

Alcohol and Health Series

Talk with Youth About Alcohol



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Introduction

If you are thinking about talking to youth about alcohol, it can be hard to know where to start. You might be unsure about the subject and you might worry that if you raise the topic of alcohol, it will somehow encourage experimentation. The intention of this resource is to help alleviate some of these worries by providing you with information to help you talk to youth about alcohol, and by encouraging you, as adults, to think about your answers to these questions:

- What do my own decisions about alcohol role model?
- Do I know how to communicate with youth about alcohol and health?
- Am I helping youth make responsible decisions?
- Am I helping youth to cope with pressure from their peer group?
- Do I understand why youth might use alcohol and how to recognize the signs of alcohol use?

Being open and inviting conversations about alcohol can help give children and teens the support and guidance they need to make healthy decisions.

You are their Role Model

Parents and guardians are their child's strongest role model and greatest influence. Your child may eventually adopt many of your values and ways of acting. Your child will notice and respond to the way you deal with problems, show feelings and celebrate special occasions.

Children tend to mimic the behaviour of those they love and admire, especially that of their parents. It is likely that your drinking habits are the ones your child will adopt later on. If drinking, either at dinner, while alone or out socializing, is a part of your life, your child will grow up assuming that this kind of drinking is the norm. If you abstain from drinking or if you drink infrequently, your choice will also set an example for your child. On the other hand, if your own drinking is excessive, your child will learn from that choice too.

If adults, including parents, binge drink in a community, there is an increased chance youth will drink before the legal drinking age, thus increasing the risk of harm to youth from alcohol.

- A 5% increase in binge drinking among adults in a community is associated with a 12% increase in the chance of underage drinking.

Source: Xuan Z, Nelson TF, Heeren T, et al. Tax policy, adult binge drinking, and youth alcohol consumption in the United States. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* 2013; 37:1713–1719.

Talk and Listen

To start the conversation about alcohol, it is important to understand some of the reasons why people choose to drink alcohol. Some reasons include to be sociable, to relax, to have fun, to avoid problems, relieve anxiety or stress, or to get drunk.

Let children and youth know that you are open to a conversation about alcohol with them and that you want to hear their thoughts. You can bring the topic up in response to a particular situation (e.g., at a family dinner where alcohol is served or in response to seeing people drinking in a movie) or in a more planned way (e.g., at a family meeting).

Here are some conversation tips:

- Be willing to listen at least as much as you talk.
- Try to understand their point of view.
- Keep the discussion going by avoiding lecturing.
- Be concise and objective when explaining the facts about alcohol.
- Become familiar with Canada's Low Risk Drinking Guidelines. A national set of guidelines designed to lower the risk for 25-65 year olds.

- For older youth, explain the difference between drinking within the guidelines, and excessive drinking on a given day or over a long period of time.
- Encourage questions.
- Expect that you'll be asked about your own drinking and experiences.

A relaxed setting and open dialogue with children and youth can make an enormous difference. If they feel comfortable talking to you, you will be better able to guide them in their choices when it comes to drinking. Tell them that they can count on you if they need help. This may be a significant source of support if they experience difficulty. Having these conversations will help your child make sense out of what they see on TV, through social media, in the news, and at school.

Support Healthy Decisions

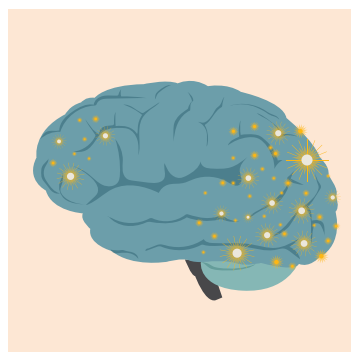
Nurture children and youth by recognizing their strengths and interests. Provide them with opportunities to practice skills that make them feel competent and capable. When they complete a task or activity, take the time to recognize their effort.

Here are some examples of age-appropriate opportunities for practicing skills:

- Consider giving youth the responsibility to babysit their siblings for part of the day or allowing them to prepare family meals or plan special events.
- Consider allowing a young child to take responsibility for feeding and cleaning up after a family pet or helping you to make a meal plan for the week.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the skill of looking at issues and concepts intelligently before you decide what you believe and how you will behave. By looking intelligently, we mean collecting the available information, assessing how valid that information is, and being willing to let go of your preconceptions if you find that they are not consistent with the evidence on that topic.



The development of critical thinking is important as it enables children and youth to take the time to analyze and evaluate ideas, rather than simply accepting them as facts.

The fact that youth are not yet equipped for the best of critical thought means that parents, and trusted adults, play an essential role in helping them to develop those skills and helping to guide them to make good decisions. Community prevention initiatives can help build these skills too. One way to help children and youth make good decisions is to ask them about decisions they have made at school, with friends or when playing a team sport. You could chat about decisions that have come up for them and others their age related to alcohol (e.g., finding left-over alcohol, drinking jokes, offer of alcohol, alcohol marketing, etc).

Use the following steps to lead you through a discussion.

Step 1: Determine the decision.

- What needed to be decided?
- Who was involved in the decision? (Just you? Or other people too?)
- Who was affected by the decision?

Step 2: Find out more about the decision.

- How did you feel about the decision you made?
- How did others feel about it?

Step 3: Talk about the choices.

- What were all the choices available?
- Did you consider all of them?

Step 4: Talk about the pros and cons of each choice.

- What were the advantages and disadvantages of each choice?

Step 5: Talk about the consequences of the choice made.

- What were the results of your decision for yourself? For others?
- Now that the decision has been made, would you have made the same choice?
- Next time you're faced with a similar decision, will you make the same choice?



Peer Influence and the Power of Parent Influence

In early adolescence (and sometimes earlier), youth are influenced more often by their peer group. This does not mean that parents are no longer important, but that there are more and more influences in their youth's life. Communicating with youth at this age can be more difficult because of their need to separate from their parents and forge their own identity.

When we talk about "peer pressure," we usually think of bad influences. But most of the time, other youth will influence your child in ways that are healthy and supportive. Your child can have the same positive influence on others.

Also, when you treat your own friends and your child's friends with respect and warmth, your child will watch you and learn valuable lessons about how to behave toward others. When you accept differences in others, and value individuals who may be seen as eccentric or unusual, your child will also learn to accept and value others. When you don't judge people on the basis of factors like their income, the clothes they wear, their gender, or their cultural background, your child will be more likely to build a diverse, strong and inclusive peer group. Peers may have a lot of influence on a growing maturing youth, but you can be even more influential—just by being yourself.

Practice these strategies with your child so that they feel comfortable saying no. You can act out any number of situations, making them appropriate for your child's age. For example, if your young child has certain neighbourhood areas where they are allowed to play, you could act out a scene where your child says no to a friend who wants them to go outside the boundaries to the corner store. With a youth, you could discuss a situation where they are asked if they would like a drink of alcohol at a party.

1. Saying No Thanks

The first strategy for resisting pressure from friends and acquaintances is a simple "No thanks, I don't want to." Often, that will be the end of the incident. You've made a choice and others should accept your choice.

2. The Broken Record

Sometimes another youth will keep up the pressure, urging you again and again to try it just once. Simply repeat your first answer over and over again. Say, "No thanks, I don't want to" as many times as necessary. Don't explain and don't get upset or try to justify your decision. Simply repeat your answer in a friendly, neutral manner. Eventually, the youth who is putting on the pressure will get tired of hearing your answer and will give up.

3. Reverse the Pressure

If someone is repeatedly nagging at you to do something that you don't want to do, turn the pressure around. Say to that person, "Why do you keep asking me?" This reverses the pressure, forcing the other person to explain the behaviour. It also implies that maybe it's the other person, and not you, who has the problem.

4. Excuse Yourself and Leave

The best way to get out of a tricky situation may be simply to leave. In a friendly tone, just say, "Sorry, I have to leave," and then walk away. You don't have to justify your actions to anyone and you don't have to put up with pressure that makes you uncomfortable.



Rules and Boundaries

Providing rules and boundaries can be a difficult task for parents; providing consequences when rules and boundaries are ignored or broken, even more so. But it is an important aspect of the parent–child relationship. In many situations, our children need someone to tell them where the lines are that they must not cross and that some rules are non-negotiable. Here are a number of suggestions for establishing rules and developing boundaries.

1. Develop clear, reasonable and safe rules, and revise them as your child gets older. Some rules can be made in consultation with your child, but others are non-negotiable.
2. Aim to provide consistent rules with consistent consequences.
3. Establish a range of consequences that will suit different degrees of rule-breaking, and be prepared to negotiate.
4. Try not to let emotions get in the way.
5. Show trust in your children, but also set boundaries. It is okay to say no. Balance monitoring of your children's behaviour with allowing them to develop their independence.
6. Show children how adults also live within boundaries.
(e.g., do not drink and drive)
7. Choose your battles.

Areas for alcohol rules and boundaries may include:

- Whether your children can access the location where alcohol is stored and what is the consequence for accessing this “no go” zone.
- What your youth are expected to do if offered alcohol underage by others, including family, friends and hosts.
- How to handle being offered a ride by an adult who the youth expects has been drinking (at the end of a night of babysitting for them, at a ball field where drinking is occurring informally on truck tailgates).
- Expectation that drinking any amount of alcohol and driving any vehicle is not acceptable (bike, scooter, ATV, boat, personal watercraft, car, motorbike, snowmobile, truck etc); and commit to this as a parent too if you hope for the boundary to be honoured.
- How to handle attending parties where alcohol is present at different ages.
- Encouraging them to delay first use of alcohol. Help them understand alcohol-related risks by addressing things like informed sexual consent, impaired driving, and alcohol-fueled relationship conflicts or violence.

What You Need to Know

Prevalence of Youth Alcohol Use

Alcohol remains the drug with the highest prevalence of use by Canadian students in grades 7 to 12. 39% of Alberta respondents drinking alcohol in the past 12 months. One in every 5 Alberta students (21%) in the survey indicated binge drinking. However, a piece of good news for youth health is that 61% of grade 7-12 students, did not drink alcohol in the past 12 months [Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey (CSTADS) 2018/2019]. Just over half of Canadian students (55%) in grades 7 to 12 indicated that they had not used either alcohol or cannabis in the past 12 months in CSTADS 2018/2019.

NOTE: Psychoactive pharmaceutical drugs used to get high defined in survey.

While the legal age to consume alcohol is 18 years, the average age at which youth in Alberta have their first drink of alcohol that is more than a sip, was 13.3 years. This age is notable because the earlier one starts to drink, the greater the risk of drinking problems in the future.

Adolescent Brain Development

Many parents struggle to comprehend why their youth act impulsively, irrationally, or dangerously on occasion. Youth can exhibit a lack of deliberation and a failure to grasp the implications of their decisions. Youth behave, approach situations, and make decisions differently from adults. This distinction can be explained biologically. According to studies, the brain continues to grow and develop well into early adulthood as well as during childhood and adolescence.

Images of the brain in motion demonstrate how adolescent brains behave when making decisions or solving issues in ways that are different from those of adults. They are less influenced by the deliberate, logical frontal cortex and more by the emotional, receptive amygdala. Additionally, studies have indicated that youth exposure to alcohol and other drugs might alter or postpone these changes.

Due to the stage of their brain development,

youth are **more likely** than adults to:

- act impulsively,
- misinterpret social signs and emotions,
- have accidents of various kinds,
- get into arguments, and
- participate in risky or harmful behavior.

youth are **less likely** than adults to:

- pause to consider the repercussions of their actions,
- think before they act, or
- alter their risky or inappropriate activities.

Youth can still make wise decisions and discern right from wrong despite these brain differences. Additionally, it does not mean they shouldn't be held responsible for their actions. However, being aware of these distinctions can assist parents, educators, advocates, and policy makers comprehend, foresee, and support healthy youth decision-making and behaviour.

"Adolescents may be attracted to risky behavior, like drinking alcohol, at a time when the brain's reward and pleasure system is maximized and their ability to anticipate consequences is still underdeveloped."

Problems may arise with Youth Alcohol Use

Sometimes we hear adults boast about all the fun of their underage drinking with a memory filter that seems to drop off the trade-off's. Not only that, when things go wrong with alcohol use, we don't always share that fact, so harms are hidden or quieted. As a parent or health professional it's important to support the youth in honestly reflecting on the current or very possible effects that can result if they drink alcohol.

The impacts of drinking alcohol as a child or teen may affect many parts of your youth's life. Those around them (parents, siblings, neighbours, teachers and fellow students) may also be affected by the youth. Whether a youth drinks a small amount regularly or binges sporadically they are at risk for negative impacts. Similar to adults, the risk of problems from drinking increases for youth as the volume of alcohol consumed increase per day, per week and per year (see another title in the series, *More Alcohol, More Effects*). If the youth's drinking includes binge drinking five or more standard drinks in a single drinking episode, the chance of experiencing problems is higher.

Early alcohol use:

- Brings increased risk of developing a substance use problem in future years.
- Exposes youth to the cancer-causing effect of alcohol sooner in life.
- May result in legal problems due to underage drinking.
- Increases the likelihood youth will experience:
 - o Alcohol poisoning
 - o Higher rates of absence or lower grades in school
 - o Conflict or fights
 - o Unwanted, unplanned, unprotected sexual activity
 - o Injuries – falls, burns, drownings, broken bones
 - o Physical and/or sexual violence
 - o Alcohol-related motor vehicle collisions
 - o Suicide or homicide
 - o Memory problems

Source: CDC: Underage Drinking (Page last reviewed April 14, 2022)

[Underage Drinking is Dangerous](#)

Safe Storage of Alcohol

Safe storage of alcohol begins the minute you have children and youth living or visiting your home. It's needed with babies, it's needed with teens and all the ages in between. Planning ahead as parents or guardians, or highlighting these practical tips as health professionals in community will make a significant difference in the health of those below the legal drinking age.

1. Lock up all your alcohol (beer, wine, cider, cooler, distilled alcohol) and ensure no minors (your own children or others) know where you store the key. If you are considering a separate fridge to cool beverages, which may include alcohol, purchase one with a lock.
2. Ensure only an adult is allowed to remove alcohol from the fridge or any other storage location.
3. Even adults have been known to grab quickly from the fridge and mix up a sparkling water with a drink containing alcohol. Consider an opaque container in which to store the alcohol, and mark it clearly "For adults only", and store it at the back of the fridge. Keep the amount on hand limited to reduce the risk for youth, and to moderate your own adult use.
4. Be sure there is a shared understanding amongst parents, guardians and hosts that minors do not prepare, or serve alcohol.
 - If you want youth to help support the hosting of the meal or event, welcome them to help with some healthy food preparation.
5. Ensure alcohol out for use at an event is supervised at all times, whether it is in bottles, in a punch, in a decanter, or shot glasses. Choose a specified adult who is aware they have committed to this important role.
6. Empty out leftover alcohol from beer cans, wine glasses or other containers before children or youth come across them. Clean them up frequently not just once at the end of a drinking occasion.
7. To ensure no accidental poisoning, store alcohol-containing cosmetics, mouthwash and cleansers out of sight and reach from children.
8. Handle alcohol safely, and expect that too of licensed restaurants and community events that include children, youth – and alcohol.

Alcohol may accidentally or intentionally be consumed when it is not stored safely or supervised.

Remember young children are very curious and they will swallow just about anything, including alcohol. Their small body weight means their blood alcohol concentration can rise dangerously quickly.

Call 911 if there is a possibility a child has consumed alcohol.

Minimizing Exposure to Alcohol Advertising

Advertisements for alcohol are plentiful. They can be found in sports stadiums, online, on the radio, on streaming music apps, TV and movies. Sometimes they are clearly advertisements and sometimes it is cleverly disguised product placements or use by the characters in a show. Research has shown us the importance of minimizing youth's exposure to alcohol advertising.

Exposure to alcohol marketing causes youth:

- to start drinking earlier,
- to drink more if they are already drinking, and
- to drink at heavy or problematic levels.

The good news is families can build in their own strategies to minimize exposure to alcohol advertising.

1. As a family choose not to use or have in your home alcohol branded promotional material (t-shirts or glassware).
2. Work to minimize the number of alcohol commercials or embedded product placements for alcohol your children experience online, and through radio, television. Practice this approach for yourself first so you realize how often you are "invited" to drink. Step away while the ad plays rather than watching it; put the device on mute so you don't have to hear the messaging. Then think about how you can implement this most effectively in the rhythm of your family.
3. Teach young people about media literacy by deconstructing a few pieces of alcohol advertising with your children or youth as it seems developmentally appropriate. This can help them critically consider the messages and expose hidden assumption and contradictions. Here are a few questions to get you started.
 - Does the ad show a balance between the positives and negatives of alcohol use?
 - What assumptions does the ad make? Does it assume that drinking is fun for everyone when we know from the prevalence of alcohol-related harms that this is not the case?

When Alcohol May be a Problem

If you suspect that a youth is using alcohol problematically or you see a pattern of change in their behaviour that concerns you, talk to them. Tell them you are concerned and explain why. If alcohol or other drug use ends up being the problem, help is available. And remember, as a parent, you can see a counsellor yourself to help you figure things out and find new ways of reaching your teen. Talk to substance use or addiction counsellor, your family physician or the addiction helpline for support as well as advice on programs and resources in your area.

Signs and symptoms that may indicate problematic alcohol use

If your child demonstrates signs and symptoms that suggest problematic alcohol use, be aware of other possible explanations and avoid jumping to conclusions. A combination of several of the following signs is a good indication that something is wrong. If you observe several of the following signs, consider taking your child to see a medical doctor or counsellor.

At home:

- changes in sleeping and eating patterns: insomnia, napping at inappropriate times, fatigue, sudden increase or decrease in appetite
- changes in physical appearance: red or watery eyes, pupils dilated or constricted; runny or irritated nose; coughing; headaches; slurred speech; less care given to grooming; weight loss
- significantly increased use of strong cologne, mouthwash or eye drops
- changes in emotions and behaviour: moodiness, depression, hostility, hypersensitivity, lying, secretiveness, giggling for no apparent reason
- difficulty following instructions or concentrating, showing confusion
- avoiding contact with you: going straight to their room or the bathroom when arriving home
- excessive secrecy or "guarded" behaviour (e.g., always leaving the room to take calls on their cell phone or quickly shutting down e-mail or instant message accounts when you enter the room)

School, friends and extracurricular activities

- changes in school performance: lower grades, lateness, absenteeism, discipline problems
- loss of interest in sports, hobbies and activities that they previously enjoyed
- presence of new or different friends, including friends who are reluctant to meet parents
- requests for more spending money

Conclusion

We understand that everyone's needs are different. Whether you want to encourage your youth to not use alcohol (or other drugs), or promote health and prevent alcohol-related harms before they happen to youth in your community, or you want to help your child or youth deal with an alcohol or other drug problem, we can help. Information and prevention services, detoxification, outpatient and residential treatment, and the Protection of Children Abusing Drugs program are offered by Alberta Health Services and its funded services to help your child and your family.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you,
call the Addiction Helpline at **1-866-332-2322**.
It's free, confidential and **available 24 hours a day**.

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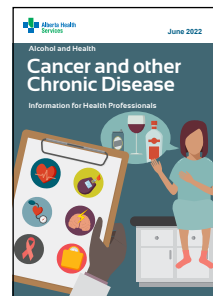
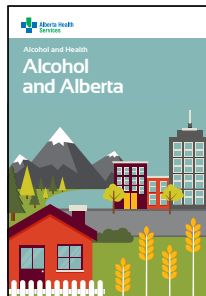
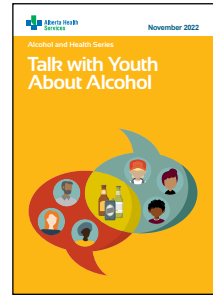
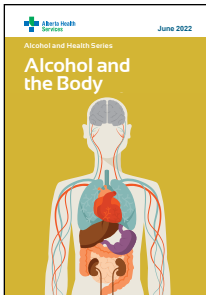
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Explore the AHS Alcohol and Health Series



More information means informed decisions

Well informed health professionals and communities will be more aware of the impacts of alcohol on their health and the health of those around them. This awareness provides the opportunity for upstream conversations on how to prevent or reduce alcohol-related harms.

The Alcohol and Health Series is available digitally and in print.

[Alcohol & Health Series | Alberta Health Services](#) (digital download)

Allied health professionals should contact their local AHS Addiction and Mental Health office to access print copies.

Notes

Alberta Health Services offers a wide range of addiction and mental health services.

For individuals looking for help for someone they care about, or for themselves the Addiction Helpline and the Mental Health Helpline are available.

Addiction Helpline
1-866-332-2322

Mental Health Helpline
1-877-303-2642

Both helplines are free, confidential and available 24 hours a day.



**Alberta Health
Services**