



PARENTS GUIDE

YOUNG PEOPLE, ALCOHOL AND DRINKING CULTURE

Alcohol has been identified as the major drug of concern for the Western Australian community, yet getting drunk is often accepted as a normal part of the Australian drinking culture. Although alcohol-related problems are sometimes seen as a youth issue, the kind of drinking behaviour that leads to problems involving young people is often a reflection of what's already accepted as the norm in the community.

Why shouldn't young people under 18 years drink alcohol?

The latest research shows that the risks of accidents, injuries, violence, self-harm, risky sexual behaviour, impaired learning ability and other physical health problems are high among drinkers aged under 18 years. Drinking alcohol contributes to the three leading causes of death among young people – unintentional injuries, homicide and suicide.

For children and young people under 18 years-of-age, not drinking alcohol is the safest option

- Children under 15 years-of-age are at the greatest risk of harm from drinking. Not drinking alcohol is especially important for this age group.
- For young people aged 15 to 17 years, the safest option is to delay the initiation of drinking for as long as possible.

Alcohol and the developing brain

The body of research about the effects of alcohol on the developing brain is still growing. Studies have shown physical changes in the brain and evidence of impaired problem solving and other cognitive function resulting from young people's alcohol use. Two key areas of the developing brain are affected:

- The hippocampus is responsible for memory and learning. Research has indicated the adolescent hippocampus is vulnerable when alcohol is consumed, it shows that these young people have smaller prefrontal lobes than young people of the same age who do not drink.
- The prefrontal lobe is important for planning, judgement, decision making, impulse control and language. This area of the brain changes the most during the teenage years. Research has found that adolescent drinking can cause severe changes in the prefrontal lobe.

Does alcohol influence the brain in other ways?

Alcohol affects cells in the body, and the most immediate impacts are seen on the brain. Alcohol is a depressant that affects the brain by causing it to slow down, and can result in:

- Slurred speech.
- Poor muscle control and judgement.
- Confusion.
- Slower reactions.
- Poor vision.
- Lack of coordination.
- Sleep disruption.

Health effects of alcohol on young people

Risky behaviours can occur when teenagers drink alcohol. Risky behaviour can have both short-term and long-term impacts, which is why it is important to support not drinking being the norm for those underage.

Increase risk of accidental and violent injury

- The occurrence of risk-taking behaviours increases in adolescence and the possibility of injury increases even more when alcohol is also involved.
- Alcohol consumption in young adults is associated with physical injury, risky sexual behaviour and adverse behavioural patterns.
- Adolescents are also more likely to get involved in a fight when they drink alcohol, compared with when they were sober.

Mental health problems including depression, self-harm and suicide

- Alcohol use increases the risk for a range of mental health and social problems in young adults.
- Alcohol use may contribute to poor mental health.
- Young people with poor mental health are more likely to initiate alcohol use in adolescence and report drinking frequently. They are also more likely to drink with the intent to get drunk.
- Adolescents who use drinking as a method of coping are more likely to suffer from depression.



Drinking statistics in Western Australian young people.

Over the last decade (from 2005 to 2014) the number of students aged 12 to 17 years-old who have never drunk alcohol has increased by two and a half times (12.3% to 31.5%). In 2005, almost two-thirds of students reported drinking in the last year (65.2%) and this declined to just over two-fifths (44.3%) in 2014. Over the same time period drinking in the last month decreased from 43.5% to 23.9% and drinking in the last week halved, from 28.9% to 13.9%.

For those students who drank in the last week:

- Based on adult guidelines, of those students who drank in the last week (13.9%), one in three (29.8%) drank at risky levels for single occasion alcohol-related harm. This is a slight decrease from 2005 where 28.9% of students drank in the last week with one-third of them (34.8%) drinking at risky levels for single occasion alcohol-related harm.
- Most students usually drink premixed spirits (45.1%) or spirits (31.1%), and just over one in ten (11.7%) drank alcoholic energy drinks.
- Friends (30.5%) and parents (30.4%) were the most likely source of a student's last drink.
- Most students drank their last drink at either their home (34.5%) or at a party (30%).
- Since 2005, the proportion of students agreeing that one of the main reasons they drink is to get drunk has decreased from 38.8% to 30.3%.

DID YOU KNOW?

- In Western Australia, alcohol is a major contributing cause of hospitalisation and death among young people from 2012 to 2015.
- 2,526 of 12 to 17 year-olds were admitted to hospital for alcohol-related reasons.
- 8,664 alcohol-related hospital bed days were utilised by 12 to 17 year-olds.
- From 2011 to 2013, there were 21 alcohol-related deaths.

What is the role of parents?

Parents and other family members play an important role in the development of young people's values, attitudes and behaviours towards alcohol and in helping our community adopt a culture that has less alcohol-related problems.

While experimenting with alcohol has in the past been considered normal during adolescence, recent research shows that this attitude needs to change. Parents do not have to accept teenage drinking. It is important to tell your teenager why you don't want them to drink alcohol. Young people whose parents disapprove of teenage drinking tend to delay when they have their first drink of alcohol or drink less or drink less often.

Parental influences on teenage alcohol use

You can have a positive influence on this behaviour in your children from a very early age. You are in an excellent position to provide education about the benefits of not drinking alcohol as a teenager, the harms associated with alcohol use, and to encourage the development of positive and responsible attitudes towards alcohol. You can also play an important role in minimising harms by monitoring your teenager's behaviour and by helping supervise activities, including teenage parties or gatherings.

Why do some young people drink?

Adolescence is a complex time when some young people and parents may face difficult situations and decisions. During this time, experimentation and risk taking are common, and this may include drinking alcohol.

During adolescence, young people often have exaggerated ideas about how much their friends drink. There are lots of reasons why young people may drink alcohol. Some of these reasons include:

- Imitating adult behaviour.
- Socialising and having fun.
- Experimenting and satisfying their curiosity.
- Enjoying the effects and/or taste of alcohol.
- Building confidence.
- Relaxing and forgetting problems.
- Because their friends and peers drink.

Information and support

If you're having difficulties dealing with any of the topics outlined in this flyer you don't have to go it alone. The listings below provide current information, support and referrals to services available in your area.

Alcohol and Drug Support Line (08) 9442 5000 or 1800 198 024 (country callers)

A free 24-hour, state-wide, confidential telephone information and support service for parents and families concerned about alcohol and other drug use. Callers can speak with a professional counsellor or be put in touch with local Community Drug Service Teams in your area who can provide counselling, education and support.

Parent and Family Drug Support Line (08) 9442 5050 or 1800 653 203 (country callers)

A free 24-hour, state-wide, confidential telephone information and support service for parents and families concerned about alcohol and other drug use. Callers can speak to either a professional counsellor or to a trained parent volunteer who has experience with a child using alcohol and other drugs.