

# Can parents influence alcohol consumption?

Many parents believe that they can do little to influence their child's drinking behaviour. Some believe that getting drunk is just a phase that all teenagers go through and that it is simply a rite of passage into adulthood. However, research has shown that parents can make a real difference when it comes to alcohol consumption if they put their mind to it.

Parents who are aware of what activities their teenagers take part in and take an active interest in what their child does, who talk and listen to their children and provide positive role models appear to have a far more positive influence on their children's alcohol consumption. Of course, parents don't operate in a vacuum, there are many other factors that come into play. Of most concern to many parents is the peer group in which their child associates. Despite such concerns, it is important for parents not to lose heart, as they are still able to exert a positive and protective influence in this very important area.

Some of the ways that parents can influence their child's alcohol consumption include the following:

**Parental monitoring** – children who are monitored well (i.e., parents are well aware of their child's activities, and there is good communication to the child that the parent is concerned about, and aware of, those activities) have been shown to start drinking at a later age, tend to drink less, and are less likely to develop problematic drinking patterns in the future.

**Parental relationships** – children who are able to communicate and talk openly with their parents about a range of issues are more likely not to drink or drink in moderation compared to young people who do not have such good relationships with their parents.

**Parental behaviour management** – most parents use one or more of a range of strategies for managing their child's behaviour. These strategies can include the use of incentives, positive reinforcement and simply making sure their child knows that there are consequences for misbehaviour. Research has shown that parents who set positive family standards and rules, reward good behaviour and use negotiation skills appear to be able to delay the age their child starts to drink. On the other hand, strict discipline and lots of conflict in the home is linked to higher rates of teenage alcohol use. Also, the children of parents who appear to be more accepting of teenage drinking tend to drink more.

**Parents' drinking behaviour** – from a very early age young people are bombarded with messages, both positive and negative, from the people around them regarding acceptable behavior. Young people's drinking behaviour is no exception and often emulates that of their parents, i.e., if adults drink more, so to do their children. Positive role modelling is possibly the most important tool a parent has to convey information to their child about alcohol and its use.

**Parents' involvement in the introduction of alcohol to their children** – we are still finding out the best way for parents to introduce alcohol to their children. At present, the recommendations from research vary considerably and are quite contradictory. On the one hand, there is research to suggest that parents can have a positive influence on their child's drinking behaviour by allowing them small amounts of alcohol and trusting their child's ability to act responsibly and drink in moderation. That said it is important to bear in mind that if parents do not set boundaries around drinking, their child is likely to drink more. On the other hand, findings in a recent study suggest that introducing your child to alcohol at an early age, even in a family context, could lead to future binge drinking. Regardless, the research is quite clear that due to the effect of alcohol on the developing brain, teenagers under 16 years of age should avoid alcohol.

While the jury is still out on this matter, the best parents can do is examine the place that alcohol holds in their home, how use is being modelled and provide guidance and boundaries. Obviously, young people need to learn to drink responsibly and possibly one way to achieve this may be for parents and others to set the example of how, where and why to consume alcohol.

#### **So don't peers have more influence than parents?**

Unfortunately, peers do have an effect on young peoples' alcohol use and this of course will affect all the positive work that parents put into keeping their child safe. One way parents can directly reduce the impact of peer influence is to find sources of information to correct the common teenage misperception that all "teenagers drink lots of alcohol". This false belief leads some teenagers to feel the need to drink lots of alcohol for fear of no longer fitting in with their peers. The truth is, although most teenagers have tried alcohol, only a very small percentage drink alcohol to get drunk. It is important to provide your teenagers with objective information, to prevent them from falling into this trap.

It is also really important to remember that peer effects only become particularly powerful when parent-adolescent relationships are of poorer quality. So the take-home message here is that parents do play a major part in decisions young people make about alcohol consumption. Listen and talk to your child at every opportunity, become involved in their life and believe in the power of your family – you can make a difference!