Visit **drinkaware.co.uk** for more information on young people and alcohol

## Other useful contacts

### General advice on alcohol
Drinkaware's website offers a range of information, tips and advice about alcohol, including a tool to find out the number of units in drinks and printed and downloadable resources. Drinkaware also has a dedicated parents' section with more information on talking to children about alcohol. Visit *www.drinkaware.co.uk*

The NHS website has more information on alcohol and its effects. Visit *nhs.uk/alcohol*.

Targeted support and advice is available to help you at *direct.gov.uk/whyletdrinkdecide*

### For young people
*thesite.org* and *talktofrank.com* have sections with advice and information about alcohol and young people.

### Addiction
If you think your child is drinking too much, contact your GP, phone Drinkline on *0800 917 8282* or visit *addaction.org.uk* to find local Addaction services.

### Parenting
Family Lives is a national charity providing help and support in all aspects of family life. Visit *familylives.org.uk* or call the 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 *dadtalk.co.uk*, *mumsnet.com* or *netmums.com*

### Mental health
YoungMinds provides information and advice on young people and mental health. Visit *youngminds.org.uk* or call *0808 802 5544*.

### Sexual health
Brook provides sexual health advice. Visit *brook.org.uk* or call *0808 802 1234*.

The FPA provides information, advice and support on sexual health, sex and relationships. Visit *fpa.org.uk* or call *0845 122 8690*.

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

Drinkaware is an independent alcohol awareness charity.
Registered Charity No. 1094586.

01/PARE/11

# Your kids and **alcohol**

**Facts and advice** to help you take the right approach

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

# When it comes to talking to your child about alcohol, it might feel like there's never a 'right time'...

What should I **tell them?**

What age should I start **talking to my child about alcohol?**

Does my own drinking affect **my child?**

Is there evidence **alcohol is bad for kids?**

If I'm strict, will **they just rebel?**

Will they **listen to me?**

# ...but approaching the topic doesn't have to mean the daunting **'Alcohol Talk'**

**It may be that you haven't started thinking about how you'll talk to your child about drinking yet, or you might think it's being covered at school, but when it comes to alcohol, the more information your child has, and the earlier they get it, the better. Friends are important in shaping your child's views but not as important as you.**

Obviously every child is different and your conversations will vary, but this leaflet will help explain why, when and how to start talking to your child about alcohol, whatever their age. It will also give you the facts you need to feel more confident to keep up an ongoing dialogue about responsible drinking throughout your child's teenage years.

Currently only 17% of parents have a plan to **talk to their children about alcohol.**

# Some things **you should know…**

**Not all young people drink**
We might see pictures and headlines in the news that make it look like all young people are drinking, but in reality almost half (49%) of 11 to 15 year olds have never drunk alcohol and this percentage has gone up in recent years. So underage drinking isn't inevitable and if they don't drink, they're not that different.

**You have more influence than you think**
Sometimes it can seem like they don't listen to a word you say, but research shows parents have the most influence on young children's attitudes and behaviour towards alcohol.

**Talk to your children before their friends do**
As children grow up, the influence of their peers gets stronger, so it's important to talk to them before their friends do. Giving your child the facts from an early age makes sure they have accurate information to understand or challenge what their friends tell them and make responsible drinking decisions on their own when they're faced with them.

**The majority of children aged 9–17** would turn to their parents first for information and advice on drinking alcohol.

**Children are aware of alcohol from a very young age**
Research shows that children as young as seven understand about alcohol and its effects. From this age children can recognise drunkenness and addiction and can tell the difference between acceptable and unacceptable drinking behaviour. That's why it's important to start talking to them early about alcohol.

**One size doesn't fit all**
Every child is different so there isn't a 'one size fits all' approach to talking about alcohol. You know them better than anyone, so this leaflet is designed to give you the facts and the confidence to be able to pass them on to your child in the way that suits you both best.

**Do as I say, not as I did**
No matter what ideas, guidelines or experiences you grew up with, the current guidance on the consumption of alcohol by children and young people is that an alcohol-free childhood is best.

**Alcohol isn't all bad**
There's no point pretending drinking alcohol is *all* bad. It's important to teach your child that there are two sides to alcohol – it can be enjoyed in moderation but if they go too far there can be risks too.

**The average age of a child's first unsupervised drink is just under 14** and it's really important to talk to your kids before they start drinking.

**Young people who start drinking at an early age drink more, and more frequently,** than those who delay their first alcoholic drink.

# Why and when to **talk to your children**

**Talk before they are teens**
Knowing when to start talking to your child about alcohol can be tricky. Children's attitudes to alcohol change as they grow up, particularly during the transition from primary to secondary school, so it's a good idea to talk to them before the teen years and before their friends do.

The earlier you start the conversation the better, even if they seem too young. And once you've started, it's important to keep the conversation going.

**It's never too late**
It might sound like a cliché but it's never too late to start talking to your child about alcohol. Even if they've already started drinking it's important to have open discussions about handling peer pressure, avoiding risky behaviour and how to stay safe.

**No time like the present**
80% of parents say they'll "deal with it when it happens" when it comes to talking to their child about alcohol. But it's best to talk about the risks associated with drinking before your child unknowingly puts themselves in a risky situation.

**Will it encourage my children to drink if I talk to them about alcohol?**
Children see and hear about alcohol from a very early age, whether at home, at school, from friends or in the media.

Even though you might be concerned about planting ideas about drinking in their heads, even if you talk to your children before their teen years, it's likely they'll already have their own thoughts about drinking. It's best to check their ideas are right, and encourage them to talk openly with you in the future to avoid making alcohol a taboo.

**Peer pressure**
As children get older they are more influenced by their friends and this can turn into pressure to drink. Prepare them for this by letting them know not everyone their age is drinking and they shouldn't ever feel they have to drink to fit in. Despite the growing influence of their friends, you can still have a positive effect on your child's attitudes and behaviour towards alcohol.

After bullying, alcohol is the issue most experienced by children aged 10–17 – **even more than smoking and drugs.**

**Nearly a quarter of children** in Years 12 and 13 said their parents have **never** spoken to them about alcohol.

# What do they learn about **alcohol at school?**

Although you might think school is the best place for children to learn about alcohol, it's not compulsory to teach PSHE in schools in England. So while alcohol may be mentioned in science or citizenship classes, children might not get as much alcohol education as you think.

Finding out what your child has learnt about alcohol at school, and discussing it in more depth at home, can be a good way to start a conversation about drinking.

**Almost all 8–10 year olds (94%) believe that it's not OK for someone their age to drink alcohol once a week.**

At secondary school children start to view alcohol differently – a quarter (25%) of 11–15 year olds believe it's not a problem for someone their age to drink alcohol once a week.

**54% of young people** drink alcohol as a result of peer pressure or because they want to fit in.

**61% of young people** think too many under 18s in England drink alcohol.

# What to say **when?**

**The age of your child's first drink is crucial, so it's important to talk to them before they have their first experience with alcohol. Their attitudes will change over time so here's a quick guide of what to say when. For age appropriate tips, go to pages 16 and 17.**

## Ages 8-10 Awareness

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

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

**Three quarters of 8–10 year olds** already know that alcohol could make them do silly things, feel sick, have an accident or get in trouble with the police.

## Ages 9-12 Curiosity

At this age children will become more curious about alcohol and may start to ask questions like:
– What does it taste like?
– What does alcohol do to you?
– What does being drunk feel like?
– If you're drunk, do you stay drunk forever?

This is a good time to talk about the impact of alcohol on the body. You could also explain how it feels to be drunk, for example, you might do silly things or feel sick. You might want to talk about the difference between drinking in moderation and abusing alcohol. Make sure they understand that different types of alcohol have different strengths.

Over a third (34%) of 16 and 17 year olds have **walked home alone at night when drunk.**

## Ages 11-14 Experimentation

By ages 11to14 children may be experimenting with alcohol. They could be offered drinks by a friend or might seek to try it themselves. You might be thinking about giving them a small amount. At this age they might ask:
– Can I sleep over at my friend's house when their parents are away?
– Can I have some of your drink?
– Why are you allowed to drink but I'm not?

Now's a good time to talk about peer pressure and help your child think of ways to deal with any pressure they might be under to drink. You might want to discuss rules about drinking and agree consequences should they break these – making it clear the rules are there to keep them safe.

5% of 11–12 year olds who have had an alcoholic drink have **been drunk at least once** compared to 76% of 16–17 year olds.

## Ages 13-17 Experienced

By this age your child may have had a number of alcoholic drinks and tested their limits – so might consider themselves experienced drinkers. They might ask more challenging questions like:
– Can I take some drink to the party?
– Can you buy me some drinks?
– But all my friends are drinking, why can't I?

If you know your child is drinking, make sure they're aware of the risks and give them tips to help them stay safe (see page 20). If they're going out, find out who they are with and what they are planning to do. Agree with them that if they ever get into a situation involving alcohol where they feel uncomfortable, they can call and get picked up, no questions asked.

It's important to be aware of how accessible alcohol is in your house and not to provide your child with alcohol. But if you do decide to, make sure you give them non-alcoholic drinks too and encourage them to alternate.

# **The facts** about children and alcohol

**Children can make more responsible decisions about drinking if they have the facts to base them on and feel confident to say "no" if they want to. Because alcohol is legal and children might see it on the television, in magazines, at home or at their friend's houses, they aren't always aware it could leave a person vulnerable so it's important they know the facts from an early age. If you understand the risks, you can help your child understand them too.**

While the immediate effects of getting drunk at a young age may be no more than being sick or having a hangover, alcohol can leave children emotionally, physically and sexually vulnerable. So the most important thing is to talk to your child early and often about the different risks associated with drinking alcohol.

As children are smaller, and their bodies are still developing, they have a lower tolerance to alcohol and are **much more vulnerable to its effects.**

## Long term risks

**Liver damage**
You might think that only lifelong alcoholics get liver disease, but regularly drinking too much can increase a young person's chances of damaging their liver. And as there aren't many warning signs of liver damage, a problem might only be discovered when it's very serious.

**Brain development**
The areas of the brain responsible for behaviour, emotions, reasoning and judgement are still developing throughout childhood and into the teenage years. Drinking during this time can have a long-term impact on memory, reactions and attention span. This could affect their performance at school and stop them reaching their full potential.

**Drinking later in life**
If young people binge drink, they are more likely to be binge drinkers as adults. Drinking frequently at a young age is also linked to an increased risk of developing alcohol dependence in young adulthood. Regularly drinking in later life can lead to cancer, stroke, heart disease and infertility.

## Short term risks

**The future can seem a million miles away for children, so talking to them about the short term risks of drinking might be easier for them to relate to.**

**Vulnerability**
The hormonal changes children go through at puberty make them more likely to take risks. Alcohol can further impair children's judgement, leaving them vulnerable. If they've been drinking they might unintentionally put themselves in risky situations like getting involved in a fight, or walking home alone.

**Unprotected sex**
Alcohol affects children's rational decision making skills. When children drink they feel more confident and have lower inhibitions. This can mean they make decisions which are out of character, such as having unprotected sex.

**Alcohol poisoning**
Alcohol can be poisonous to children's bodies if they drink too much in a short space of time. If children's blood alcohol levels get too high their brain can stop controlling their body's vital functions and in the worst-case scenario, they could stop breathing, fall into a coma or choke on their own vomit.

**Appearance**
Alcohol has almost as many calories as pure fat so drinking can cause weight gain. It is also a diuretic so it dehydrates the body and can make skin look pale and grey. Drinking affects normal sleep patterns too, leading to restless nights and tiredness.

**20,000**

Every year over 20,000 under 18s are admitted to hospital in England as a result of drinking alcohol.

A third (32%) of teenagers have been a passenger in a car with a **driver who was drunk.**

# How much is too much for under 18s to drink?

In 2009 the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) for England and Wales issued official guidelines on alcohol for under 18s and their parents. The Northern Ireland Executive promotes similar ideas.

## The guidance says:

An alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option, and children under 15 definitely shouldn't drink.

If 15–17 year olds drink, it should be within the daily unit guidelines and infrequently – certainly no more than once a week.

If 15–17 year olds do drink, they should be supervised by a parent or other adult.

Research shows the earlier a child starts drinking, the higher their chances of developing alcohol abuse or dependence in their teenage years and as an adult. Those who drink before age 15 are most vulnerable to alcohol misuse later in life.

So, parents play a crucial role in delaying young people's first drink.

It may be tempting to offer your child a sip of alcohol on special occasions so they don't feel left out. This could send mixed messages about whether they are or aren't allowed to drink. That's why the CMO guidance advises delaying your child's first drink for as long as possible and advises no alcohol before age 15.

Of course, children are naturally curious, so they'll probably ask you questions if they see you drinking and may ask to try some. Rather than offering them a sip, use this as a chance to talk to them openly and honestly about the facts (you could use pages 16 and 17 as a guide).

You might think that allowing them to try alcohol will demystify it. Instead, as with issues like smoking and drugs, it's better to let them know they can ask you anything, at any time, about alcohol. If you don't know the answer, be honest and suggest you find out together.

If you've already given your child a drink, it's best to honestly explain that if they carry on drinking it could harm them so they aren't allowed to continue. Reassure them that if they stop, any effects drinking has already on their body are likely to be reversible, but if you're worried it's best to talk to your GP.

# **What's the law** around alcohol and young people?

**Alcohol consumption in the UK is governed by strict laws.**

**It is against the law:**
- to sell alcohol to someone under 18 anywhere
- for an adult to buy or attempt to buy alcohol on behalf of someone under 18
- for someone under 18 to buy alcohol, attempt to buy alcohol or to be sold alcohol
- for someone under 18 to drink alcohol in licensed premises, except where the child is 16 or 17 years old and accompanied by an adult. In this case it is legal for them to drink, but not buy, beer, wine and cider with a table meal
- for an adult to buy alcohol for someone under 18 for consumption on licensed premises, except as above
- for children under five to drink alcohol at home or on private premises unless following a doctor's advice for health reasons.

**It is not illegal:**
- for someone over 18 to buy a child over 16 beer, wine or cider if they are eating a table meal together in licensed premises
- for a child aged 5 to 16 to drink alcohol at home or on other private premises. Parents can choose to give their child alcohol at home.

**Consequences of breaking the law**

If the police suspect someone under 18 has alcohol in a public place, they have the power to confiscate it. If young people get caught with alcohol three times they could face a social contract, a fine or arrest. Getting a criminal record could affect future job prospects and make it more difficult to travel to countries like the USA.

The police can also confiscate alcohol from someone, no matter what their age, if they believe it has been or will be drunk by someone under 18 in a public place.

**Over a quarter of 14–15 year olds** have caused damage while drinking.

One in ten 15–16 year olds said that drinking has led them to **get in trouble with the police.**

# **Tips** and **advice**

**Key**
- 8–10 years
- 9–12 years
- 11–14 years
- 13–17 years

## 01

As a parent, the worst thing you can say about drinking is nothing at all. Offering a listening ear is just as important as telling your child the facts. Reassure them you will listen to their experiences and won't judge them if they have tried alcohol.

## 02

Having a plan will make your life easier. Rather than waiting for something bad to happen, think about when and how you are going to start the conversation and keep it going.

## 03

You might think being too strict could mean they rebel. But research shows if parents set rules around drinking, young people are less likely to get drunk, so it's important to work together to agree boundaries around alcohol. Agree on realistic consequences if they break the rules, and follow through if necessary, but reward them if they keep to them.

## 04

If your child asks you a question about alcohol they're open to further discussion, so use this opportunity to find out how much they already know.

## 05

Get to know their friends' parents. You could share this leaflet with them as a conversation starter. They'll probably share your concerns, so you could agree on rules around parties and supervision. You can also share anecdotes about the questions your children have asked, which might help you prepare for your own conversations.

## 06

Learning about drinking isn't only about alcohol education. By helping your child learn how to weigh up the pros and cons of other scenarios, like which secondary school to go to or whether to travel home alone, you can prepare them for making their own decisions about drinking.

## 07

Drinkaware research shows one in six children drink because they are bored. If you can, offer a space where your child can spend time with their friends without alcohol or encourage them to take up a hobby.

## 08

Pick a time when neither of you feel rushed or under pressure. Avoid starting a conversation about alcohol just as your child is going to bed or walking out the door to a party.

## 09

Make sure your child knows that drinking is a decision. Try talking about ways they can say "no" so they feel confident in that situation. They could say they are training for a sports match the next day or that they have a rehearsal or a family event.

## 10

If an opportunity to talk to your child doesn't present itself, try using triggers to prompt discussion. These could include:

- At dinner time, if you're having a drink with your meal
- At special occasions where people are drinking, like a wedding or birthday party
- When you're unpacking the shopping or in the alcohol aisle of the supermarket
- Alcohol-related news stories, soap opera storylines, documentaries or anecdotal school stories
- Alcohol-related photos they have seen or been named in on a social networking site
- Asking what they've learnt about alcohol at school. If they've learnt about calories, you could draw the comparison between eating too much bad food and getting fat, and drinking too much and getting ill.

# I think my teenager might already be experimenting with alcohol or feeling under pressure to drink. What tips can help them stay **safe?**

**Even the most sensible child can be vulnerable as a result of alcohol. Here are some tips you can give your child to help them stay safe.**

**If your child does get drunk, try not to overreact.** Stay calm and wait until the next day to discuss it. Listen to their side of the story and talk through with them how they could act differently in future.

### Eat
Making sure they eat a proper meal before they start drinking will slow the alcohol getting into their system, so they won't get drunk so quickly. Starchy food like pasta is best.

### Alternate
Encouraging them to drinking plenty of water and alternate soft drinks with alcoholic ones will slow down your child's drinking. Buy them soft drinks to take out with them.

### Mobile
Remind them to charge their mobile before they go out and make sure they have plenty of credit. Let them know they can call you at any time of day if they're in trouble.

### Don't mix
Tell them not to mix their drinks, as this makes it harder to keep track of how much they've had. Make sure they know that some drinks are stronger than others and could get them drunk more quickly.

### Pace
Encourage them to take their time to taste and enjoy their drinks rather than rushing or downing them. Explain that having only one alcoholic drink on the go at a time can make it easier to keep track.

### Drink driving
Remind them to never get into a car with someone who's been drinking. It may seem obvious when sober but people are more likely to take risks when drunk.

### Spiking
Let them know that some people try to spike drinks with more alcohol than they want or with drugs. Tell them to keep an eye on their glass or bottle and not to accept drinks from strangers.

### Safety
Make sure they know what to do if a friend becomes unwell or passes out – stay with them, put them into the recovery position, make sure they can breathe and call an ambulance.

### Support
Let them know that if they're in trouble, feel uncomfortable or can't get home safely, they can call you at any time to arrange to collect them, no questions asked.

### Parties
At parties that aren't in your home, make sure an adult is going to be present. Three quarters (78%) of parents think it is appropriate for 15 to 17 year olds to drink alcohol – so even if you don't, your child's friend's parents might. Don't be worried to call the house and find out yourself – speaking about your concerns with other parents will reassure you and help keep your child safe.

### Get home safely
Make sure they've planned how they're getting home. Encourage them to stay with their friends, keep enough money for a taxi and always use a licensed taxi firm. Make sure they let you know where they are going and who with.

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

Yes, research shows that from a young age children learn about acceptable behaviour by observing and copying their parents, so when it comes to drinking, it really is a case of leading by example.

What they see at home helps children think about how they'll drink alcohol as an adult. So, just as children learn to walk and talk like their parents, they learn how to drink like them too. For example, there's evidence that children whose parents drink moderately in front of them are less likely to drink to excess.

Some simple tips to demonstrate your own responsible attitude to drinking include:

- Drinking within the daily unit guidelines. This shows your child that adults can enjoy alcohol in moderation.
- Don't feel hypocritical for drinking when you have told them they can't. Instead, explain that alcohol is only for adults because their bodies have finished growing, and even adults have rules about how much they can drink.
- Talk to them about different drinks having different strengths and let them know alcohol is measured in units. Try ordering a unit measure cup (available from the Drinkaware website) and show them what different measures of drink look like.
- Sometimes it can seem like there's always an excuse to drink, but children notice if their parents have different drinking patterns at special occasions or on holiday. To avoid confusing them, keep up a conversation which explains that usually you stick to the daily unit guidelines.
- If you do drink too much occasionally and have a hangover, don't try and hide the symptoms, instead talk openly to your child about how you're feeling, for example, having a headache or feeling sick and let them know the effects would be worse for them as they're smaller and still developing. This way they know too much alcohol can have a negative consequence and you avoid making alcohol a taboo subject.

**The majority (90%) of parents agree** it is up to them to set a good example to their children through their own drinking habits.

**Over 4,000 children a year,** including some as young as five, contact ChildLine with worries about their parents' drinking.

**The Government advises that adults shouldn't regularly exceed the daily unit guidelines** of 3–4 units of alcohol for men (equivalent to a pint and a half of 4% beer) and 2–3 units of alcohol for women (equivalent to a 175ml glass of wine). To keep track of your drinking or to find out the units in your favourite drink, visit *MyDrinkaware.co.uk*.