

Alcohol advice for parents

“Thank goodness my child doesn’t do drugs,” you sigh with relief. But are you overlooking the dangers of alcohol?

Our society is full of mixed messages about alcohol. We tell our children not to drink but then spend Friday night at the pub with friends. Unlike ‘hard drugs’, alcohol is considered socially acceptable – as long as you don’t over-indulge.

But this attitude could be dangerous. In 2004 just under a quarter of British 11-15 year olds had drunk alcohol in the previous week. Although the actual number of children drinking has changed very little, today’s children are drinking twice as much than they did 10 years ago – more than 10 drinks each week (compared with five in 1994).

So why do children drink?

Most children have their first alcoholic drink around the age of 12. Young people, particularly boys, drink to show their maturity and independence, and first sips are often had with parents. By ages 14-15, adolescent drinking becomes more secretive, and children tend to experiment with alcohol and hide it from their parents. By 16-17 they see themselves as ‘responsible drinkers’ who know their limits and don’t need to try as hard to hide their behaviour.

Your attitudes are more powerful than you think: studies show that when parents disapprove and set boundaries, children are less likely to drink. When parents are permissive, children are likely to drink more.

Excessive drinking can have devastating effects on people at every age, but young people are even more at risk. Children need far less alcohol to have the same effects as adults, and those who drink are more likely to engage in risky and violent behaviour. Even moderate drinking can cause short and long term damage to the young, growing brain. Long term risks from alcohol abuse include cancer, high blood pressure and liver disease.

Some studies have shown that the earlier children start drinking, the more likely they are to develop problems with alcohol. But parents need to be realistic – a total alcohol ban may encourage risky or secretive behaviour. Teach your children the realities and dangers of alcohol and build up their self esteem with praise and open communication. If you fear your child may be drinking to excess, talk about it with them and seek professional help from your GP or local support group.