



Alcohol and Young People

A Question and Answer
guide for parents.

Is it better to get my child used to alcohol at a young age by giving them small amounts? Isn't this what the European Culture does?

In Australia, parents often have the misguided belief that it is safe to follow what is sometimes referred to as the "European culture". The European culture is often described as introducing children to alcohol at an early age, with the aim of making it less likely that their children will have problems with alcohol later in life. This could not be further than the truth.

In Australia, there is no evidence that the "European culture" approach provides immunity from alcohol problems. Further, Europe and Australia have similar problems with alcohol and young people.

Therefore, the evidence indicates that the early introduction of alcohol does not offer any protection or set the child up for a pattern of sensible drinking in later years. Overall, scientific research has proved quite the opposite and has shown that they are at more risk of developing problems with alcohol later in life.

Professor John Toumbourou from Deakin University explains:

"Delaying the age of the first drink appears to be beneficial in most countries in the world including: Anglo-Saxon cultures (like Australia), Northern Europe, Scandinavian, Slavic, the ex-Soviet Union and Pacific countries and would apply in Asian and Islamic countries that tend to prohibit alcohol use. That leaves as one possible exception southern Europe. However, in Australia in 2006, 50% of children had a glass of alcohol by age 12 and this would be unlikely to occur in southern Europe where parents tend to not allow any alcohol until age 15 to 16 where drinking to intoxication is forbidden."

What has the research shown about the effects of alcohol on young people and how has the research been proven?

Research has shown that early introduction of alcohol to adolescents can alter the pathways in the developing brain. This may result in an increased risk of problems with alcohol in later years and a wide spectrum of mental and physical health issues including: depression, relationship difficulties, poor school commitment, accidents, injuries and self-harm. Alcohol interferes with the imprint of brain patterns – particularly in the frontal lobes of the brain that control areas such as reasoning, thinking, emotions, memory and decision making. The adolescent brain is still developing until at least 23 years of age. The frontal lobes are the last area to fully develop and are more susceptible to development damage from alcohol.

Recently, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) released the Australian Alcohol Guidelines which advise that *'for children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking alcohol is the safest option'*. This is based on scientific evidence surrounding the development of the brain and also the high risk of accidents, injuries, violence and self harm in the 15 - 17 age group. The research evidence was compiled from around the world and examined by experts.

See the link below for the NHMRC Australian Alcohol Guidelines. This includes a summary of the new Guidelines, and a comprehensive research report on alcohol related harm in both children and adults.

http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/your_health/healthy/alcohol/index.htm#do

I grew up in a family where we were given alcohol at the table and didn't experience any problems?

It is hard to compare different generations. Our young people today have grown up with an already established drinking culture and this is one reason we need to change to healthier practices such as delaying the age of alcohol use. Add to this family breakdown, increased alcohol availability and the pressure for our children to complete multiple years of education to gain secure employment, and the stage has been set for adolescent alcohol risk to be different compared to past generations.

Our generations also overlooked the adverse impact of alcohol misuse, with costs estimated at over \$16 billion. As parents we need to strive for our children as they can enjoy better health than we had in the past.

There are many factors that may contribute to problems with alcohol. Not everyone will experience these but there are no guarantees for immunity either.

Bosco Rowland from Deakin University explains this further by using the "lottery, and seat belt analogy"

"When a young person consumes alcohol is it like entering a lottery. In this analogy, the lottery prize is a poor health outcome prize – such as alcohol dependence in adulthood, poor mental health, or poor educational outcomes. Every time a young person drinks, it is like adding another ticket to the raffle pool. The more tickets the greater the likelihood a young person's odds/ risk of winning first i.e. having a poor health outcome. So the safest option is to delay the consumption of alcohol for as long as possible.

Another analogy is to think of delaying drinking as similar to wearing a seatbelt. Not everyone who drives a car will be involved with a road accident, however in the likelihood that a combination of factors come together and the person is involved in an accident, the seatbelt will save a person from injury and fatality. So too if a young person delays the use of alcohol, in the likelihood that other factors come together, the 'seatbelt' i.e. not drinking will save them from potential harm."

If I set a rule to not supply alcohol to my teenager, won't they go out and get drink from other sources anyway? Is it best to give them a couple of drinks rather than what they might get from others?

The teenager's job description includes rebelling against their parents rules so most teenagers will test boundaries to some degree. Often this has more to do with peer group pressure than about the alcohol.

Where parents set a rule that children are not to use alcohol, the rebellion tends to involve the children having a few drinks behind their parents' back. Where parents set a rule that allows moderate alcohol use the children tend to rebel with heavy alcohol use. The evidence clearly shows that in families where parents allow alcohol use, the children have a greater risk of involvement in heavy and harmful alcohol use, and poor social and development outcomes.

If my child is already drinking is it too late to set a rule to not supply alcohol?

Professor John Toumbourou:

Given alcohol is heavily marketed and readily available, a number of young people use alcohol despite their parents preferring that they did not. Some parents in these situations opt to purchase a limited amount of alcohol for their children with the goal of assisting their child to limit their alcohol use to moderate levels. The evidence does not support this practice. One recent study recruited and surveyed 1,945 US and Australian Year 7 students and then followed them across a 3 year period. The findings showed that those teens that were allowed to drink alcohol under adult supervision or that were provided with alcohol had a higher risk of drinking problems and alcohol related harms as they got older (McMorris, et al, 2012). By not providing adolescents with alcohol and not allowing adolescent alcohol use in the home context parents make clear they do not favour this behaviour. Adolescents that wish to use alcohol in these situations have the option to purchase it using their own money. Given adolescents tend to have limited money this typically has the effect of reducing the amount of alcohol that the adolescent can use. Although adolescents often rebel against their parents, as they get older they tend to endorse their parent's attitudes and respect their parents for setting boundaries.

Reference:

McMorris, B. J., Catalano, R. F., Kim, M. J., Toumbourou, J. W., & Hemphill, S. A. (May 2011). Influence of Family Factors and Supervised Alcohol Use on Adolescent Alcohol Use and Harms: Similarities Between Youth in Different Alcohol Policy Contexts. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 72(3), 418-428.

If I do set a rule not to supply alcohol until they are 18, how do I get support or help if I am having difficulties with my child's behaviour?

Teenagers can often display rebellious behaviour in their journey into adulthood. This can make parenting challenging and confusing at times. Having strategies and being prepared as well as seeking support is important. Support may be in the form of a trusted mentor, family member or friend that shares similar values, or if you are concerned or having difficulties it may be advisable to seek extra support or professional help. A talk with your GP, Parentline, or the School Counsellor is a good start, and they can advise other resources and links to professional services if needed. It is comforting to feel supported in how we want to parent our children and know we are doing the best for them.

See links below for some helpful parenting resources:

Parentline

A confidential free telephone service providing professional counselling and support for parents and carers: www.parentline.vic.gov

For details of Parentline in other states:

<http://www.parentline.com.au/getting-help/who-else-can-help/other-helpline-services.php>

Parentingstrategies.net

A website providing guidelines and strategies to help parents reduce adolescent alcohol use:

www.parentingstrategies.net

For further information on available resources go to www.KeepemSAFE.com.au.

Where do I find out about the new laws that protect teens from unauthorised supply of alcohol?

From November 2011, new secondary supply laws in Victoria protect minors from the unauthorised supply of alcohol in a private premise. These changes form a part of the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998 which also regulates laws in licensed premises.

The legislation speaks loud and clear: It is against the law to supply alcohol to anyone under 18 years of age in a private home unless you have the permission of their parent or guardian. Fines of up to \$7000 apply.

Other states such as Queensland, Tasmania and NSW also have similar laws in place.

To find out more about the secondary supply law campaign, read the “Story of Leigh” at www.keepemsafe.com.au

For more info about the new laws go to www.teendrinkinglaw.vic.gov.au.

This resource was developed to provide answers to frequently asked questions and dispel common myths surrounding alcohol and young people. It was compiled by **Keep em Safe** for the **Smart Generation Project** with assistance from **Communities That Care Ltd.**, **Deakin University** and the **Murdoch Childrens Research Institute**.