

## Teenagers and alcohol: a dangerous mix

As a caring parent and good role model, you can make a big difference in ensuring that your teenager does not become another statistic. Good parenting has been shown to be the single biggest factor in avoiding alcohol abuse in youth. You can help your teens to make responsible decisions in life by building their self-confidence and self-worth. Having confidence helps teenagers to make safer and smarter decisions since confident teenagers are more equipped to avoid people and situations that are not necessarily right for them and to find those that are.

## Why are teens drinking?

### Teenagers drink because of peer pressure

This is one of the biggest reasons that teens drink. Your teenager faces a number of tough decisions daily and peer pressure has a big impact on many of those. Teens may be afraid that if they say no to something harmful, they won't be accepted by their peer group. If their friends drink and they don't, they run the risk of looking like a nerd. It is also sometimes the way to join a "cool" group.

### Teenagers drink to rebel

Teenagers generally tend to rebel against what their parents or caregivers tell them to do. When angry teenagers drink, they can become angrier, even aggressive, and this could have disastrous results.

### Teenagers drink alcohol to look cool

Teenagers want to fit in and be part of the crowd. They often lack self-confidence and alcohol works quickly to get rid of feelings of inferiority.

### Teenagers drink because they have no sense of hope

With only half of our youth living in two-parent households, the prospect of 25% to 35% unemployment and only a small percentage of school leavers finding jobs, the South African teenager faces a very uncertain future. Some of the issues around underage drinking are highlighted below.

- One in two teenagers in the average South African home is a user of alcohol.

- Almost half the learners (49%) interviewed in a recent secondary school survey said that they had consumed alcohol at some stage during their school career.
- In the same survey, 15% of boys and 8% of girls said that they had had their first drink before the age of 13.
- Having five or more drinks in a single session is considered to be binge drinking and makes you a problem drinker. Half of the students who had admitted to drinking (23% to 35%) said that they had had a binge drinking session in the month before the survey.
- People who begin drinking before the age of 15 years are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than those who have their first drink at age 20 or older.
- Teens who use alcohol are three times more likely to be involved in violent crime.
- Teenagers who drink are far more likely to try illegal drugs. In fact, research shows that 67% of teens who drink before the age of 15 will go on to use illegal drugs. They are 22 times more likely to use marijuana and 50 times more likely to use cocaine.
- Some youth start abusing alcohol from the age of 12
- A local research study showed that 60% of grade 8 to 11 learners who abused alcohol had to repeat their grade.

## Risk factors and consequences of alcohol abuse

It is against the law for people under the age of 18 to purchase alcohol. If caught, they could receive a heavy fine or even spend time in jail. Teenagers who abuse alcohol increase their risk of being injured through events such as car accidents or violence; may be more susceptible to being drawn into crime, such as stealing; and more than 50% of rape victims are abused while intoxicated.

### Risky sexual behaviour

Drinking lowers your defences and so teenagers who drink are more likely to be sexually active and take unnecessary risks such as unprotected sex. This could result in unwanted pregnancies, life-threatening sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV and Aids.

## Problems at school

A study of high-school students found a strong connection between binge drinking, school dropouts and low academic aspirations.

### Psychological problems

Researchers have found symptoms of depression (disturbed sleep, appetite loss and lack of pleasure) associated with teenagers who abuse alcohol.

### Physical problems

During their teenage years, youths' brains are still developing and maturing; the brain is only fully matured when a person is in his/her mid-20s. Alcohol negatively affects the development of the brain, and can result in long-lasting damage to brain cells and neural pathways.

### Alcoholism

Teenagers who begin drinking before the age of 15 are much more likely to develop a drinking problem than people who start drinking when they are in their twenties. Teenagers who drink are also more likely to experiment with other drugs, such as marijuana and cocaine.

## Signs that your teenager could be abusing alcohol

The following are signs that your teenager might be drinking or have a drinking problem. If you suspect anything, trust your instincts and talk to your child about it immediately. Some of the signs below can be of normal teenage behaviour, however, if you spot several of them at the same time, or they suddenly appear or are extreme, they could possibly indicate a drinking problem:

- Mood changes: tempers, irritability, defensiveness or aggression
- Problems at school: Missing school and bunking, pretending to be sick and staying at home, low grades, and/or disciplinary action
- Rebelling against family rules
- Changing friends and not wanting to introduce you to the new friends.

- Change of attitude and not caring about anything: Sloppy dressing; not bathing or brushing hair or teeth; not being interested in activities they were interested in previously
- Finding alcohol in your teenager's room or school bag or smelling alcohol on his/her breath
- Physical and mental problems: Blackouts, not being able to remember events, poor concentration, bloodshot eyes, lack of coordination or slurred speech.

**“I don't know what happened, she turned 15 and suddenly got moody and withdrawn. She did not feel like my child anymore... then the bad marks started...then I found out she was drinking heavily on weekends.” - Mother (38), Alberton**

## How you can help

The introduction of alcohol into the home is a personal matter, but if parents do decide to allow access to alcohol, they need to be aware of the risks involved. Teenagers who have an open and trusting relationship with their parents are less likely to use and abuse alcohol, and are more likely to approach their parents for advice and assistance. Talk openly and honestly with your teenagers about the reasons why they should avoid underage drinking; stay away from resorting to scare tactics.

Build your teen's self-esteem; make them aware that they do not need alcohol to fulfil their dreams.

### Start talking to your children about alcohol when they are still young

You should start talking to your children about drinking when they are about 10 or 11 (grade 5) years of age or even earlier. It needs to start this young as they are probably already talking to friends about alcohol, and if you don't explain the dangers, they could think it is cool and try a drink when offered. Do not be afraid that you will push them away by talking to them about the problem. Teenagers need to know that you believe in them enough to take the time to talk and listen to them. Your involvement can affect their decision-making. The knowledge that someone believes in them and in their future will have a positive influence in their lives.

Here are some ways to encourage your teenager to talk to you:

- Talk to your child about what interests them. Encourage them to tell you about their lives and their interests. Listen without interrupting
- Ask questions that they can't answer with just a "yes" or a "no". Ask questions that will begin a conversation such as "what do you think about teenagers drinking?"
- Control your reaction. If you are told something that makes you angry, don't react immediately. Explain in a calm manner why you don't approve of the behaviour.
- Don't lecture or criticise your teenager. If they know that you respect their opinion and that you are not being too controlling, they will be more likely to listen to you and respect your opinion.
- Show that you care. Try to spend one-on-one time with your teens because although they may not show it, it is very important to them to feel that they are important to you too.

### Help your child to say "no"

The reality is that parents cannot be with their children at all times and so your child needs to be able to stand up to peer pressure and say "no". One of the best ways to handle this is to equip your children to say 'no' without them looking like a nerd and distancing themselves from their peers. For example, they could respond with "not now thanks, maybe later" or "no thanks, I take my sport seriously so I don't drink". You could also encourage them to blame it on you and say "no thanks, my dad will breathalyse me when I get home".

The positive 'no' is a good technique to teach your teen. It equips teens to use their power and at the same time preserve their friendships. Unlike an ordinary 'no', a 'positive no' begins with a 'yes' and ends with a 'yes'. The positive no involves, first of all, saying yes to yourself and what is important to you. Here is an example:

- Yes: "I need to go to soccer practice because I want to play for South Africa one day."

- No: "So I cannot go drinking with you."
- Yes: "I value our friendship. I still want to hang out with you; I'm just choosing not to drink with you."

**Drink responsibly in front of your teenagers.** Children copy the adults around them so drink responsibly and you will be a great role model. Don't encourage underage drinking. Don't serve alcohol to your teenager or their friends, even if it is just a light beer. Don't send your children to buy alcohol for yourself or anyone else. Find out who your children's friends are and get to know them. You will quickly be able to spot if there is trouble and take steps to remedy the situation.

Encourage your teenager to participate in extra-mural school activities. If they are doing something they enjoy, with friends who are like them, they will be less likely to hang around with teenagers who drink because they are bored. Encourage your teen to participate in controlled after-school and weekend activities that are challenging and fun. If your community does not have after-school activities, consider getting together with other parents and teens to help create some activities for young people in your community.

Establish home rules about drinking and the consequences of breaking them. Tell your teenagers what you expect from them and what you think is appropriate behaviour. Decide what the consequences will be if they break your rules and practise consistency when enforcing the punishment. Keep in mind that if you are not a drinker, you must not assume that your children are not drinking. Here are some tips to help build your children's confidence and resilience:

- Encourage your children to try again if they fail and help them understand that everyone makes mistakes. "It is okay if you can't do something the first time you try it."
- Praise your child's efforts. If an exam or game does not work out the way your child wanted, try to praise them for the effort they put into the activity. You could also suggest some ideas about what she/he could do differently to be successful next time.

### Quick facts on teenagers and alcohol (and drugs)

- Schoolchildren who use alcohol or drugs are three times more likely to be involved in violent crimes.
- Some youth start abusing alcohol from the age 12 or younger.
- 50% of Grade 11 learners admitted that they have used alcohol in the last year.
- 31% of school learners drink socially.
- 60% of Grade 8 to 11 learners in Cape schools who misused alcohol had to repeat their grades.
- By the age of 18, more than 60% of teenagers have been intoxicated; 30% had used school time to drink.

### Get some help

If you think your teenager has a drinking problem, don't ignore it. It could get worse. Do something about it. Talk to your teens or give them the contact numbers of support groups that are equipped to help and where they can remain anonymous. If you need help, please contact:

- South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) - 011 262 6396
- Tough Love - 0861 868 445
- Life Line - 0861 322 322
- Alcoholics Anonymous - 0861 4357 22
- Al-Anon - 031 304 1826

#### the dti Contact Details

**Physical Address:** the dti Campus, 77 Meintjies Street, Sunnyside, Pretoria, 0002

**Postal Address:** the dti, Private Bag X84, Pretoria 0001

**the dti website:** www.thedti.gov.za

**the dti Customer Contact Centre:** 0861 843 384

# TEENS AND ALCOHOL:

## A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

