

## INTRODUCING YOUR CHILD TO ALCOHOL

We are still finding out the best way for parents to introduce alcohol to their children. At present, the results from research are all over the place and are often 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 clear boundaries around drinking at the same time, their child is likely to drink more. On the other hand, findings from other studies suggest that introducing your child to alcohol at an early age, even in a family context, could lead to future binge drinking.

One thing, however, is now becoming extremely clear and that is the age that alcohol should not be introduced to adolescents. We now know more than we have ever done before on the effect of alcohol on the developing brain, and as result all experts agree that teenagers under 16 years of age should avoid alcohol.

We now know that is important to delay the initiation of alcohol for as long as you can. The earlier a child starts using alcohol, the greater the possibility that they will develop problems with the drug in the future. This together with the information on its effect on adolescent brain development sends a very strong message to parents about the introduction of alcohol. Hold off for as long as you can!

This is a comparatively new message. Due to the new information we now have regarding the the developing brain, the message we are giving to parents has changed dramatically. Parents still want to try to ensure that their child's first drink isn't one that takes place at a park late on a Saturday night, but providing it too early, even in the family home with a meal, without clear rules and boundaries, is likely to be just as problematic in other ways.

The most important factor to remember here is 'individual difference'. Alcohol plays a different role in every family and that needs to be considered when planning how to introduce alcohol to your child.

No matter what your family's relationship with alcohol – whether you are teetotalers, whether you have a glass of wine with every family meal, or you simply have a brown paper bag under your arm with a couple of bottles in it every time you go out to socialise – here are a few simple steps to follow when considering introducing alcohol to your child:

### **Be completely honest about your own alcohol use**

Have a discussion with your partner about the role alcohol plays in your family's life – i.e., does it play an important part? Are you teetotalers or regular drinkers? You need to remember that your child has learnt a great deal about the role alcohol plays in the family simply by watching you.

## INTRODUCING YOUR CHILD TO ALCOHOL

### **Create your rules and boundaries**

Based on that discussion, create your family rules and boundaries around alcohol. Rules should always be made with your children present as they need to have some degree of ownership of the rules that will affect their lives, as well as understanding why they exist, i.e., you want to keep them safe.

Too often parents are fearful that they can't make restrictive rules around alcohol for their child as they will be seen as hypocritical. It needs to be remembered that drinking alcohol is an adult activity, just as driving a car is and as a result, there should be different rules for young people.

### **Create meaningful consequences**

Unfortunately, most of the consequences that parents put into place when their child breaks set rules and boundaries are usually given in anger and as a result don't often work very well. This is particularly true of the parents' favourite – 'grounding'.

Whatever consequence a parent decides to use, make sure it is meaningful to the child and that it can be carried out with comparative ease. Grounding for days, weeks or months is simply going to be too difficult to carry out and to be completely truthful, many young people have very short memories and they will quickly forget what they have actually been punished for and then will end up simply resenting you.

Removal of mobile phone and loss of computer privileges are two of the best consequences that are currently popular with parents. Begin with short periods of time that they lose privileges – you will find they are just as effective and much easier for you.

### **Make sure that your child knows that rules are negotiable as they get older**

It is important to remember that the rules you set for a 15 year old are not necessarily going to be as effective, or appropriate, when they reach the age of 17.

Start discussions about alcohol rules from around 12 years of age (it'll be much easier then – they're not interested and not yet going to parties where they may be exposed to drinking at this point) and then revisit the rules every six months. It is important to reward good behavior and so the rules should be slightly adjusted each time you meet. A parent's best negotiating tool is a curfew – i.e., what time do they need to be home by? But it is vital that the starting point is realistic – if your first curfew is midnight, where is there left to go?

While the jury is still out on the best way to introduce alcohol to young people, the best parents can do is examine the place that alcohol holds in their home and how use has and is being modelled. When you have that information, negotiate appropriate rules and boundaries with your teenager. Obviously, young people need to learn to drink responsibly. Is a teenage party the best place for this to occur? Most probably not. Possibly one of the best ways to achieve the best outcome may be for parents and others to set the example of how, where and why to consume alcohol. Most importantly, this includes the valid and often ignored option of choosing not to drink at all.