

Teen drinking:

A PARENTS' GUIDE

Most teens will want to try alcohol at some stage, but how do parents work out safe rules around drinking? Patricia Flokis seeks expert advice

Trying alcohol is often a rite of passage in the teenage years. But preventing your adolescents from drinking before their time, with all the associated risks to their health and safety, can be a challenge for most parents. Here, three parenting experts discuss what you need to know to combat teen drinking.

Paul Dillon

AUTHOR OF TEENAGERS, ALCOHOL AND DRUGS AND DIRECTOR OF DRUG AND ALCOHOL RESEARCH AND TRAINING AUSTRALIA.

Check in regularly

Young people whose parents know where they are and who they're with start drinking at a later age, tend to drink less and are less likely to develop problems with alcohol down the track. I always ask parents, 'Can you tell me exactly where your son or daughter was at 10.30pm on Saturday night?' and a big chunk of them have no idea or they think they sort of know. When I ask them if they've ever checked, most never have, mainly because kids are incredibly clever at making us feel guilty about doing so. If your child says they're staying over at a friend's house on a Saturday night,

it could be teenage code for 'I'm going out to a party drinking and I'm not telling my parents.' You need to call that house on a landline, not a mobile, at least once, to talk to the parent and make sure they're there.

Practise tough love

To reduce the risk of dangerous drinking in teens, the evidence indicates that a tough love parenting style is what works best. This means that you have rules and consequences, but they're bound in unconditional love. Kids need to understand that every rule you make is because you love them and want them to be safe. You also need to explain to them, especially when they start to go to parties, that there is nothing they can do that will make you love them less, but that certainly doesn't mean that there won't be repercussions if you find out they've been drinking. It's also vital that your child understands that if they're out and in trouble they can call you any time and you'll be there for them.

Be prepared

Parents often ask me, 'Should I ever admit my mistakes with alcohol?' I don't



think there's any point sitting your child down specifically to discuss any slip-ups you made, but you need to plan what you're going to say if they ask the question. The best approach is to focus on what altered your drinking behaviour, for instance, did it start to affect your life or friendships? Using an awful drinking story as a scare tactic can backfire because some kids are just going to think, 'That's not going to happen to me'. If they say to you 'Well, you did it' simply say, 'Yes, I made terrible mistakes at times, but it's my job as a parent to try to protect you from doing the same things. You have to make your own choices, but you know the rules and what the consequences are.'"

Maggie Dent

PARENTING SPECIALIST
AND AUTHOR OF SAVING
OUR ADOLESCENTS.

Make them 'secret guardians'

Many teens don't want to drink but their friends are drinking. So when they're caught in that situation, I advise them to be their friends' secret guardian. I tell them to sit on one drink all night while watching out for their friends' wellbeing. Teens think it's a great idea because they still get to look cool in front of their friends, which satisfies their need to belong. You could also discuss scenarios they might need to draw their friends away from, like them getting into a car with a drunk driver or knowing what to do if a friend passes out. It's about giving your teen the information to get them and their friends home safe.

Lock up the hard stuff

I recommend parents move their significant liquor into a locked cupboard in their bedroom. Parents say to me, 'How does that demonstrate trust?' but it's not about trust, it's about minimising the risk in your own home. All it takes is one friend to dare the others when you're not there to supervise and all of a sudden, they're all intoxicated. If they know there isn't any alcohol in the house or that it's locked away, they'll quickly forget about it.

Find them a lighthouse

Often teens find it easier to turn to other people rather than their parents if they've drunk too much or found themselves in trouble, so they need what I call 'significant lighthouses' in their lives for these moments. These are people that know, love and believe in your children, such as aunts and uncles, grandparents, coaches or family friends. Your child needs to be reassured by your unconditional love, but tell them they should seek out these allies for help if they feel they can't speak to you.

Don't make it easy for them

Parents should try to do everything they can to delay experimentation around alcohol, so you might need to say no to parties or social events where alcohol may be available to them. I did this with my own children, but I also opened my home to their friends to

hang out and have fun. Teens just want to be together and it's important for them to see that they can have a good time without drinking.

Dr Emma Little

CHILD AND ADOLESCENT
PSYCHOLOGIST FROM
MELBOURNE.

Don't give them a taste for it

Research shows that children who are allowed to taste alcohol under parental supervision around the age of 10 are more likely to drink at 14. Letting them taste or drink alcohol at home can normalise the behaviour, making them less likely to refrain from drinking when they're out with friends. But just saying 'no' without explaining why can also give them a reason to rebel. The best thing to do is share the reasons why you'd prefer they didn't drink. You can explain that it leads to an increased chance of them being harmed or victimised, it affects their growing body and brain, and it might lead them to behave inappropriately. The more information your child is armed with, the more likely they are to follow the rules you've put in place.

Be their role model

It's really important to model a healthy relationship with alcohol by drinking occasionally and in moderation. It's also crucial to think about the language you use in relation to alcohol. Saying things in front of your kids like, 'I've had a bad day at work,

I really need a drink,' can make alcohol sound like an appropriate way to cope with stress, which it's not. Also, involving kids in your drinking has been linked to increased alcohol use, so making them fetch your drinks or top up your glass is never a good idea. And if you drink too much around your children you may make decisions you wouldn't normally make, like allowing them to try it.

Encourage outside interests

Teens who are engaged in life are less likely to want to drink before their time, so keep them involved in activities such as sports, music or drama classes. Teens who participate in sporting groups, for example, are less likely to want to drink because they're invested in looking after their bodies and won't want to let themselves or their teammates down.

Don't glamorise drinking

Kids often get the impression from adults or movies that being drunk is lots of fun. Explain that if they drink to excess not only are they going to feel terrible the next day, they're going to be left wondering if they did something that may follow them around for a long time. I've seen teen girls horrified and distraught after semi-naked pictures of them have turned up on social media after they got drunk and performed a strip-tease they don't remember doing. Use what your teen has seen on Instagram or Facebook to discuss how they would feel if they found themselves in a similar position.