turn young people off.

"I worry about the friends they are with." The 'best friends' have a lot of influence in the development of a pattern of drinking. Parents are wise to be aware of the pattern of drinking among young people in the area. It is also helpful to get to know the 'best friends' and make them welcome at home.

Often parents criticise friends when they fear their influence. This can lead to a young person feeling torn between parents and friends and this is not helpful in maintaining good communication. It is better for parents to convey their worries about the safety of the young people than to run down the friends

themselves.

"Will they end up in a fight?" We also need to discuss the increasing trend towards rowdy and violent behaviour, often under the influence of alcohol, and to clearly state that violence at all levels is unacceptable. Parents can help teenagers to think about places that are dangerous and how levels of alcohol consumption can leave them vulnerable to involvement in fights. Young people need the older generation to be clearly concerned with their safety.

"I'm so worried I can't sleep." Parents often worry when their teenagers begin to drink. Often that fear is not so much about the drink itself as the consequences of drinking. At its worst the fear can be about drink related violence or poor decision making around sexual activity.

"Are they having sex?" We all worry about pressure on our children as they enter puberty and the confusion and anxiety that can follow. The age of sexual activity has fallen and peer pressure along with media pressure can make decision making difficult. Sometimes young people drink in response to this pressure and alcohol consumption can lead to inappropriate decisions. Parents can make it clear to their sons and daughters that sexual activity is always their choice and it is always OK to say "NO". Once again TV and films can provide us with opportunities to discuss this with our young people.

"I just don't know how to begin. I know she drinks sometimes when she's out with her friends. She's usually quite a sensible girl, but I just hope she doesn't take any stupid risks. Should I have drink in the house?" Most households do have drink at home and will often offer a drink to visitors. Drink however needs to be kept in a place where younger children cannot access it by accident. It is unfair to teenagers, especially if parents are away for a night, to leave them in a situation where they have access to a large supply of drink at home especially during the years when they are likely to experiment.

USEFUL CONTACTS

Your school's Parents Council
Your school's Home Liaison Officer
Your Health Board's Health Promotion Officer
Your local Residents Association

VISIT DRINKAWARE.IE
for information on alcohol and drinking,
from fascinating facts to practical tips.

DOWNLOAD FREE GUIDES including the 'Student Survival Guide' the 'Festival Survival Guide', 'Alcohol Sport & You' and the 'Christmas Survival Guide'.

OTHER USEFUL PUBLICATIONS: 'Straight Talk - A guide for parents on teenage drinking' published by the HSE



drinkaware.ie was developed by MEAS (Mature Enjoyment of Alcohol in Society Limited) MEAS is a drinks industry initiative against alcohol misuse

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Young People & Alcohol Quiz

ARE THESE STATEMENTS TRUE OR FALSE?

1 The average age of beginning to drink is 14-15 years

FALSE Since the early 80's the average age of beginning to drink has reduced from 15 years to 13 years. The whole 'timetable' of drinking (starting with an occasional drink and following with more regular drinking) is now earlier than a generation ago, but has levelled off, with recent (2011) evidence showing it has increased somewhat.

2 The number of young people who have never tried alcohol has decreased over the years.

TRUE There has been a dramatic change here. Thirty years ago about 1 in 4 those leaving post-primary school had not tried alcohol even once. Today the number reaching 18 without having tried alcohol is very small. Some teenagers start to drink because they wrongly think all teenagers are drinking. Recent research shows that the number of teenagers under 15 experimenting with alcohol has dropped and that half of 15 year olds are not regular drinkers. Delaying drinking reduces the risks of harmful drinking in later life.

3 Under 18's know that they will not be able to buy alcohol, even if they want to

FALSE Young people aged from 16 upwards say that they can get access to alcohol if they want to. (We are not suggesting that alcohol is always easily obtained - what is crucial is that young people see it as easy to obtain).

4 There is more drinking in cities than anywhere else

FALSE People from all backgrounds begin to drink at roughly the same age.

5 All young people do not start drinking in the same setting

TRUE There are three broad locations for the 'first drink'. Own home or home of a friend (sometimes when parents are away), pubs/off- licences (sometimes bought by a 'friend' who is overage), and parks/beaches/waste-ground.

6 The changes in Irish Society are part of the picture that influence the drinking of young people

TRUE Childhood is shorter in modern Ireland than it was even 20 years ago. Young people are independent minded at an earlier age, are sexually active, and make decisions about their lives earlier.

7 The best time to talk to your children about alcohol is when they enter the early teens

FALSE Children often ask about alcohol and drinking when they are very young. When this happens a positive response is better than ducking the issue. Many parents do not see the need to raise the subject until their children reach their teens when they apparently start drinking alcohol. Ideally you should speak to your child before he or she is likely to start experimenting with alcohol.