Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
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Factsheet

Normalising alcohol during social celebrations: what role does the family play?



Evidence ratings:

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

Year:

Targeted Drugs: Alcohol, Drugs (General)

Tags: Parental Supply, Parenting, Drinking

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

Normalisation of alcohol use

Normalisation of alcohol use refers to the widespread availability and social acceptance of alcohol in Australia. It also includes the social acceptance of getting drunk or drinking at risky levels.



In Australia, alcohol use is a regular part of society, with alcohol consumption common at social settings, parties, sporting events and celebrations both inside and outside the home. These celebrations can be particularly common at the end of the year, with family gatherings and New Year's Eve. Young people are often exposed to alcohol through advertising, the widespread presence of alcohol outlets (pubs, bars, clubs, bottle shops), social media, and on TV shows or movies. Alcohol advertising not only appeals to those under 18 years, but can also influence their alcohol purchasing behaviours. Additionally, exposure to positive portrayal of alcohol use (e.g. at parties or dinner) via TV and movies is associated with binge drinking at a younger age and higher consumption of alcohol both in adolescence and later life.

Alcohol use can also be portrayed as a coping strategy. While it is not unusual to reach for a drink after a stressful day, for parents this practice can have unintended consequences, affecting how your children view alcohol use. Memes or advertisements about the use of alcohol as a coping strategy can further normalise alcohol use and promote a harmful drinking culture where drinking to excess is seen as 'normal' or 'funny'.

How does parents' normalisation of alcohol use impact children's use?

Home is where many Australians drink alcohol. When asked where they usually consumed alcohol over a 12 month period, 79% of adults reported their home and 43% said a friend's home. Drinking at home can mean children are likely to be familiar with their parents' or other adults' drinking behaviours, which can result in alcohol being normalised in young people's lives, long before they reach legal drinking age. Additionally, children and teenagers look to parents to model their own behaviour, and so they may imitate their parents' behaviours and attitudes towards alcohol, for example by drinking alcohol to cope with stress, have fun or to boost self-confidence.



Research shows that parents' drinking behaviours influence when adolescents start to drink and how much they drink. This means that by modelling behaviours like drinking to relax or getting drunk at social gatherings, parents can inadvertently reinforce positive attitudes towards alcohol or towards getting drunk.



The good news is that parents can help young people to develop healthy attitudes towards alcohol, by drinking in moderation and/or modelling ways to turn down a drink. Parents can empower young people by demonstrating that social gatherings do not need to revolve around alcohol, and by modelling ways to have fun without alcohol. It is also important for parents to model and discuss with children alternative and healthy coping strategies during tough times.

Importance of delaying alcohol consumption in adolescents

The brain undergoes significant development during adolescence that continues until the age of 25. Therefore, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the harms from alcohol, and delaying alcohol use for as long as possible should be the goal. Some of the risks associated with early initiation of alcohol use are:

- Increased heavy alcohol use in older adolescence.
- Greater likelihood of developing an alcohol use disorder later in life.
- Increased risk of other drug use.
- Increased risk of developing mental health related problems.
- Disruptions to brain growth and neurochemical functioning.
- Poorer school performance.
- Risky sexual activity.

Tips to avoid normalisation of alcohol and model responsible drinking

Below are some strategies to help parents' model responsible drinking.

- Limit your alcohol consumption, especially around children.
- Avoid getting drunk, especially in front of children.
- Offer non-alcoholic drinks at family occasions and events.
- Openly turn down offers of alcohol in front of your children.
- Demonstrate that social occasions can be fun without alcohol.
- Never drink and drive or allow other adults to.
- Model some healthy strategies to cope with stress such as going for a walk or listening to music.

For more information check out this factsheet on *how parents can protect against drug and alcohol use and related harms.*

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.

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