

Alcohol & the Adolescent Brain

A guide for parents and youth workers



Alcohol
Forum
Ireland

**“ For young people,
an alcohol-free life is the healthiest and
best option to help them reach their
fullest potential ”**

Alcohol & the Adolescent Brain

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About Alcohol Forum Ireland

Our Vision

An Ireland where every child, family and community is free from the harmful effects of alcohol.

Our Mission

To create and inspire change by working with individuals, families and communities to prevent and reduce the harm caused by alcohol.

About the Alcohol Forum

As a national charity, the Alcohol Forum believes real change will only happen by working with communities to address the causes of alcohol harm in Ireland. Our approach is shaped by evidence and is informed by the expressed needs of the people and communities we work with across Ireland. Our work provides the support, resources and expertise needed to reduce and prevent the harmful effects of alcohol on individuals, families and communities.

We would love to hear from you:

We have consulted widely with parents and professionals during the development of this guide. The Alcohol Forum would love to hear of your experiences using this booklet so we can continue to improve and provide further information – email us on info@alcoholforum.org.

Alcohol Forum | Enterprise Fund Business Centre | Ballyraine | Letterkenny | Co. Donegal | Ireland | F92 CX47
T: (+353) 074 91 25596 | E: info@alcoholforum.org | W: www.alcoholforum.org | Charity Number CHY17835

Table of Contents

Why do we need guidance?	01
Key Messages	02
Why should young people avoid alcohol?	03
What's Happening In The Teenage Brain?	10
Who's Influencing Young People's Drinking?	25
Communicating with Young People: The Golden Rules	39
Alcohol and the Law	53
Where to go for Information or Support	55
Acknowledgements	57
References	58

Why do we need guidance?

Adolescence is a challenging time of life. As young people attempt to navigate the bridge between childhood and adulthood, they are faced with a host of changes, difficult decisions and a changing social landscape.

Helping a young person find their feet in the world and forge their own identity requires a careful balance of promoting independence whilst providing them with ongoing support, guidance and encouragement.

One of the most challenging issues facing young people and parents alike is alcohol use.

Parents and youth workers have a very important role to play in supporting young people to avoid, delay and minimize alcohol use as they pass through adolescence.

This guide will provide you with the information you need to begin deciding the best approach to take. It will discuss brain development during the teenage years and the impact that alcohol use can have. It will provide information and tips for parents and youth workers to help guide their interactions on the issue of alcohol.

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Because of their young age, stage of brain development and lack of life experience, adolescents are at significant risk of short-term and long-term alcohol-related harms.

Key Messages

- **The brain is undergoing one of life's most important stages of brain development during the teenage years. It is extremely important that the brain is protected from toxic substances such as alcohol during this time.**
- **Alcohol has been linked to toxic damage in the brain. This is because alcohol is a neurotoxin. A neurotoxin is a substance that is poisonous or damaging to the brain or nervous system.**
- **New research has shown that teenagers are particularly vulnerable to the neurotoxic effects of alcohol as their brain is still developing.**
- **Alcohol use during adolescence may result in lasting changes to the brain.**
- **Because of changes happening in the brain during adolescence, the use of alcohol among young people is linked with increased risk for harmful or dependent alcohol use in later life.**
- **In order to support brain development and health, no alcohol is the safest choice for young people.**
- **Parents and youth workers, as well as wider communities, have important roles in helping young people remain alcohol-free and in delaying and minimising the use of alcohol.**

Why should young people avoid alcohol?



1.

Alcohol can disrupt important development in the brain.

The brain does not fully develop until the mid to late twenties. During adolescence, the brain undertakes a number of important changes that allow the young person to develop a more sophisticated, mature brain.

This includes 're-wiring' parts of the brain responsible for emotion, decision-making, planning, and memory. Studies suggest that drinking alcohol during adolescence may disrupt brain development.

Studies have also shown that heavy alcohol use during adolescence can lead to changes in the 'volume' and 'thickness' of the brain, slowed growth in the brain and disrupted networks in the brain. Regions of the brain most affected are those responsible for learning, memory and attention and impulse control.

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Scientists have suggested that teenage drinking can result in changes to the brain that may be long lasting and may prevent young people from meeting their full potential.

2.

The earlier a young person starts to drink, the greater their risk of becoming dependent on alcohol.

Alcohol affects the brain in many ways. In a young person, the effects of alcohol on the brain happen much faster than in adults because the brain is not yet fully developed.

Alcohol creates a shortcut straight to the brain's reward system, and gives the teenager a 'high' – a 'high' greater than that experienced by an adult brain. Because of this, the adolescent brain is likely to experience alcohol as more 'pleasurable' or rewarding than an adult brain. As a result, the brain creates a memory of this rapid pleasure, encouraging further use of alcohol in the future.

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A person is 4 times more likely to become dependent on alcohol if they start drinking before the age of 15 than people who wait until the age of 21 to start drinking.

3.

Alcohol use can harm young people's mental health.

The teenage years can be a time of great emotional upheaval for the young person. This can be due to changes occurring in the brain and body, as well as the new challenges they face as their responsibility and independence increases.

Alcohol use increases the risk for a range of mental health and social problems in teenagers and is linked with reduced self-esteem. Surveys have shown that:

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Rates of depression and anxiety in young people are significantly higher when they are drinking to harmful or dependent levels. There is also a strong link between suicidal behaviour and the misuse of alcohol among young adults. For young people, no alcohol is the safest choice.

4.

Drinking alcohol can cause young people to make poor decisions or lead them into harmful situations.

Changes that occur in the brain during the teenage years make adolescents more prone to risk-taking and impulsive behaviours. Alcohol can cause the parts of the brain responsible for reading situations, making decisions and controlling behaviour to shut down. This means that while teens are under the influence of alcohol they have less control over their behaviour, emotions and decisions. This can compromise their safety and/or the safety of others.

Teenagers drinking alcohol are at increased risk of:

- **Getting in trouble with the Gardaí:** 1 in 10 young people surveyed who drink alcohol have ended up in trouble with the police.¹ This can leave the adolescent with a criminal record from a young age.
- **Using other drugs:** Young people who use alcohol are more likely to move onto using other drugs such as cannabis than teens who are not using alcohol.²

- **Sexually transmitted infections (STI's) or unplanned pregnancies:** Studies have shown that the use of alcohol is associated with early sexual activity in adolescents³ and that people who are heavier drinkers tend to have more sexual partners and to use condoms less.⁴ This places teenagers at increased risk of unplanned pregnancy and STI's.
- **Accidents and Injuries:** Teenagers are 11 times more likely to be injured if they drink alcohol. The use of alcohol can increase risk of falls leading to damage to the brain (traumatic brain injury) and disability.
- **Victim of Assaults or other crimes:** Some studies have found that the younger people are when they drink alcohol, the more likely they are to be a victim of violence.⁵
- **Unwanted sexual activity:** Some studies abroad have shown that at least half of sexual assaults involve the use of alcohol.⁶ The majority of rapes of college women occur when the victim is intoxicated (“incapacitated rape”).⁷

Common Myths about Alcohol use in Adolescence



Fact or Fiction?

“ France has a good approach by introducing alcohol early in the home so their children grow up knowing how to drink sensibly ”

The facts:

- France ranks higher than Ireland in terms of total alcohol consumed per person per year.³
- Alcohol kills 134 French people every day.⁹
- One in four deaths among young men (age 15-34) in France is due to alcohol.¹⁰

Researchers have also studied the impact of early alcohol use among young people. They have found that:

- Parents who supply alcohol, even with the best intentions, are likely to accelerate their child's drinking.
- Children who grow up in families with permissive attitudes and behaviour around alcohol are much more likely to develop problems with alcohol.
- Early initiation of alcohol use is associated with increased risk of alcohol dependence.



What's Happening In The Teenage Brain?

The Teenage Brain: A Work In Progress

Until very recently it was thought that the brain was fully developed by the time a child reached their teenage years. However, over the past 20 years, scientists have discovered that the teenage brain is very much a work in progress.

During adolescence, the brain is undergoing important changes to prepare the teenager for adult life. These changes are known as neuro-maturation. This process happens to allow the brain to develop and mature and to allow teenagers develop the skills they need to find their way in the world on their own two feet.

Did You Know That The Brain Is Not Fully Developed Until A Person Reaches Their Mid-Twenties?

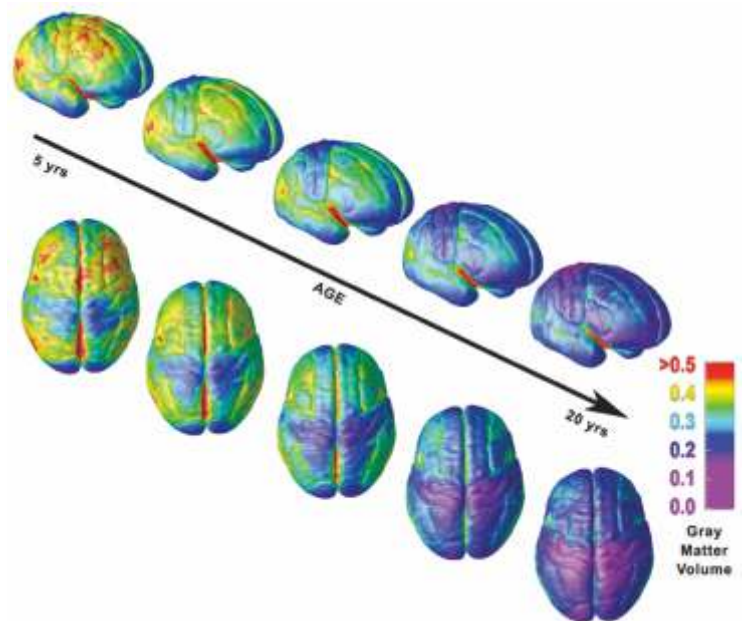
- While teenagers' bodies are almost fully developed by their teenage years (their height, their organs, their bones), the brain is very much lagging behind.
- The brain continues to develop and mature well into the mid-twenties (and sometimes thirties).
- The brain is a very complex and sophisticated organ and it takes decades for it to develop to its full potential.

While Teenagers May Look All Grown Up, Their Brains May Be A Decade Away From Full Development.

This means that there are big differences between the brain of a teenager and the brain of an adult. Due to these differences, there will also be differences in how adults and teenagers react, behave, feel and process information.

The image on the right shows the amount of change that occurs in the teenage brain. From the age of 11 or 12 (the mid-point of this image) until the age of 20, the brain undergoes some extreme changes. These changes continue for more than 10 years.

The developing purple areas show the brain laying down new pathways allowing for more sophisticated information processing across the brain.



Under Construction

– Building the Teenage Brain

During adolescence, the brain begins a new phase of construction to rebuild itself in preparation for adult life. This occurs in four stages and lasts from age 11 to age 25-30.

JOB SPEC

Stage One
Spring Clean

a.k.a Pruning



PURPOSE:	As a child moves from childhood into the teenage years, new demands are placed on the brain. The teenager needs to become more independent and develop more 'adult skills' as they begin to separate from their parents and take on more responsibilities. In order to do this, the brain needs to get rid of old pathways in the brain formed during childhood and make room for new adult brain mechanics.
JOB COMMENCING:	AGE 11
TIMEFRAME FOR JOB COMPLETION:	AGE 18
TASKS:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Get rid of old brain-pathways to make way for new adult brain-pathways. 2. Make room for more efficient, sophisticated pathways that will allow the brain to undertake more complex and advanced skills.
BE AWARE:	This spring-cleaning can cause a lot of upheaval in the brain and cause changes in behaviour as the child becomes a teenager. Activities or relationships that the child was once very interested in are no longer appealing to them. It can cause changes in personality and temperament.

JOB SPEC

Stage Two

Rewiring & Recoding

a.k.a 'Proliferation'



PURPOSE:	The brain needs to 'rewire' and 'recode' itself and lay down newer, more specialised pathways. This task involves a long stage of growth and renewal in the brain. It allows different regions of the brain to become better connected over time and allows the teenager to develop more specialised skills and thought processes.
HIGH PRIORITY:	This stage of brain development is one of the most important events of human growth and development – second only to infancy in terms of the rate of change that occurs in the brain.
JOB COMMENCING:	AGE 12
TIMEFRAME FOR JOB COMPLETION:	AGE 25
TASK:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rewire the Brain 2. Re-code the brain
BE AWARE:	Protect the brain from neurotoxins during this time as it may slow or stall works

JOB SPEC

Stage Three

Insulation

a.k.a 'Myelination'

PURPOSE:	Insulate the new wires in the brain to allow them to send, receive and transmit information to different parts of the brain very quickly and efficiently. Allow new skills, knowledge or behaviours to become 'wired into' the brain.
JOB COMMENCING:	AGE 14
TIMEFRAME FOR JOB COMPLETION:	AGE 25-30
TASKS:	1. Wrap new brain wires in insulation
BE AWARE:	Protect the brain from neurotoxins during this time as it may slow or stall works.

JOB SPEC

Stage Four

Build a Boss

a.k.a 'Frontal Lobe Development'



PURPOSE:	The brain begins building part of the brain responsible for adult behaviour. This will allow the young person to make good decisions, plan goals and actions, think about the future, control their emotions, manage risks and learn from mistakes.
JOB COMMENCING:	AGE 16 approximately
TIMEFRAME FOR JOB COMPLETION:	AGE 25-30
TASKS:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Build a program to allow brain to see consequences of actions 2. Recode the brain so it can begin to plan for the future 3. Enter software to allow the brain to make good decisions 4. Download a firewall to allow the brain to see risk and danger 5. Build a system to allow brain to control emotions
BE AWARE:	The teenager may become impulsive and begin experimenting outside of their once-familiar boundaries and behaviors until the 'boss' is completed to supervise things in the brain – risk taking is likely until the job is finished. Once this building job is complete, more mature behaviour will become evident.

Health & Safety Information



Why no Alcohol is the safest choice

These stages of brain development are one of the most important in our lives. It is now believed that drinking alcohol during peak periods of brain development may damage this 'brain wiring' process.

Research in this area is relatively new, and some studies rely on research of animal brains. Despite this, there exists much evidence to suggest that alcohol use can be disruptive to brain development during adolescence.

While our understanding of this area is growing, it is important to remember that drinking no alcohol means no risk of brain harm.

The Great Emotional Upheaval

Like any construction project, the brain will not be working at its best during this time. While many parts of the brain are built, the brain has to rely on other parts of the brain to keep the show going.

During adolescence, there is much reliance on the emotional centre of the brain. The emotional centre of the brain is responsible for our fight, flight or freeze reactions. It tends to be very reactive to threat or perceived threats in the world.

Most of the information entering a teenage brain will be processed through the emotional centre first. This leads teenagers to:

- Be prone to mood swings
- React quite strongly in certain situations
- React before thinking things through
- Express strong emotions more regularly
- Misread situations
- Act on impulse

In adults, the frontal lobe (the boss of the brain) keeps the emotional centre of the brain in check. This allows us to think logically about situations while taking into account our feelings. It makes us less reactive to emotionally-charged situations and allows us to control our behaviour.

However, because the 'boss of the brain' is not yet mature in teenagers, they often have a reduced ability to control their emotions or to control their impulses.

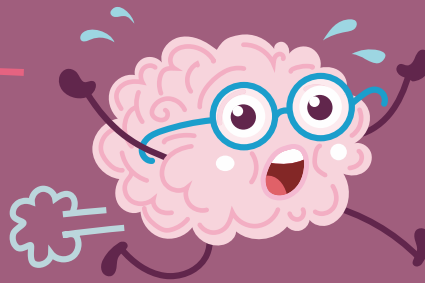
As the brain of the teenager develops, there is a shift away from a reliance on the emotional centre of the brain. The 'boss' of the brain begins to take over allowing teenagers to become more reflective and to think before acting.

Adolescence puts the Brain into fight, flight or freeze mode.



Fight

Reacts strongly to situations



Flight

Avoids or withdraws from situations



Freeze

When threatened, feels powerless, helpless and unable to do anything

i The Great Emotional Upheaval

Why no alcohol is the safest choice

Alcohol can become a 'fast route' to dealing with difficult emotions in teenagers. While alcohol may provide some relief from these emotions in the short term, teenagers who use alcohol in this way are less likely to develop healthy coping strategies. This may lead to poor mental health in the long term. Avoiding alcohol in adolescence will promote positive mental health, healthy coping behaviours and improved self-esteem in both the short and long term.

Pleasure and Reward in the Teenage Brain

Along with the rewiring that is happening in the brain during adolescence, there are other changes occurring which impact the teenager's ability to experience pleasure and reward.

All humans have a chemical in their brain called 'Dopamine'. Dopamine is important because it allows us to experience pleasure from activities in our life that promote our well-being and survival. Its allows us to connect the experience of pleasure to our memory, encouraging us to do certain activities again in the future.

During the teenage years, the amount of Dopamine in the brain is reduced. This means that teenagers find it difficult to get pleasure from things they may have enjoyed in the past. This can make teenagers feel quite flat.

While this may sound like a bad thing to happen in the brain, it is an important part of brain development. Because teenagers may not enjoy old familiar activities any longer – they seek out new experiences. This encourages the teenager to leave their 'comfort zone' and try new things, meet new people and develop new skills.

These new thrilling experiences will lead to dopamine release in the brain of the teenager, encouraging them to repeat these experiences again in future. Teenagers need to do more than adults to experience the same amount of pleasure in the brain. This is why they often take risks that may have poor consequences for them. Because their brains are not fully developed, they cannot fully reason their decisions.

i Pleasure and Reward

Why no alcohol is the safest choice

All drugs, including alcohol, lead to large surges of dopamine in the brain. This can trick the brain into thinking that the substance is important. This is particularly the case in a teenage brain. Because their base-line level of dopamine is lower than adults, the 'high' they get from alcohol is greater, more pleasurable and rewarding. Because of the changes happening in the teenage brain, it is likely that these brain responses will be wired and insulated into the brain, making addiction more likely in future.

Blackouts and the Teenage Brain

Because the teenage brain is still developing, adolescents are more prone to alcohol-related black outs. Alcohol can have a dramatic impact on memory. Alcohol interferes with the brains ability to make and store memories.

- A black out is a period of time for which a person cannot remember key details of events or even an entire occasion.
- It can leave a person very vulnerable or at risk of harm from others or themselves.
- 51% of students who drink alcohol report having experienced a blackout as a result of their drinking. Females are more at risk of blackouts than males even at low levels of alcohol consumption.
- Worryingly, students also report engaging in a range of risky behaviors during blackouts. These include sexual activity with either friends or strangers, vandalism and getting into arguments and fights.
- Blackouts indicate that the brain is shutting down because it cannot cope with the amount of alcohol in the body. Sometimes this can lead to unconsciousness and result in admission into the emergency department.

i Black Outs

Why no alcohol is the safest option

Because of changes happening in the teenage brain, they are more susceptible to alcohol-related blackouts. The teenage brain will give less signals to stop drinking than an adult brain. This makes them more likely to drink to intoxication. Teenagers can experience blackouts at relatively low levels of alcohol use. This can leave them in vulnerable situations that they may not be able to remember at a later point.

Common Myths about Alcohol use in Adolescence



Fact or Fiction?

“ If I forbid alcohol use, it will only make my teenager want to drink more. ”

Fiction

- Children and young people who say they learnt about the risks of substance use from their parents are less likely to use drugs or alcohol.
- Young people who know their parents would disapprove of substance use are also less likely to use drugs or alcohol.
- Parental disapproval is one of the key reasons children give for their decision to not to drink.



Who's Influencing Young People's Drinking?

1.

A good relationship with your teenager.

As a parent, you are the biggest influencer of your teenagers decisions to drink alcohol. You are – and will remain – the most important support for your children as they get older. Even as they begin to leave the nest, or begin to resist your input, you will remain the person with the biggest influence on their well-being, decisions and behaviour.

Your relationship will be the foundation for helping them navigate their way through a host of changes and difficult decisions. Anything you can do to improve your communication with your teen will improve your relationship and decrease problems, especially in the area of alcohol.

Children and teenagers thrive when they have parents who;¹¹

- Listen
- Encourage independence
- Set limits and consequences
- Have high expectations for their children's behaviour
- Express warmth and nurturance
- Allow their children to express opinions
- Encourage their children to discuss options
- Provide fair and consistent discipline
- Make parental views about alcohol use clear and set a standard for behaviour

Young people who experience these types of parenting responses are the least likely to develop alcohol-related problems . They are more likely to learn problem-solving approaches and are more respectful of parental boundaries and views about teen drinking.

Parents who explain the rationale for avoiding alcohol and who help the young person understand the “whys” of not drinking are likely to be more successful in reducing alcohol use in their children.

Making your views on youth alcohol use clear.

Parents need to give young people a very clear message that they disapprove of underage drinking.

- **Educate yourself:** If you have a good understanding of why no alcohol is the safest choice, it is much easier for you to communicate this to your child. Also knowing the risks allows you to hold firm on your views in this area if they are questioned or resisted by your teenager.
- **Start Early:** Talking about alcohol before your child reaches adolescence will help them understand your views on alcohol before more pressured situations arise (e.g., they ask to go to a disco for the first time). Revisit these more often as adolescence approaches.
- **Allow them to express their opinions on alcohol:** Use opportunities such as seeing alcohol-use during t.v programmes to start a conversation about alcohol. It's important to understand why young people might want to drink. Reasons teenagers give for drinking include feeling like it increases their confidence, wanting to get a buzz, being able to forget problems, wanting to fit in or to enhance their image. Talk about other ways that these needs could be met.
- **Explain why families need rules about alcohol:** Sharing some of the risks you have learned about can be helpful. Avoid using scare tactics.
- **Decide consequences for alcohol use.**

Modelling Responsible Alcohol Use

Teenagers are constantly observing the world around them trying to understand what is expected of them as they grow up. This is part of navigating the bridge between childhood and adulthood.

Many children's and teenager's first encounter with alcohol will come from observing their parents' drinking alcohol at home. Research has shown that young people are more likely to drink if they:

- Are exposed to a close family member, especially a parent, drinking or getting drunk
- Receive less supervision from a parent or other close adult¹²

Children who see their parents drunk are more likely to get drunk, drink underage and binge drink¹³. The way we drink alcohol as parents has a knock on affect to our children. So too do our attitudes towards youth alcohol use.

What message are you sending?

Do you ever...	Situation	Possible message to your child
Drink to relax or relieve stress?	After a hard day at work the first thing you do is open a bottle of wine or beer.	Could your child see alcohol as an adult way to relieve stress or anxiety and think drinking would be a grown up way of coping with exam pressure or other difficulties in their life?
Drink to get drunk?	You tend to use alcohol to get drunk and don't pay much attention to recommended guidelines.	Would your child think alcohol is for getting you drunk and that advice on recommended guidelines is meaningless and can just be ignored?
Joke about being drunk?	You enjoy having a joke about things you or others have done while drunk.	Could your child think you approve of people getting drunk and doing silly things? Might they think, if you find it funny when people get drunk, you won't mind too much if they do it?
Ignore your own advice?	You've advised your child about the risks associated with drinking too much, but when it comes to your own drinking you ignore this advice.	Could your child think guidelines and boundaries around drinking aren't important and don't need to be kept to?

Table reproduced with permission from Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland.

Parents who drink alcohol should always try to drink within the low risk guidelines and avoid binge drinking behaviour - especially in front of children and teenagers.

What are the low-risk guidelines for adults?

For adults above the age of 18, the recommended low-risk limits for alcohol use are:

Men: No more than 17 standard drinks per week, spread out over the course of a week, with at least two to three alcohol-free days.

Women: No more than 11 standard drinks, spread out over the course of a week, with at least two to three alcohol-free days.

A 'standard drink' in Ireland contains roughly 10 grams of pure alcohol. Some examples of a standard drink are:

- 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)



Other parents and adults

It takes every adult in the community to help young people choose not to drink alcohol. It is easier to ensure rules are followed if your teenager's friends have the same ground rules.

Get to know other parents, especially if your children are friends. Talk about your rules around alcohol and how you can support each other achieve these goals. Communities are coming together all over Ireland to work together to reduce alcohol-related harm.

Please see page 56 for more details on how to get involved.

2. Advertising

Young people in Ireland today are bombarded with alcohol advertisements through social media. Young people are very impressionable to the messages they receive through advertisements.

Alcohol advertising gives the message that there is a link between drinking, a vibrant social life and being accepted by others.¹⁴ All of these things are very attractive to the teenage brain.

Alcohol advertising also gives a very positive image of alcohol use and can present an unbalanced view of its benefits. Research has shown that teenagers are more likely to drink if they have positive attitudes and expectations of alcohol.

i Parenting Tip

Encourage Critical Thinking

To limit the effects of advertising on young people, talk about advertisements as they arise in daily life. Teach them the strategies that advertisers use to catch attention and encourage people to buy things. Encourage them to think critically about adverts.

A parent guide on this approach is available at: www.medialit.org/parents-and-media-literacy.

i Parenting Tip

Limit Screen Time

- **Less time on screens will mean less time absorbing advertising messages. Have device 'curfews' (no usage during or after certain times).**
- **Parents can now download apps that allow you to switch off certain social media apps on your child's phone during certain times of the day or night.**

Visit www.internetsafety.ie and www.webwise.ie for more tips on internet safety.

i Parenting Tip

Get Involved

One of the most effective ways of reducing the impact of advertising on children and teenagers of all ages is to restrict and regulate the types of adverts that can be viewed by children, particularly alcohol advertisements. Communities across Ireland are involved in efforts to reduce youth alcohol use. See page 65 for more details on Community Action on Alcohol and how to get involved.

3. Friends

One of the strongest predictors of ‘intention to drink’ and drinking behaviour in teenagers is the belief that alcohol aids social interaction.¹⁵ Peer influence has a big role to play in youth alcohol use. Despite this, you as a parent remain the biggest influencer of your teenager’s decisions to drink. It can help to do the following:

1: Be around

Research clearly shows that if parental monitoring is in place - that is knowing where your teenagers are, and who they’re with - they are much less likely to begin to use alcohol at an early age. Teenagers, as part of their growing independence, should provide parents with “Who, What, Where, When” information. Call other parents or the school to go over the details of events or activities. Trust your instincts. If you sense something is wrong, don’t be afraid to say ‘no’.

2. Plan

Make it easy for your teenager to leave a situation. If they feel uncomfortable, let them know that they can contact you at any time.

Prompt your teens to think about their plan of action if peer pressure to use alcohol becomes an issue. What would they do? What would they say? Some techniques might be:

Taking an honest approach

- “No thanks, Mum and Dad would kill me”
- “I can’t, got a big game tomorrow”

Giving a humorous response or changing the subject:

- “No thanks, I need all the brain cells I can get”
- “Nah...want to get something to eat? I’m starved!!”

3: Praise their assertiveness.

Tell them you are proud when you know they’ve stood up to peer pressure and/or made a good decision.

4. Opportunity

Young people are very 'price sensitive'. This means that their behaviours towards a product will change according to price – the more expensive something is, the less likely they are to buy it.

Alcohol has become very cheap over the last decade making it more within the reach of a young person. At the time of publication the Irish government were bringing forward a range of measures in the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill, including; minimum unit pricing, that will make alcohol less affordable for young people. Other steps can be taken by parents to support these measures.

- **Account for money:** If you give your young person money to buy clothes or books, check to see that they have bought these items.
- **Check in with other parents:** Often young people will 'pool' smaller amounts of money with other young people in order to buy alcohol. Check with other parents to make sure that the cost of an activity is what your teenager is telling you.
- **Keep alcohol stored away:** Be careful where you leave alcohol in the home. Know how much you have and check it regularly. Alcohol should not be readily available to young people. Some teenagers may take alcohol at home and top-up the bottle with water to disguise the missing alcohol from parents.
- **Not serving alcohol to u-18s:** As we have seen, supplying young people with alcohol is likely to make their drinking worse in the long run. No alcohol is the safest option.



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- **Dropping off and Picking Up:** If your teenager is going to a disco, drop them off and pick them up directly from the venue. Most alcohol is bought before attending U-18 events. Agree the time they will be leaving the venue. Always check sleepover and other plans – ring other parents and check who's providing supervision.
 - **Report premises selling alcohol to U-18s.** If you are concerned that a local premises is selling alcohol to young people, this can be reported to the Gardai. Under section 37C of the Intoxicating Liquor Act, 1988, a member of the Garda Síochána may send a young person between the ages of 15 and 18 into any licensed premises for the purposes of testing their sales to U-18s. If the premises is found to be selling alcohol to teenagers, they may be convicted and fined.

5. Brothers and Sisters

Brothers and sisters can have an influence on their younger sibling's alcohol use too.

Older brothers and sisters in college/ university may offer to buy alcohol for their younger siblings. They may lend them their ID's for buying alcohol or entering into pubs or nightclubs. Often they can glamourise alcohol use by bringing home 'drinking stories' from college or through social media posts.

i Parenting Tip

Ask young adults to not share drinking stories with younger teens. Nearly all social media platforms have a 'hide from' option which allows the user to make some posts invisible to certain friends or followers. If a post contains references or pictures from night's out where a lot of alcohol is being consumed, they may wish to 'hide' these posts from those under 18.

Remind older siblings that it is illegal to buy alcohol for someone U-18 and that it is illegal for a teenager to impersonate an adult through the use of a false ID. Both of these can lead to a conviction or fine in court.

Common Myths about Alcohol Use in Adolescence



Fact or Fiction?

“I drank when I was young and it didn't do me any harm” ”

The facts:

The nature of adolescence has changed over the last number of generations. Teenage life is starting earlier and finishing later than ever seen before.

- The way young people drink has changed over the last number of decades– they drink more, in very short periods of time and start younger. This exposes them to alcohol-harm in ways that other generations may not have seen.

A hand is shown holding a small white letter 'H' on a dark chalkboard. The word 'HELLO' is written in white letters on the board, and a small white heart is placed to the right of the word. The chalkboard is on a wooden table, and a small white cup is visible on the right side.

HELLO

Communicating with Young People: The Golden Rules

1.

Teenagers need to have opportunities to take risks

Teenagers have a natural drive to experience risk and thrill. We have seen that this is important because it helps them extend themselves beyond their comfort zone as they progress towards adulthood. Because of this natural drive to take risks, they may be tempted to try alcohol.

i Parenting Tip

If your teenager is in to thrill seeking, try helping them channel this energy into safer and constructive activities as part of their daily lives.

These could include adventure sports – martial arts, mountain biking, go-karting, skateboarding, zip-lining and rollercoaster rides.

Some teenagers might find they love the ‘rush’ of performing in drama or creative arts. For others, it may be getting a job. Some may enjoy competing in an area of interest. Encouraging them to take small risks in life is important. It might be asking out someone they like, setting up the band they wanted to or trying out for a place on the senior football team.

Encouraging risk or thrill in this way may lower temptation to take risks in other areas. These situations also provide opportunities for the teenager to learn how to cope with set backs.

i Parenting Tip

Because dopamine levels are lowered in the teenage brain, teenagers can feel quite 'flat' or bored compared to adults. Parents can support natural dopamine 'boosters'. Teenagers will likely experience increased dopamine release from:

- **Sports or any physical activity**
- **Humour** – funny DVD's or YouTube clips, comedy nights, spending time with friends
- **Having a sense of achievement** – reminding them of what they have already achieved, praising and rewarding effort and hard work, encouraging them to progress with an activity they enjoy
- **Experiencing kindness from others or being kind to others.** Teenagers require just as much praise, reward and encouragement from their parents as younger children (even though they might not like to admit it!). Providing opportunities for them to help others is also important – letting them volunteer, getting involved in community or school groups etc.

2.

Teenagers weigh up risk differently to adults

Because teenager's frontal lobe (the boss of the brain) is not fully developed, they weigh up information and think about risk differently to adults.

This is likely to play a role in how they think about or behave in situations where alcohol is available. When talking to teenagers about any situation which may involve an element of risk, it is important to be mindful that they will give more emphasis to certain types of information over others.

Time Preference in the Teenage Brain

- Because of the differences between an adult and teenage brain, the way they think about the future differs greatly.
- When an adult makes a decision, they will often use multiple sources of information. They will think about experiences and information they received in the past, think about how relevant these experiences/information are to the current situation and begin anticipating how likely something is to happen in the coming weeks and months.
- In this way, adults are more likely to think weeks, months and years ahead when making a decision and planning for the future.
- Teenagers on the other hand, do not have the same sophisticated brain mechanics to make decisions and weigh up future risk.
- This concept is called 'time preference'. It describes how far ahead someone looks when faced with making a decision.
- On average, teenagers are only likely to consider the next 12 to 24 hours ahead when making a decision. Their decisions are likely to be based on the perceived positive or negative consequences that will occur within the next 24 hours or less.

i Parenting Tip

Time Preference in the Teenage Brain

When communicating with teenagers about risk, it is important that you factor in the potential immediate and short term consequences of their decisions and actions.

Focusing on outcomes that will only occur in the long term are not likely to be registered as important by the teenage brain.

For example:

“If you are drinking alcohol you’ll damage your liver”

(long term consequence – unlikely to be registered as significant by the teenage brain)

V’s

“I’ll wait up until you are home tonight. Remember our rules about alcohol. If you have been drinking we will need to talk about that”

(short term consequence – likely to be registered by the teenage brain)

3.

In a teenagers brain, social reward & acceptance is everything

There is another reason why teenagers favour short-term rewards over long-term risks. The brain of the teenager is very sensitive to rewards – particularly social rewards.

This is due to a part of the brain that becomes over-active during the teenage years – the ventral striatum. The ventral striatum is a part of the brain which is interested in behaviours that lead to positive social outcomes.

The ventral striatum is focused on one big question -

“what kind of behaviours lead me to be more liked, successful, accepted?”

When the ventral striatum gets an answer to that question, it will quickly send signals to other parts of the brain telling the brain, “do that again, that’s rewarding!!”.

The ventral striatum is overactive during the teenage years (more than children and more than adults). This is important because it encourages teenagers to build new relationships outside of the family nest.

What this also means however, is that teenagers are likely to favour social rewards over pretty much everything else!

Even if a teenager can see the risk involved in a situation – the perceived social reward will significantly outweigh the potential risk.

Dopamine (connecting pleasure experiences to memory and decision making) is released in the ventral striatum whenever a social reward is received. Compared with adults, the adolescent brain releases more dopamine for longer periods of time following social interactions.¹⁶

Much research shows that risk taking is more likely in the presence of peers or friends. This is because of increased activity in the brain’s ventral striatum when peers are known to be watching – a process that is found in adolescents but not adults.¹⁷

i Parenting Tip

Peer relationships are incredibly important to teenagers. During the teenage years, relationships with friends begin to have more importance to the teenager than relationships with parents.

Support activities and friendships outside the family. Encouraging friendships, new relationships and activities allows your teenager a sense of control over his or her interests.

Provide alcohol free spaces for young people to enjoy themselves. Having friends over regularly or supporting them to travel to places of interest will allow you to get to know their friends. Having friends in close proximity of parents also allows you to influence any risk taking that might happen when in the presence of a peer group.

Get to know the parents of your teenagers friends. If each teenager is following the same set of rules, it reduces the likelihood that peer pressure will happen. Agree rules for outings and always clarify plans – who is doing what, how and when. Always check if your teenager says another parent is providing supervision, accommodation or travel arrangements.

4.

Teenagers need the three C's: Clear expectations: Clear rules: Clear consequences

Teenagers continue to need boundaries and consistent rules and consequences from parents. Even as children progress through to the adolescent years, parents hold the right to use authority, set rules and limits, and decide what behaviour is acceptable or not.

This will be most effective when the parent's aim is to influence their teenagers, rather than control them.

Be clear about the rules.

By making the rules of your house well known, you give a clear message to your children about what is expected from them.

In as much as possible, allow young people to have input in developing these rules. In saying "This is the rule, end of!!," the message to the young person is often heard as: "I don't think you're able to make wise decisions."

By getting their input, this may help your teenager be more responsible in upholding the rule. Also, agreeing in advance what the consequence of breaking the rules will be allows young people to clearly predict what will happen if they break the rules.

The ideal position is for you to be able to say, "As we have agreed, you may choose to do this or you may choose to do that, but if you choose to do that please understand that the consequences will be".

Follow through.

Believe in the rules you have agreed. Once you put them in place, be consistent and see them through. Young people will come up with many reasons why "this one time" you should let them off the hook. Sometimes, there may be a valid reason, but consistency is usually the best policy.

5.

Teenagers experience more emotion than adults

During the teenage years, the brain develops at such a rapid pace that it relies almost exclusively on the emotional centres of the brain. Adolescence puts the brain into fight, flight, or freeze mode. When the brain is in this mode, it is less able to use reason or logic. Because of this they are very prone to emotional reactivity – their emotions tend to accelerate from 0 to 100 very quickly!

Calmness Counts: While it can be very tempting to fight fire with fury, try to take a step back so the situation does not escalate. Can you let this go right now? Not everything needs to be addressed in the moment. Wait for your teenagers to calm down before discussing 'hot topics'. It is very difficult to think straight when emotions are running high.

Don't always make it about them: Talking about a subject in the third person allows the teenager to emotionally distance themselves from a challenging subject. Using other people (real, imaginary or on television) can help open up a discussion with a teenager without them feeling accused. For example, saying "one of my friends at work is struggling with her daughter's drinking. I'm trying to think what could be done to help her" might be easier for a teenager to process than, "we need to talk about you and alcohol".

Remember, Its Normal. The great emotional upheaval that happens during adolescence is very normal. It

can help to talk about the changes in the brain during the teenage years and how they impact on their feelings and behaviours. Helping to normalise your young person's feelings and displaying empathy and acceptance will help strengthen your relationship. Keep reminding yourself that their brain is simply processing information in different ways and they have little control over this. If you become concerned about your teenagers emotional well-being or it starts interfering with their ability to do things in day to day life, talk to their GP.

Help them self sooth: One of the greatest things you can do for young people is to help them learn how to deal with difficult emotions. Modelling healthy self-care will teach them how to respond to things when they get difficult. Taking a walk when stressed, taking time off when you need to rest, talking to a friend when upset show young people that they have control over their emotional state.

6. Keep communication channels open

Take time to listen.

Teenagers have a lot to say if they have the right audience. Be willing to listen and to talk about all subjects. Listening becomes even more important during the adolescent years.

- Avoid the temptation to lecture! Listening allows parents to get a snap-shot of how they see things and helps parents understand what is understood correctly and what might not be.
- Parents who are willing and ready to talk about all sorts of things and to accept the value of their children's viewpoints make it easier for children to talk and learn about sensitive subjects.

7. Pick Your Battles

It is a normal part of adolescence for young people to do or say things that separate them as unique people from their parents. There can be a dramatic change in the clothes they wear, their hairstyles, the music they listen to, the interests they wish to pursue. While these changes can be unnerving – ask yourself if these are things they are likely to grow out of.

A lot of the changes in adolescence are temporary. Try to focus your energy in the bigger issues! In doing this, your input will have a bigger impact when difficult situations arise.

8. Everyone makes mistakes

Very few of us will make it through the teenage years without making mistakes of some kind. Preparing your teenager for independence will not be achieved by shielding them from making any mistakes, but rather by exposing them to the reality that mistakes happen, that there are consequences from these and that they can learn from these mistakes.

Take a deep breath: Listen before you speak or act.

- As soon as we start shouting or criticising young people, the barriers will go up. They start to tune us out and they start justifying or defending their behaviour.
- Often young people do not say anything to their parents when they make a mistake because they are afraid of how their parents will react.
- Hearing your teenager out will allow them to express their reasons for their behaviour or choices. Hear your child out and explore what went wrong before you reprimand him or her. Listening to your teenager will strengthen your child's confidence in your relationship as a place they are heard, accepted and valued.



Be determined to help the young person learn from the mistake.

- 1: **Encourage them to admit to the mistake.** Remind them of the rules. Talk about how their actions were different from the rules. Encourage them to take responsibility for making the mistake rather than blaming others.
- 2: **Calmly assist them to understand if there is something that needs to be done** – do they need to apologise to someone? Do they need to tell someone else about the mistake? Does something need to be repaired or fixed? Who else do their actions impact and what can be done to minimise the impact on this person?
- 3: **Resist the temptation to rescue them from the consequences of the mistake.** If you have agreed consequences previously, remind them of those and say when they can expect these consequences to happen and for how long. If there are other natural consequences (i.e. suspension from school), allow these to happen without resisting them.
- 4: **Talk about what went wrong. Talk about how this can be avoided in the future** – what would help them to prevent this situation from happening again? Help them explore what they learned from the mistake.
- 5: **Finally discuss how they can make amends.** Discuss what will happen if this happens again in future. Agree future consequences.
- 6: **After amends have been made, consequences delivered, lessons learned and future consequences agreed,** praise them if they have made a good effort in resolving the situation. After this, it is time to move on.

Even parents make mistakes:

- Parenting is tough! It is a learning experience for all. Parents will not always get it right and often navigating parenthood involves a lot of trial and error.
- It is mainly through educating ourselves and observing our child that we learn what techniques work best for a young person. Every person and child is unique, and your formula for parenting will be slightly different for your relationship with your teenager.

Seek outside help if necessary.

- If you find that arguments are occurring very regularly, becoming destructive to your relationship, or you are struggling in your role as a parent, its okay to seek advice or help from a professional. Talk to your child's G.P.

9.

The HSE Alcohol Programme – Guide for Parents

The HSE Alcohol programme have also developed a number of resources for parents and young people about alcohol. These will be an essential read for parents wishing to learn more about how they can effectively parent to reduce the risk of youth alcohol use.

Visit their website www.askaboutalcohol.ie



Alcohol & The Law

It is against the law for young people under the age 18 to:

- Buy alcohol or be in possession of alcohol
- Pretend to be over 18 to buy alcohol
- Drink alcohol in a public place
- Be in an off-licence (unless with a parent or guardian)

Conviction can lead to a maximum fine of €500

It is against the law for an adult:

- To buy alcohol for a young person under the age of 18
- To serve alcohol to a young person under 18 visiting your home without the explicit consent of that young persons parent or guardian

Conviction can lead to a maximum fine of €2500



Licensed or Off-Licensed premises:

It is an offence to sell alcohol to anyone under the age of 18

Conviction can lead to a maximum fine of €2500

- It is against the law for a young person (U-18) to be in a pub after:
 - 9pm from 1 October to 30 April
 - 10pm from 1 May to 30 September
- A young person between 15 and 17 can attend a private function, (a wedding, a birthday party etc.) in a pub after the times listed above if a meal is being served.
- It is against the law for a young person under 15 to be in a pub without a parent or guardian

If the license holder is found guilty of allowing unsupervised children in his or her premises, a fine can be imposed. Parents and guardians can also be guilty of an offence under the Act if their children are found to be in licensed premises without supervision.

- It is against the law to serve alcohol to someone who is already intoxicated

Where to go for more information or support

Information on Alcohol

ALCOHOLFORUM.ORG

Provides the support, resources and expertise needed to reduce and prevent the harmful effects of alcohol on individuals, families and communities.

Phone number: +00353 (0)749125596

Website: www.alcoholforum.org

Email: info@alcoholforum.org

ASKABOUTALCOHOL.IE

This HSE website provides information about alcohol risk, the physical and mental health effects of alcohol. It has useful tools to help you assess your drinking including a drinks calculator. The website also provides information for people who are worried about their own drinking, or worried about someone close to them, and has a service finder to help connect people to support and services.

Website: www.askaboutalcohol.ie

HSE DRUG AND ALCOHOL HELPLINE :

This confidential service has both a freephone Helpline (1800 459 459) and an email support service (helpline@hse.ie). The HSE Drugs & Alcohol Helpline provides support, information, guidance and referral to anyone with a question or concern related to drug and alcohol use and/or HIV and sexual health. The service is non-judgemental and offers space to talk about your situation, to explore some options and to consider your needs. During calls/ emails, staff refer to a database of over 400 services nationwide. Opening hours are Monday to Friday, 9.30am and 5.30pm.

Phone Number: 1800 459 459

Address: Swords Business Campus, Balheary Rd, Balheary Demesne, Swords, Co. Dublin, Ireland

DRUGS.IE

Drugs.ie provides information and support on drugs and alcohol. It is an independent website managed by The Ana Liffey Drug Project. Their mission is to help individuals, families and communities prevent and/or address problems arising from drug and alcohol use.

Website: www.drugs.ie

AL-ANON-IRELAND

Fellowship of men and women whose lives have been or are being affected by another person's drinking.

Location: Al-Anon Information Centre, 5/6 Capel Street, Dublin 1

Tel: 01 873 2699 - 10.30 am to 2.30 pm (Mon-Fri)

01 873 2699 - Weekend 24-hour confidential helpline

Email: info@al-anon-ireland.org

Website: www.al-anon-ireland.org

How to get involved in Community Action on Alcohol

Community Action on Alcohol is an approach which brings together local people and agencies to develop tailored responses to issues around alcohol in their community.

To get involved email paula@alcoholforum.org

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