Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
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Factsheet

Alcohol and risk taking: How to help your teenager stay safe



Evidence ratings:

This resource has undergone expert review. See our Help/Q&A section for more details.

Year:

Targeted Drugs: Alcohol, Benzodiazepines, Cannabis, Cocaine, Drugs (General), Emerging Drugs (“Legal Highs”), Hallucinogens, Heroin, "Ice" (Methamphetamine), Inhalants, Ketamine, MDMA/Ecstasy, Tobacco

Tags: Parenting, risk, violence

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

Alcohol and risk-taking behaviour in teenagers

"I worry a lot about risk taking behaviour when they do eventually drink."
-Mother of a 13- and 15-year-old

During the teenage years the brain is going through significant changes, and the problem-solving and long-term thinking parts of the brain are still developing. This means teenagers are more likely to act on impulses and take risks. Some level of risk taking is a normal part of teenage development and can help young people learn the consequences of risky behaviour. However, sometimes such behaviours can lead to unwanted consequences. It is important that parents take a balanced perspective with their children as they learn the difference between acceptable and risky behaviours.

Drinking alcohol is associated with greater risk-taking behaviours because alcohol can make young people feel less self-conscious or concerned about negative consequences. Therefore, to reduce the impact of alcohol-related injury and other harms on young people’s lives, the National Health and Medical Research Council recommends that people under 18 years of age do not drink any alcohol. For further information on the impacts of alcohol on the brain and body please read our alcohol factsheet.

Strategies to reduce risk-taking behaviour

As a parent it is natural to worry about your children being exposed to risks, especially as they enter adolescence and may be exposed to alcohol and other drugs. One of the best things a parent can do for their teenager is to talk openly about the situations they may encounter and give options for things they can do to prevent or minimise risky behaviours. A good conversation starter is to ask what your teenager is learning at school about the risks associated with alcohol and other drugs.

Below are some recommendations and discussion tips that can help to minimise risk-taking behaviour in teenagers. You can also read our factsheet for parents on harm minimisation for further information.

Talk to your teenager openly



Open and honest communication, using a calm and non-judgemental tone, is the most effective method when communicating with teenagers—especially when discussing sensitive topics like drug and alcohol use. Maintaining an open dialogue means you are more likely to hear about any risk-taking behaviours from your teenager, and this in turn, provides the opportunity to discuss ways to minimise risks. For more further information about how to best communicate with your teenager, check this factsheet.

Problem solve together



You and your teenager can discuss possible risky situations they may face when at parties, festivals, or gatherings. Plan with them what they would do to minimise their risk of harm.

When problem solving:

- Start by focusing on the risk itself. What is the risk, how would it come about?
- Then ask your teenager to think of possible solutions.
- Together, consider the pros and cons of each solution and decide on the best option.
- Make a plan to carry out the solution.
- Talk to your teen again after they've carried out the plan and evaluate how well it worked.
- If it worked well, encourage them to do the same in the future. If not, try out another solution and discuss how successful/unsuccessful it was.

Offer to drive



Offer to drive your teenager and their friends to and from parties, festivals, or gatherings. This means your teenager will be less likely to drive home after drinking or get a lift with someone who has been drinking.

Discuss how to recognise and respond to risks



- Talk to your teenager about how to spot the warning signs of risky situations and to report any situation that seems unsafe. This might include looking out for people who are drunk and wanting to 'pick a fight'.
- Teach your teenager how to spot an emergency and ensure they know how to seek help when needed. For example, knowing where the first aid tent at a festival is and knowing emergency services numbers and who to call if someone is unconscious.
- You may also want your teenager to be familiar with the information provided in this factsheet, which explains how they can help someone in a drug-related emergency.
- You may also want to discuss the risk of drink spiking with your teenager, the importance of watching their own drinks and their friend's drinks. For more information read our factsheet on drink spiking.

Talk about consent



When drinking alcohol, people are more likely to make risky sexual decisions. It is important that teenagers are aware of what consenting to sex means. They need to be aware that consent needs to be provided verbally, without pressure or persuasion, that a person can change their mind at any time, and if they change their mind, then sexual activity must stop. It is also important to highlight that intoxicated people are legally unable to consent and a person could face serious consequences for having sex with someone who is intoxicated. Further information about consenting to sex can be found here. You could also discuss the potential consequences of having unprotected sex (e.g., Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and/or unwanted pregnancy), and brainstorm strategies with your teenager to reduce the chances of this occurring.

Encourage your teen to support their friends



Encourage your teenager to stay close to their friends, particularly when alcohol or other drugs are involved. For example, your teenager could:

- Discourage friends from leaving the group with an unfamiliar person, suggesting instead that the new person join the group.
- Keep an eye out for any friends who disappear from the group, and make efforts to find and/or contact them.
- Arrange with friends to all go home together, and remind each other to stick to this agreement.

Make contact with other parents

Get the contact details of your child's friends and their parents so you can contact them if needed. Try to check in with the other parents in your teenager's year group and discuss what activities you're comfortable with and rules you think are appropriate when it comes to alcohol and other drug use.

Take home points

- Teenagers are hard wired to take risks, so it is important for parents to take a balanced perspective on the difference between acceptable and risky behaviours.
- Remember to **talk to your teenager openly** about any concerns you have and **actively listen** to their perspective and concerns too.
- Identify potential risks and develop a plan to deal with those risks should they occur. Your teenager might not always be open to the discussion so prepare what you want to say and take advantage of the opportunities to talk when they come up.

Evidence Base

This factsheet was developed following expert review by researchers at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use at the University of Sydney. A full list of sources which informed this factsheet can be seen below.

Sources

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