

# **Children, Young People and Alcohol: Advice and Information for Parents and Carers**

**Consultation Example  
for discussion**



department for  
**children, schools and families**

## Introduction

Drinking can be a positive part of our lives. We toast the bride and groom at a wedding. We share a bottle of wine when having a meal with friends. We watch the regulars in Eastenders or Coronation Street socialising in their local pub. Alcohol is part of our national culture. Drinking is part of the world we raise our children in and can be part of the world we want them to enjoy. Drinking has its positive sides...

*But...* Drinking too much or drinking too young can be dangerous and costly. It can damage your children's health now, not just when they are older. It can lead them into risky situations – such as fights and unwanted or regretted sexual relationships. It can make them more likely to be the victim of crime or to get into trouble with the police for anti-social behaviour. Young people's drinking also costs the country millions of pounds a year. Drinking has its down sides...

*You can...* Tell yourself that drinking too much is something other people's kids do. *Or...* You can make sure you and your children know it's something that can affect you and your children.

*You can* say: "What's the worst that can happen?" *Or...* You can find out what that could be first;

*You can* say: "They'll learn by their mistakes..." *Or...* You can make sure they don't make any;

*You can* feel powerless...*Or...* You can get the information and advice you need.

*You can* decide that the way you drink does not rub off on your kids...*Or...* You can set a positive example.

## They drink

Most young people do not regularly get drunk. However, there are still a significant number of young people who drink alcohol regularly and do get drunk. It is not confined to one social group. By the time they are 15, the vast majority of young people have had their first alcoholic drink. Most of these young people will have got their alcohol from their parents and drunk it at home.

### FACT

In the UK there are an estimated 3.5 million children aged 11–17 who have ever consumed alcohol (2 million aged 11–15 and 1.5 million aged 16–17). An estimated 1.5 million under 18s drank alcohol last week.

## CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER'S (CMO) GUIDANCE

The key role of the Chief Medical Officer is to provide, for the Government and the public, advice without fear or favour. The CMO seeks out the best scientific evidence and uses this as the basis, not just for presenting the facts but also for making well-founded policy recommendations. The CMO has developed a set of **Guidance** on the consumption of alcohol by children and

young people to help parents to set boundaries with their children and protect them from alcohol related harm.

**The CMO says** *“Children and their parents and carers are advised that an alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option. However, if children drink alcohol, it should not be until at least the age of 15 years.”*

Patterns of drinking by young people have changed in the last few years. Research shows that although the number of young people who drink alcohol is falling, those children who do drink, drink more, more often and start from an earlier age.

#### **FACT**

It is estimated that over 700,000 children under the age of 15 drank alcohol last week, almost a quarter of a million under 15s drink more than once a week.

**The CMO says** *“Parents and young people should be aware that drinking, even at age 15 or older, can be hazardous to health and that not drinking is the healthiest option for young people. If 15 to 17 year olds do consume alcohol, they should do so infrequently and certainly no more than one day a week.”*

More worrying still, those young people who drink alcohol, drink it with the intention of getting drunk.

**FACT**

It is estimated that 360,000 children under 15 were drunk last week. More than a third of young people who had drunk alcohol in the previous month say they did so deliberately to get drunk.

**The CMO says** “Young people aged 15 to 17 years should never exceed recommended adult daily limits (of 2–3 units for women and 3–4 units for men in any single day), and on days when they drink, consumption should usually be below such levels.”

If you don't know what a unit is have a look at the diagram on this page.



Those young people who drink alcohol are increasingly doing so outside in public places without adult supervision.

**FACT**

The proportion of 11–15-year-olds who drink on the street, in a park or somewhere else outside has increased in the last 8 years. In a recent survey, 56% of young people said that they had drunk outside on the street or in the park.

**The CMO says** *“If young people aged 15 to 17 years consume alcohol it should always be with the guidance of a parent or carer or in a supervised environment.”*

### It is against the law:

- To give a child **under five** alcohol (except in a medical emergency);
- To be drunk in charge of a child **under 7** in a public place or on licensed premises;
- To sell alcohol to someone **under-18** anywhere;
- For someone **under-18** to buy alcohol, attempt to buy alcohol or to be sold alcohol in any circumstances or in any place at all (unless acting at the request of the police or a weights and measures inspector);
- For someone **under-18** to consume alcohol in any part of licensed premises with one exception: 16 and 17 year olds accompanied by an adult may consume but not buy beer, wine and cider with a table meal in licensed premises;
- For an adult to purchase alcohol for a person **under-18** for consumption on licensed premises, except as above;
- For an adult to buy or attempt to buy alcohol on behalf of someone **under-18**.

## What can happen – myths and reality

**Myth:** *“The worse that can happen is they are sick and have a hangover...”*

**Reality:** Actually, young people who drink to excess...

- **end up in hospital:** 10,000 children aged 11–17 are admitted to hospital each year as a result of their alcohol consumption, with 6,000 of these aged under 16.
- **develop serious illnesses:** Young people are particularly susceptible to the damage caused by alcohol including cancers of the colon, pancreas, lip and mouth, breast and larynx; heart disease; cirrhosis of the liver and mental health problems, like depression
- **are suffering injuries when they drink:** More than 1 in 10 of all 15–16 year olds have been involved in an accident or had an injury as a result of drinking.
- **have unsafe sex:** Almost 1 in 10 boys and more than 1 in 10 girls aged 15–16 who had recently drunk alcohol say they had unprotected sex after drinking. 1 in 4 of sexually active 13 and 14 year olds admitted they were ‘drunk or stoned’ when they first had sex.
- **get into arguments and fights:** More than 1 in 10 boys and girls aged 15–16 who had used alcohol recently say they have been involved in fights after drinking. 1 in 7 boys and almost a quarter of girls say they have been in an argument after drinking.



- **get into trouble with the police:** More than 1 in 10 boys and girls aged 15-16 who had been drinking say they have been in trouble with the police. A recent survey showed that among 10- to 17-year-olds who drank at least once a week, in the past 12 months, 39% had committed a violent offence, 10% had committed drug-related offences, 17% had committed criminal damage and 34% had committed theft. This is much higher than rates among those who had not drunk alcohol in the last year.
- **are not reaching their potential in school:** A recent study found that students who drank often and to excess were over three times more likely to say they were behind in school work than more moderate drinkers. Further research has shown that almost half of young people excluded from school had had an alcoholic drink in the last week. Alcohol is also linked to missing school, with pupils who truant more likely to have drunk alcohol in the last seven days than pupils who had never truanted.

**Myth:** *“There’s no real harm in it...”*

**Reality:** Actually... young people drinking alcohol costs the taxpayer millions a year. The cost of dealing with alcohol related crime caused by under-18s is conservatively estimated at being between £915 million and £1.15 billion every year.

**Myth:** *“We can’t stop them getting hold of alcohol...”*

**Reality:** Actually... almost half of young people who drink say they got their alcohol from their parents with less than a third saying they got it from friends and less than a quarter saying they

got it from a pub or an off-licence. Research shows that parents' own drinking habits are learned and copied by their children.

**Myth:** *"They'll do it whatever we say..."*

**Reality:** Actually... research suggests that in general, when parents show disapproval, children are less likely to drink. Young people say that they want their parents to set boundaries around alcohol, and when this happens it is shown to reduce harm.

### More vulnerable

Young people who drink are more likely to forget the lessons you've taught them, and make bad decisions about safe sex, stranger danger, watching their belongings, watching out for each other, and getting home safely

## What you can do

### You can:

- Know where your kids are, particularly on Friday and Saturday nights. Help them find something better to do or do things together as a family on Friday and Saturday nights.
- Make sure there is a responsible adult supervising at any party that your child has gone to where there is likely to be alcohol.
- Think about what your own drinking says to them.

- Try and say the same things that the parents of your children's friends' are saying.
- Talk to your children about alcohol.

### **When to talk**

- Start young. Pre-teens and children even younger know about drinking and can talk about it.
- Don't talk it through when they're drunk or have a hangover – you won't get very far.
- Talk to them at times in their lives when they're experiencing stress: exams, changing schools, leaving school, family difficulties and when they are most likely to be around alcohol such as nights out, Christmas and summer holidays. But choose a calm moment.
- When drinking appears in the media, maybe a Soap or a celebrity story.

### **How to talk**

- Little and often.
- Ask questions. Encourage them to talk about why they drink not just what they have been doing.
- Negotiate boundaries and rules.
- Offer incentives to not drink or offer better alternatives.
- Don't be afraid to offer disapproval but leave the door open to talk.

- Listen. Don't interrupt. Let them have their say before you respond.
- Don't underestimate the pressures they're under. Tell them you understand what they are going through.

### **What to say**

- You can say 'no thanks' and still be friends.
- You can do other things – your hobbies, sports.
- Watch out for your friends.
- Would you want your younger sister or brother to get drunk?
- Take control. Who runs your life, you or the drink?
- Give them the facts or a way they can get them.
- If you drink, for 15 to 17 year olds, make sure it is not every week and never more than once a week at most.
- If you want to drink, not before you are 15 and never more than 3-4 units (for a boy), or 2-3 units (for a girl). If you don't know what a unit is have a look at the diagram on page 4 of this booklet.

### **Tips to offer to your children if they decide to drink**

- Eat something first.
- Make sure you know what is in your drink, how many units of alcohol it contains and pick lower strength drinks.

- Don't leave your drink unattended.
- Drink water or a soft drink between alcoholic drinks.
- Make sure you have a plan for getting home safely and let us know where you are.

### **What they might say to you... and what you can say in return**

- "Well, you drink!"
  - *Yes because drinking can be enjoyable, but only if you do it responsibly and at the right age.*
- "I know what I'm doing."
  - *Do you know what safe limits are? If not, here are the facts (give them the website address of the young people's leaflet – [www.dcsf.gov.uk/consultations](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/consultations))*
- "Well, all kids my age drink."
  - *Actually more and more young people are choosing not to drink. They're putting their money and time into something better. You don't have to copy the drinkers – it's ok to decide not to drink or not to get drunk.*

## Agree the boundaries

The CMO offers clear advice that will help you to set boundaries with your children:

- An alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option. However, if children drink alcohol, it should not be until at least the age of 15 years.
- If young people aged 15 to 17 years consume alcohol it should always be with the guidance of a parent or carer or in a supervised environment.
- Young people aged 15 to 17 years should never exceed recommended adult daily limits (3–4 units for men, 2–3 for women), and on days when they drink, consumption should usually be below such levels – If you don't know what a unit is have a look at the diagram on page 4 of this booklet. Parents and young people should be aware that drinking, even at age 15 or older, can be hazardous to health and that not drinking is the healthiest option for young people. If 15 to 17 year olds do consume alcohol they should do so infrequently and certainly on no more than one day a week.

## **Your kids' drinking and yours**

The majority of adults drink in a responsible manner. However, parents should be aware of factors that can affect their children's attitude to alcohol.

Young people are growing up in a culture where drinking, and even drinking to excess, is seen as normal. TV images, stories about celebrities and pop music all present drinking and getting drunk as normal and even desirable. But what is your behaviour saying to your kids?

If bottles and cans take up a big part of your supermarket trolley every week, or you drink with every meal... Does that tell them alcohol is just another drink?

If your children regularly see you drunk... Does that tell them it's normal, or safe? Just a part of being grown up?

## Start from what's important to them

The CMO is clear that an alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option. You might want to talk to your children about their sports, their hobbies or their relationships and how alcohol can affect them. By talking about things that are important to them and how they are threatened by alcohol, you are more likely to be listened to.

## How to spot warning signs

It is difficult to define exactly when drinking by a young person becomes a problem or when you might need to seek further help or advice. Here are a few things to watch out for or think more about:

If your child:

- Drinks every week
- Drinks to get drunk every time
- Drinks to forget or deal with problems or because they feel sad
- Drinks to cope with situations or cannot cope without a drink
- Experiences problems with school, police or friends when drinking

You may want to talk to someone or find out more information if you are unsure

Every area has support services for young people that know about alcohol and can offer you and your child free support or advice

Check out the links to more information on the back page of this leaflet



## **What if your child is being sold alcohol under-18?**

New government legislation is being implemented to introduce a mandatory code for the alcohol retail industry that will further help to reduce the availability of alcohol to young people.

If you are aware of a shop, off-licence, pub or club that is selling alcohol to people under the age of 18, you can report it to the police or local trading standards officers. If you are a resident in the vicinity of the premises selling to children, you can instigate a review of their licence. To do this, you need to speak to the local authority licensing officers. There is more detail about reviews on the DCMS website:

<http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/060918guidanceforInterestedPartiesReviews2007.pdf>

## Links

To find out more about responsible drinking and get accessible information about alcohol visit: <http://www.drinkaware.co.uk/>

To find out more about alcohol, drinking and related health issues visit: <http://units.nhs.uk/>

To get advice and support on parenting issues visit:  
<http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk/>

Alternatively, you can call Drinkline on 0800 917 8282

Drinkline offers the following services:

- Information and self-help materials
- Help to callers worried about their own drinking
- Support to the family and friends of people who are drinking
- Advice to callers on where to go for help

Drinkline is confidential and no names need be given. Callers to the above number have the option of listening to recorded information about alcohol or talking to an adviser.

## **Have your say and get involved in the public consultation**

To get involved and have your say, all the consultation documents and ways to respond can be found online from the links below:

Website: [www.dcsf.gov.uk/consultations](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/consultations)

Email: [alcohol.consultation@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:alcohol.consultation@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk)

Post: Alternatively, you can write your answers and send them to:

DCSF Consultation Unit  
Castle View House  
East Lane  
Runcorn  
WA7 2GJ

Completed questionnaires and other responses should be sent by 23 April 2009



You can download this publication or order copies online at [www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications)

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