



Straight Talk

A guide for **parents** on teenage drinking

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What is this booklet about?

Welcome to 'Straight Talk' - a guide for parents on teenage drinking.

It provides information on teenage alcohol use, gives practical advice for parents on how to deal with it and explains what the law says about teenagers and alcohol.

This booklet will be useful both to parents who:

- want to delay their teenager starting to drink; or
- know or suspect that their teenager may be drinking.

Research shows that clear messages from parents that underage drinking is unacceptable delays drinking in teenagers.

Many teenagers will experiment with alcohol. The most important factor in delaying your teenager from drinking is positive parenting based on good communication, negotiation and setting firm limits.



The most important thing that you can do as a parent is to support your teenager to delay drinking. If you do this, the risks of harmful drinking are much lower in later life.

No matter what teenagers say or what you think, they want parents to talk to them about alcohol.

They want their parents to:

- be informed;
- know the facts; and
- set limits for them.

This booklet will help you to help your teenager.



Why is this booklet needed?

Ireland and alcohol

Drinking alcohol is part of everyday adult life in Ireland. We use it to celebrate, to commiserate and to socialise. Alcohol can be purchased in the local shop, petrol station, supermarket or off-licence.

Used in moderation, alcohol is a pleasurable, socially-acceptable drug.

Alcohol is not always consumed sensibly in Irish society and binge drinking is becoming far too common. Research shows that Irish people:

- drink more than people in other European countries;
- have the highest level of binge drinking in Europe; and
- experience more harm as a result of alcohol use than other Europeans.

The harm caused by alcohol can be seen in our courts, hospitals, homes and schools.

There has been an increase in street violence, accidents, drunk driving, alcohol poisoning, suicide, alcohol dependency, cancers and other drink-related illnesses.

Teenage drinkers are often blamed for these problems, but much of the harm is caused by or happens to adults.



Teenagers and alcohol use

The good news

Nearly half of school-going children have never had a drink and the number of teenagers under 15 years experimenting with alcohol has dropped.

This is good news for parents and teenagers.

Research shows that some teenagers start to drink because they wrongly think “everyone is doing it!”.

Most teenagers only experiment with alcohol or use it for recreation. However, some can use alcohol in a way that is problematic and drinking is linked to suicide.

The legal age for drinking alcohol is 18. The reality, however, is that many teenagers drink regularly before the age of 18.

The risks

Teenage drinking carries risks and even experimenting with alcohol on one occasion can create problems for your teenager.

This is because your teenager is still growing and developing. Teenage bodies, minds and emotions are still maturing, so are very vulnerable to the immediate effects of alcohol.

Teenagers need **clear messages** from parents that underage drinking is unacceptable.

This reduces the risk of problem drinking in adult life. Before you can talk to your teenager about drinking and set limits, you need to **know the facts about alcohol**.



What are the facts about alcohol?

What is alcohol?

Alcohol is a drug that is absorbed from the stomach into the bloodstream.

A drug changes the way the body works; it affects the mind, the body and the emotions.

Alcohol affects the central nervous system. This means it affects our breathing and heart rate, as well as how we think, feel, perceive things and behave.

Because alcohol can make us more carefree or excitable, many people think alcohol is actually a stimulant drug. But it isn't.

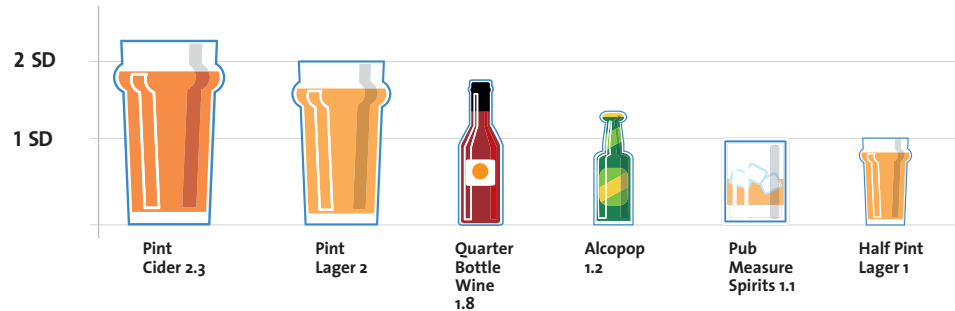
Alcohol is a depressant. The more you drink the clearer this becomes - you might become sleepy or drowsy or more emotional, for example.

Alcoholic drinks come in 6 different forms:

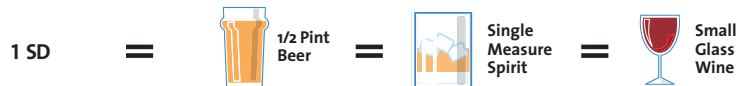
- beer
- cider
- wine
- spirit
- liqueur and
- alcopops.



What is a standard drink?



1 standard drink contains 10g of pure alcohol



In Ireland a standard drink has about 10 grams of pure alcohol in it.

In the UK a standard drink, also called a unit of alcohol, has about 8 grams of pure alcohol.

Here are some examples of a standard drink.

- A pub measure of spirits (35.5ml)
- A small glass of wine (12.5% volume)
- A half pint of normal beer
- An alcopop (275ml bottle)

A bottle of wine at 12.5% alcohol contains about seven standard drinks.

What are the low-risk drinking guidelines?

There are no safe levels of drinking among teenagers but the low-risk weekly limits for adults are:

- up to 14 standard drinks in a week for women, and
- up to 21 standard drinks in a week for men.

Drinks should be spaced out over the week, not consumed in one sitting. Drinking more than the safe levels may cause harm.

Remember, drinks measures are not always the same. What you get in a pub and what you pour for yourself could be very different.

These weekly limits do not apply to teenagers or to people who are pregnant, ill, run-down or on medication. It is healthier for teenagers not to drink alcohol.

What is a binge?

Binge drinking is a term used to describe an occasion when we drink too much. It is when we have 6 or more standard drinks.

Binge drinking is a form of harmful drinking that is likely to increase our risk of accidents, injuries, violence and poisoning.



Having more than 5 standard drinks at a time can seriously increase the harmful effects of drinking.

*Alcopops are more popular among girls.
Beer is more popular with boys.*

How does alcohol affect us?

Alcohol affects each person differently. The effects of alcohol depend on who is drinking it, what they are drinking and the situation in which they are using it.

Who is drinking

- How old are they?
- Are they male or female? Alcohol affects women more quickly than men.
- What do they weigh?
- How do they feel about themselves?
- What are their beliefs about alcohol?
- How often have they used alcohol?
- What are their reasons for using alcohol? For example, they may drink because they are depressed.
- What is their mood like?

What they are drinking

- How much?
- How quickly?
- How often?
- How strong?
- Have they eaten before drinking?

Where they are drinking

- Where - party or pub?
- When - Friday night or Monday at noon?
- With whom - friends or alone?
- What limits have they set - two drinks and a taxi home or drinking as much as they can before going out?

Less is more. Less alcohol means more money, more energy, more control.

How long do the effects of drinking last?

In general you start to feel the effects of alcohol within 5 or 10 minutes of drinking. It then takes one hour for every standard drink you take to work through your system.

Teenagers need to know that drinking black coffee, getting fresh air, getting sick (to rid the stomach of alcohol) or taking cold showers do not sober you up.

There is a big difference between a man drinking two bottles of beer in a pub and a teenage girl drinking two bottles of beer in an alleyway with friends.



Who teaches our teenagers to use alcohol?

You do!

Children begin to develop an awareness of alcohol at a very early age through:

- television;
- advertising;
- their family; and
- their community.

Research shows that by the time a child reaches five years of age, they have already formed basic attitudes and opinions about alcohol.

Teenagers learn about alcohol through:

- their own experiences; and
- observing the effects of drinking on family, friends and community.

Our teenagers learn from:

"...parents and peers, posters and propaganda, from pundits, publicans, priests, poets and performers, that in Ireland... a good social time and drinking alcohol are quite simply the same thing - without a good drink, and a few good drinks at that, you cannot have a good time."

Sunday Independent



Why do teenagers drink?

Teenagers drink for many different reasons.

- They are curious.
- They want to be accepted and belong.
- Their friends are doing it.
- It makes them feel older.
- They want to rebel.
- They are bored.

Teenagers may also drink to:

- celebrate special events (exam results, birthdays, Debs);
- feel more confident;
- relax;
- reduce stress (exam stress, relationship pressures);
- cope with sadness, unhappiness, rejection or low self-esteem; or
- get drunk!

Teenagers may use alcohol because they want to move away from being a 'child' and see drinking as a sign of maturity. As parents, you need to challenge the view that you need to drink to be an adult.

Effects of alcohol use among teenagers

- **Hangover**
When teenagers are 'hungover' they are experiencing a type of alcohol poisoning. They become dehydrated and as a result, feel sick, have headaches and become irritable.
- **Poor school performance**
Teenagers who use alcohol may remember less of what they have learned. This has knock-on effects at school, especially around exam time. Alcohol use can be the result and cause of difficulties at school. It can also hinder the development of other skills, such as decision-making, personal and social skills.
- **Drinking, smoking and taking drugs**
Teenagers who drink and smoke are more likely to take drugs.
- **Anti-social behaviour and mental health**
Heavy drinking and binge drinking are linked to anti-social behaviour, mental health problems and permanent brain damage.
- **Premature death**
The main causes of death among 16 to 25 year olds are accidents, suicide and violence. Alcohol is often involved in these cases.
- **Unsafe sex**
There is a definite link between drinking alcohol before sex and not using contraception. This can lead to crisis pregnancy and an increased risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI).

If a teenager drinks before they are 15 they are:

- four times more likely to develop alcohol dependency than those who wait until they are 21;
- seven times more likely to be in a car crash because of drinking; and
- 11 times more likely to suffer unintentional injuries after drinking.

Heavy use of alcohol during teenage years can impair brain development and cause loss of memory and other skills.

Despite this:

- Irish, Danish and British young people drink more alcohol than any other young people in Europe;
- most teenagers try alcohol before the legal age for drinking and some drink regularly; and
- times of drunkenness among adults and teenagers in Ireland are still remembered with pride.

These are aspects of our drinking culture that need to be challenged.



What factors can lead to teenage drinking?

- Spending time with friends in unsupervised settings (friend's home, on the street or in parks)
- Friends drinking
- Over-exposure to adult drinking
- High-risk drinking by older brothers and sisters
- Being involved in problem behaviour at an early age
- Living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood
- Skipping school
- Parental separation
- Having more money and greater spending power

We need to be aware of what may encourage teenagers to drink so that we can take as many steps as possible to delay teenage drinking.

What are the factors that help teenagers delay drinking?

- ✓ Clear messages from parents that underage drinking is unacceptable
- ✓ Clear example from parents about how to drink responsibly
- ✓ Praise and encouragement from parents
- ✓ Strong relationships with their family, friends and teachers
- ✓ Good social skills
- ✓ Involvement in school, youth groups, sports or church activities



Four things you can do to delay teenage drinking

1. Talk and listen to your teenager - it is the greatest support you can give them.

- Know the facts about alcohol.
- Talk to your teenager about alcohol in a calm, matter-of-fact way.
- Listen to your teenager. They will have their own stories and beliefs about alcohol. You need to hear these.
- Use everyday opportunities to bring up the subject, for example a storyline in a TV programme.
- Make your feelings about underage drinking very clear. Some parents suggest that talking to another adult in the company of a teenager is a useful way of getting the message across.
- Spend time with your teenager, for example if they are involved in sport go to a match together.
- Be available to talk.



2. Have family rules.

- Discuss the rules with everyone.
- Be clear about what is allowed or not allowed, for example they are not allowed attend teenage parties where alcohol is served.
- Have “coming home” times and stick to them.
- Have consequences for breaking rules and stick with them.
- Do not make empty threats or impose harsh punishments.

3. Know where your teenager is.

- Are they where they say they are? If they say they are staying overnight in a friend’s house, check.
- Will there be a supervising adult there?
- Who are they with?
- What time are they coming home at?
- How are they getting home?
- How much money do they have?



Have a routine at home that means you can see and talk with them when they come home from a night out.

4. If you drink alcohol, be responsible. Think about your own drinking.

- How much do you drink?
- Why do you drink?
- Do you need to cut down?
- What rules do you have about your drinking (for example, not drinking and driving)?
- Know how much alcohol is in the house and check it regularly.

Remember, what you do will be seen by your teenager and it will influence the messages you give them about alcohol.



What are the signs my teenager is using alcohol?

There are a number of signs that your teenager may be drinking.

- Smelling of alcohol
- Wanting to stay over in friends' houses, especially after discos or parties
- Suddenly using breath mints or brushing teeth more often
- Using too much perfume or aftershave
- Becoming very secretive (more so than usual)
- Lacking co-ordination in speech and movement
- Being excitable, giddy or moody
- Changing sleep patterns or being tired during the day
- Lacking interest in anything
- Getting poor grades and skipping school
- Borrowing money
- Stealing and lying

Some of these signs may be similar to the normal behaviour changes that teenagers go through, so it is important not to jump to conclusions.

What do I do if I know or suspect my teenager is drinking?

- Ask them not to drink.
- Suggest alternatives to your teenager, such as non-alcoholic beers, wines and cocktails.
- If you or another parent drops off and picks up, you have control of what time they arrive and what time they go home. Most underage drinking is done before and after the disco.
- If your teenager knows they will have to face you or another adult at the end of the night they may drink much less, if at all.
- Tell them never to:
 - leave a drink around where it could be spiked;
 - mix drugs and alcohol;
 - drink and drive or take a lift with someone who has been drinking or taking drugs; or
 - leave a party or club alone.

Things your teenager should know

- Drink slowly so their body has a chance to deal with the alcohol.
- Count how much they are drinking.
- Eat before drinking to avoid getting drunk.
- Use non-alcoholic mixers.
- Use spacers not chasers - take a soft drink every second drink.
- Mind themselves - they should not drink alone.
- Mind their mates - do not leave friends alone if they are drinking. If the friend is in trouble, they should call a responsible adult or an ambulance if needed.



Parents, teenagers need to know that drinking black coffee, getting fresh air, getting sick (to rid the stomach of alcohol) or taking cold showers do not sober you up.

What should I do when my teenager comes home after drinking?

- Take a deep breath!
- Make sure they are physically safe.
- Ask if they have taken any other substance or drug.
- Try to get them to drink water to help them recover better.
- Wait until the next day to discuss their use of alcohol. Listen. Give them a chance to explain their side of things and reasons for drinking.
- Be patient and show you love and care for your teenager, but be firm about your views and express your disapproval - your support for your teenager is vital.
- Re-establish ground rules. Set realistic goals that are small but achievable, allowing you and your teenager a chance to work together.
- Work together in organising alternatives to drinking, such as hobbies or interests.

*Teenagers will often reject your values and wishes. Stick with it! They may not **want** to hear your viewpoint but still **need** to hear it put across calmly and fairly.*

What should I do in an emergency?

If a teenager is unconscious or 'out of it' it is important that you know what to do - **it could save their life!**

- Turn them on their side.
- Dial 999 or 112 and ask for an ambulance.
- Do not leave them alone.
- If it is not your teenager who needs help, contact the other parents involved.
Most parents would want to be kept informed.
- If they have taken pills or powder and you come across them, give them to the ambulance personnel.
- Do not worry about who is to blame - the important thing at this point is the teenager's wellbeing.



What does the law say?

It is against the law for a young person under 18 to:

- buy alcohol;
- drink alcohol in a public place;
- pretend to be over 18 in order to buy alcohol;
- be in a pub after:
 - 9pm from 1 October to 30 April,
 - 10pm from 1 May to 30 September; or
- be on licensed premises during an exemption.

It is against the law for a young person under 15 to be in a pub without a parent or guardian.

A young person between 15 and 17 can attend a private function, such as a wedding, in a pub after the times above if a proper meal is being served.

It is also against the law for an adult to buy alcohol for a young person under the age of 18. The penalty is a maximum fine of €1500.

The information below should be helpful, as many parents are unsure of the law on underage drinking and what happens if this law is broken.

Juvenile Diversion Programme

- Applies to those over the age of criminal responsibility and under 18
- Gives young offenders a second chance
- Includes conditions, such as accepting responsibility, agreeing to cautioning and supervision from Juvenile Liaison Officer and no previous cautions
- Allows teenagers avoid a criminal record

In a private residence, alcohol cannot be served to a visiting young person (under 18) without the explicit consent of that young person's parent or guardian.

Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994

- Cannot be drunk in public place - maximum fine of €127
- Cannot take part in 'offensive conduct' between 12am and 7am - maximum fine of €635
- Cannot use threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour in public - maximum fine of €635 and/or 3 months jail

Intoxicating Liquor Act 1988 (Part IV provisions relating to persons under 18 years)

- It is illegal to sell or supply alcohol to under 18s.
- Gardaí can take away alcohol from under 18s drinking in public and can also contact their parents.



Where can I go for help?

Dealing with teenagers can sometimes be difficult for parents and so you may need support. You could talk about your worries to another parent you can trust or seek help from any one of those listed below.

Useful numbers

- Parentline
- Family doctor
- Local alcohol and drug service
- An Garda Síochána
- School
- Clergy

1890 927277

Acknowledgements

Publications

The Report of the North West Alcohol Forum 'A Portrait of Our Drinking', June 2004

Strategic Task Force Report on Alcohol Second Report, September 2004

Understanding Substances and Substance use, A Handbook For Teachers, 2004

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