Talk to Your Children About Alcohol
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Introduction

If you are thinking about talking to your children about alcohol, good for you. Children can have no better help than a concerned parent who thinks ahead, takes the time to be informed and uses their knowledge to help their children make informed and healthy choices.

Kids are smart, and they are learning all the time. If you want them to believe what you tell them, it’s important that you have some knowledge and that you are as truthful as you can be.

It can be hard to know where to start. You might be unsure about the subject and you might worry that if you raise the topic of alcohol, it will somehow encourage your child to experiment. The intention of this resource is to help alleviate some of these worries by providing you with information to help you talk to your children about alcohol, and by encouraging you to think about your answers to these questions:

- Am I a good role model?
- Do I know how to communicate with my children?
- Am I helping my children make responsible decisions?
- Am I helping my children to cope with pressure from their peer group?
- Do I understand why young people might use alcohol and how to recognize the signs and symptoms of alcohol use?

Parents are key influencers in the lives of their children throughout their life span. Being open and inviting conversations about alcohol can help give children, teens and young adults the support and guidance they need to make healthy decisions.
Parents are their child’s strongest role model and greatest influence. Your child will eventually adopt many of your values and ways of acting. Your child will notice and respond to the way you deal with problems, show feelings and celebrate special occasions.

Children tend to mimic the behaviour of those they love and admire, especially that of their parents. It is likely that your drinking habits are the ones your child will adopt later on. If drinking, both socially and while dining, is a part of your life, your child will grow up assuming that this kind of drinking is the norm. If you abstain from drinking or if you drink moderately, your choice will set an example for your child. On the other hand, if your own drinking is excessive, your child will learn from that choice too.
Talk and Listen

To start the conversation about alcohol, it is important to understand some of the reasons why people choose to drink alcohol. Some reasons include to be sociable, to relax and to have fun.

It is also important to know when people’s choices to drink might be problematic. These may include drinking alcohol to avoid problems, relieve anxiety or stress, and to get drunk.

Setting the Stage for a Conversation

Let your children know that you are open to a conversation about alcohol with them and that you want to hear their thoughts. You can bring the topic up in response to a particular situation (e.g., at a family dinner where alcohol is served or in response to seeing people drinking in a movie) or in a more planned way (e.g., at a family meeting).

Here are some conversation tips:

- Be concise and objective when explaining the facts about alcohol and discussing the pros and cons of alcohol use.
- Explain the difference between drinking in moderation and abusing alcohol.
- Encourage questions.
- Expect that you’ll be asked about your own drinking and experiences.
- Be willing to listen at least as much as you talk.
- Try to understand your child’s point of view.
- Keep the discussion going by avoiding lecturing.

A relaxed attitude and open dialogue with your child can make an enormous difference. If your child feels comfortable talking to you, you will be better able to guide them in their choices when it comes to drinking. Tell them that they can count on you if they need help. This may be a significant source of support if they experience difficulty. And having these conversations will help your child make sense out of what they see on TV, through social media, in the news, and at school.

Why do teens drink?

Many adults think that adolescents only drink alcohol because of peer pressure. While peer pressure is a factor, adolescents often choose to drink for many of the same reasons that adults do: sociability, relaxation and fun.
Five Ways to Improve Communication With Your Children

1. Find a time that fits for both of you to have a conversation. If your family makes it a priority to eat together, meal times may be the perfect opportunity. Or you may find it easy to engage your child's attention when you are driving them to hockey, soccer or dance.

2. Start in an open-ended way, such as “Tell me about your day” or “What did you do today?” Opening this way requires more than a one-word response and your child's answer may help you to discover what is most important to your child.

3. Listen reflectively. You can do this by simply repeating what your child said or by saying it back to them in your own words. This will make sure that you truly understand what your child is trying to tell you.

4. Affirm your child’s feelings. This makes children feel supported and will make it easier for them to talk to you in the future. For example, you might say, “I understand that it must have been hard for you to come to me about this. I really appreciate your openness.”

5. Summarize what you’ve heard. This reinforces what your child has said and shows that you have been listening. Also, keep in mind that there are non-verbal ways of communicating that can also help with open communication, such as making eye contact and nodding your head while they are talking.
Supporting Good Decisions

Self-Esteem

Nurturing your child by recognizing their strengths and interests and providing them with support in the areas where they need it can help them to build positive self-esteem. Provide them with opportunities to practice skills that make them feel competent and capable.

Here are some examples of age-appropriate opportunities for practicing skills:

- Consider giving teens the responsibility to babysit their siblings for part of the day or allowing them to prepare family meals or plan special events.
- Consider allowing a young child to take responsibility for feeding and cleaning up after a family pet or helping you to make a meal plan for the week.

After your child completes a task or activity, take the time to recognize their effort.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the skill of looking at issues and concepts intelligently before you decide what you believe and how you will behave. By looking intelligently, we mean collecting the available information, assessing how valid that information is, and being willing to let go of your preconceptions if you find that they are not consistent with the evidence on that topic.

The development of critical thinking is important as it enables children to take the time to analyze and evaluate ideas, rather than simply accepting them as facts.

We know that the adolescent brain continues to develop well into young adulthood (late-twenties) and that the part of the brain that is responsible for critical thinking is last to develop. In the booklet *Adolescent Brain Development and Drug Abuse*, Dr. Ken Winters describes this process succinctly:

*The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain that enables a person to think clearly, to make good decisions and to control impulses. It is primarily responsible for how much priority to give incoming messages like “Do this now” versus “Wait! What about the consequences?” Because the emotional “Do this now” regions, predominantly located behind the front of the brain, have progressed more […] it is difficult for the “Wait” part of the brain to exert much influence.*
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The fact that teenagers are not yet equipped for the best of critical thought means that parents play an essential role in helping them to develop those skills and helping to guide them to make good decisions. One way to help your child to make good decisions is to ask them about decisions they have made at school, with friends or when playing a team sport.

Use the following steps to lead you through a discussion.

**Step 1: Determine the decision.**
- What needed to be decided?
- Who was involved in the decision? (Just you? Or other people too?)
- Who was affected by the decision?

**Step 2: Find out more about the decision.**
- How did you feel about the decision you made?
- How did others feel about it?

**Step 3: Talk about the choices.**
- What were all the choices available?
- Did you consider all of them?

**Step 4: Talk about the pros and cons of each choice.**
- What was good and bad about each choice?

**Step 5: Talk about the consequences of the choice made.**
- What were the results of your decision for yourself? For others?
- Now that the decision has been made, would you have made the same choice?
- Next time you’re faced with a similar decision, will you make the same choice?

Peer Pressure

In early adolescence (and sometimes earlier), teens are influenced more often by their peer group. This does not mean that parents are no longer important, but that there are more and more influences in their teen’s life. Communicating with teens at this age can be more difficult because of their need to separate from their parents and forge their own identity.
Peers can be great

When we talk about “peer pressure,” we usually think of bad influences. But most of the time, other children will influence your child in ways that are healthy and supportive. Your child can have the same positive influence on others.

Further, when you treat your own friends and your child’s friends with respect and warmth, your child will watch you and learn valuable lessons about how to behave toward others. When you accept differences in others, and value individuals who may be seen as eccentric or unusual, your child will also learn to accept and value others. When you don’t judge people on the basis of superficial factors like their income, the clothes they wear, their gender, or their cultural background, your child will realize that there is nothing wrong with people being different. Peers may have a lot of influence on a growing child, but you can be even more influential—just by being yourself.

Four ways to say no and still be friends

Practice these strategies with your child so that they feel comfortable saying no. You can act out any number of situations, making them appropriate for your child’s age. For example, if your young child has certain neighbourhood areas where they are allowed to play, you could act out a scene where your child says no to a friend who wants them to go outside the boundaries to the corner store. With a young teen, you could discuss a situation where they are asked if they would like a drink of alcohol at a party.
1. **Saying No Thanks**
   The first strategy for resisting pressure from friends and acquaintances is a simple “No thanks, I don’t want to.” Often, that will be the end of the incident. You’ve made a choice and others should accept your choice.

2. **The Broken Record**
   Sometimes another child will keep up the pressure, urging you again and again to try it just once. Simply repeat your first answer over and over again. Say, “No thanks, I don’t want to” as many times as necessary. Don’t explain and don’t get upset or try to justify your decision. Simply repeat your answer in a friendly, neutral manner. Eventually, the child who is putting on the pressure will get tired of hearing your answer and will give up.

3. **Reverse the Pressure**
   If someone is repeatedly nagging at you to do something that you don’t want to do, turn the pressure around. Say to that person, “Why are you picking on me?” This reverses the pressure, forcing the other person to explain the behaviour. It also implies that maybe it’s the other person, and not you, who has the problem.

4. **Excuse Yourself and Leave**
   The best way to get out of a tricky situation may be simply to leave. In a friendly tone, just say, “Sorry, I have to leave,” and then walk away. You don’t have to justify your actions to anyone and you don’t have to put up with pressure that makes you uncomfortable.

*Encourage your child to think about these ways of saying no any time their friends or classmates want to do something that makes them uncomfortable. When children learn that they can say no and still stay friends, it relieves them of a lot of the pressure.*
Rules and Boundaries

Providing rules and boundaries can be a difficult task for parents; providing discipline when rules and boundaries are ignored or broken, even more so. But it is an important aspect of the parent–child relationship. In many situations, our children need someone to tell them where the lines are that they must not cross and that some rules are non-negotiable. Here are a number of suggestions for establishing rules and developing boundaries.

1. Develop clear, reasonable and safe rules, and revise them as your child gets older. Some rules can be made in consultation with your child, but others are non-negotiable.

2. Aim to provide consistent rules with consistent consequences.

3. Establish a range of consequences that will suit different degrees of rule-breaking, and be prepared to negotiate.

4. Try not to let emotions get in the way.

5. Show trust in your children, but also set boundaries. It is okay to say no. Balance monitoring of your children’s behaviour with allowing them to develop their independence.

6. Show children how adults also live within restrictive boundaries.

7. Choose your battles.
What Parents Need to Know About Alcohol

According to the Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey 2012/2013 (CSTADS 2012/2013) while it is illegal for anyone under the age of 18 to consume alcohol, the average age at which adolescents in Alberta have their first drink of alcohol that is more than a sip, is 14. This age is notable because the earlier one starts to drink, the greater the risk of drinking problems in the future. Other notable points related to alcohol use and teens include their tendency to binge drink, that their alcohol use exceeds their use of other drugs, and that alcohol impacts them differently than it does adults.

Alcohol and Other Drug Use

In the CSTADS 2012/2013, Alberta teens in grades 7 to 12 were asked about alcohol and other drug use in the 12 months prior to the survey. Although marijuana and other illicit drug use among Alberta teens is concerning, the number of teens using alcohol is much higher, as indicated in the graph below.

Binge Drinking

When teens between grades 7 and 12 choose to drink, the majority (76%) of them binge drink. Binge drinking means five or more drinks of alcohol on one occasion. According to the CSTADS 2012/2013, 22% of teens in grades 7 through 9 reported drinking alcohol in the 12 months preceding the survey and 12% indicated binge drinking over the same time period. Between grades 10 and 12, the number of teens drinking and binge drinking increased, with 60% indicating they drank in the 12 months preceding the survey and 46% indicating binge drinking. Binge drinking is the most common pattern of consumption among teens that drink alcohol and age 15 is the average age that teens report their first time binge drinking.
Binge drinking by teens is no small matter. The brain of an adolescent is not yet fully developed. In fact, just like the body, it goes through a major transformation during adolescence. The brain is “reconfigured” and the areas responsible for emotions undergo particular modification. What’s more, the frontal lobe, which is involved in planning, strategizing, organization, concentration and attention, is last to develop. At the same time, puberty causes neurochemical and hormonal changes that make teens more likely to engage in risky behaviour. In other words, many teens begin experimenting with drinking at the very time when their strategic and planning skills are still poor and their desire for intense emotions is high.

Alcohol—Not the Same for Teens and Adults

Response to alcohol varies according to body weight, the regularity with which one drinks, the number of drinks one has and how quickly one drinks. Teens are typically less experienced and less familiar with alcohol’s effects, which results in a lower tolerance for alcohol. Teens also suffer worse long-term consequences, even if they drink according to low-risk guidelines for adults. For more information on alcohol use and teens, please refer to the resource in this series titled Alcohol and Adolescents, and/or talk to your health-care provider.

What is a Standard Drink?

Whether it is beer, wine, cider or spirits, a drink is a drink. The same amount of alcohol will have the same effects, in general. A can of beer contains the same amount of alcohol as a glass of wine or a shot of liquor (gin, vodka, scotch, etc.).

What is Moderate Drinking?

Moderate drinking has a different meaning for different people, but Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines (LRDG) provide an excellent starting point. It is important to recognize that these are low-risk, not no-risk, guidelines and the guidelines set limits, not targets, for alcohol consumption.
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Women who want to drink moderately and avoid associated long-term health risks should have no more than 10 drinks a week, with no more than two drinks a day most days.

Men who want to drink moderately and avoid associated long-term health risks should have no more than 15 drinks a week, with no more than three drinks a day most days.

To avoid intoxication and reduce the risk of short-term injury or acute illness, women should have no more than three drinks on a single occasion.

To avoid intoxication and reduce the risk of short-term injury or acute illness, men should have no more than four drinks on a single occasion.

To avoid any kind of habituation or dependency, it is recommended that everyone—men and women—choose not to drink at all at least one or two days a week.

If pregnant, planning to become pregnant, or about to breastfeed, the safest choice is to drink no alcohol at all.

It is inappropriate to drink alcohol under certain circumstances such as when one

- has important decisions to make
- is engaged in dangerous physical activity
- is operating a motor vehicle, machinery, or mechanical or electrical equipment
- is responsible for the safety of others
- is taking medication that is affected by alcohol
- has mental or physical health problems
- has a problem with alcohol dependence
- is pregnant or planning to become pregnant
What if I Choose to Allow My Teen to Drink?

It is important to remember that there are strong reasons for your teen not to drink alcohol at all: The authors of Canada’s LRDG report that “alcohol can harm healthy physical and mental development of children and adolescents.” Since younger people are also greater risk takers (as mentioned in the section Critical Thinking), they are also much more likely to be injured when they drink, and their injuries are often more serious. Furthermore, the later in life any of us starts to drink, the less likely we are to develop serious problems with alcohol. Every year a person delays starting to drink lowers the risk of alcohol problems. At minimum, according to the LRDG, teens should delay the first drink until the late teens and until reaching legal drinking age.

However, if you choose to allow your teen to drink, it is best that they do so under parental guidance and follow the LRDG.

For teens up to legal drinking age, the LRDG recommend that they speak to their parents about drinking, never have more than one or two drinks at a time, and never drink more than once or twice per week.

All teens who drink should plan ahead, follow local alcohol laws and consider these safer drinking tips:

- Set limits for yourself and abide by them.
- Drink slowly. Have no more than two drinks in any three hours.
- For every drink of alcohol, have one non-alcoholic drink.
- Eat before and while drinking.
- Always consider that your age, body weight and health problems might suggest lower limits.

Here are additional tips for parents:

- Explain to your teen how alcohol affects the body and the kind of risks that are involved in drinking. For more information on this topic, please refer to the resource in this series titled *Alcohol and the Human Body: Short-term Effects*.
- If, in your family, teens are allowed to drink small quantities of alcohol on special occasions, make sure they understand the difference between those special occasions and the rest of the time.
- For more information on the effects of alcohol on teens, talk to your health-care provider.
Those under age 25 should never on a single occasion exceed two drinks for women and three drinks for men.

What Your Adult Child May Want to Know

From legal drinking age to age 24, the LRDG recommend that young people follow the same rules as those of adults aged 25 to 65, with one difference: those under 25 should never on a single occasion exceed two drinks for women and three drinks for men (those over 25 may occasionally observe a three- or four-drink maximum).

How Can I Tell if My Child Has a Drinking Problem?

Remember, you know your child. You do not need to be an expert to detect alcohol use (or other drug use for that matter). Trust yourself to know when there is a problem.

How do you know when they’re sick? What’s the number one sign? When they are not acting like themselves.

Use these same skills to detect use of alcohol or other drugs. Keep in mind that these changes could be due to other reasons.
No one sign alone indicates alcohol use. Look for patterns or combinations of indicators. Here are some examples of changes to watch for:

- changes in school performance
- changes in attitudes toward sports and other activities
- changes in weight or physical appearance
- changes in eating or sleeping habits
- changes in friends
- changes in behaviour

What Should I Do?

If you suspect that your child is using alcohol or other drugs, you may feel that you need to catch them using. Perhaps you feel that you should search their room, or control their activities and friends. These are normal feelings. After all, you want them to be safe.

However, it is much more helpful to talk with your child about the changes you have observed. Tell them the differences you see between the way they used to behave and the way they behave now. Try not to judge them. Stay focused on their behaviour. For example, saying “You used to be considerate!” may seem like a personal attack. If you concentrate on the behaviour you are observing, you will be less likely to hurt or offend them. For example, “You used to call when you were going to be late and you don’t anymore. Would you be willing to do that again?”

If you see a pattern of changes in your child, have a conversation. Tell them you are concerned and explain why. It is possible that there is another cause for their behaviour. If alcohol use ends up being the problem, help is available. And remember, you can see a counsellor yourself to help you find new ways of reaching your child.

Conclusion

We understand that everyone’s needs are different. Whether you want to prevent your child from using alcohol (or other drugs), or you want to help your child deal with an alcohol or other drug problem, we can help. Information and prevention programs, group and family counselling, outpatient and residential treatment, and the Protection of Children Abusing Drugs program are offered by Alberta Health Services and its funded services to help your child and your family.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, call the Addiction Helpline at 1-866-332-2322. It’s free, confidential and available 24 hours a day.
More information means informed decisions

Well-informed people will be more conscious of the harmful effects of excessive drinking, and will be aware that if they choose to drink alcohol, drinking in moderation is a healthier choice.

For copies:
AHS staff and allied health professionals can download digital copies from under the “Resources” tab at: www.albertahealthservices.ca/amhresources. Allied health professionals should contact their local Addiction and Mental Health office to access hard copies.

Thank you

AHS would like to thank our allied health professionals at Éduc’alcool for their contribution to this series.
Alberta Health Services offers a wide range of addiction and mental health services.

For individuals looking for help for someone they care about, or for themselves the Addiction Helpline and the Mental Health Helpline are available.

**Addiction Helpline**  
1-866-332-2322

**Mental Health Helpline**  
1-877-303-2642

Both helplines are free, confidential and available 24 hours a day.