

## Teenagers, Alcohol and their need for Boundaries

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*This is a current and constantly relevant topic as teenagers are encountering alcohol more and more freely in their environment. Below is some information and a few ideas in helping you as parents think about your position and response to this challenging aspect of adolescent behaviour. The information has been drawn from a number of sources with a few interesting websites noted at the end.*

### **ALCOHOL STATISTICS AND THE LAW**

#### **Teenagers are Drinking!**

A survey was recently done by an ex-teacher of this school for his Psychology Honours project where his focus was on comparing parent's and their son's views on how much teenagers drink. His findings were that teenagers are drinking alcohol, their parents were reasonably accurate in predicting how much their sons drink, and that parents believed that teenagers in general drink much more than their sons. Although there were some limitations to the study which could have resulted in boys under reporting how much they actually drink, what I took away from it was that drinking alcohol as a teenager happens, parents often know about it and that they are worried it will be getting worse.

A great deal of research has been conducted in South Africa into adolescence and its associated risky behaviours and an area of concern that is emerging is the increasing use and abuse of substances by teenagers. A recent study suggested that alcohol is the substance most widely used and abused amongst teenagers (Mash & Wolfe, 2010). Another study by Parry, Myers, Morojele, Flisher, Bhana, Donson and Plüddemann (2004) noted what they termed "high levels of alcohol misuse" among high school students. In 2002 the Youth Risk Behaviour Survey (which is a comprehensive survey that makes for scary reading) was conducted by the Medical Research Council and it indicated that 32% of South African high school students had drunk alcohol within the previous month. Their sample was of about 10 000 students and it was looking specifically at teenagers younger than 18 years. This means that ten out of every class of thirty high school students had consumed some form of alcohol in the last month.

They did the survey again in 2008 and that figure had risen nationally to 34%. An interesting piece of information is that the Western Cape high school students were the highest at 53%. A further statistic

they were able to generate was the variation amongst race groups and they found that of the Western Cape sample the group that drank the most were the white teenagers.

They also looked at Binge Drinking which they defined as five or more drinks within a few hours. In 2002 nationally the figure was 23%. One in four teenagers had engaged in binge drinking within the past month. In 2008, this figure rose to 28.5%, so more binge drinking is happening and here again the Western Cape came out on top with 41%. That is a remarkably high number of our teenagers who are drinking with the intention of becoming completely drunk.

It is easy to think that these do not apply to your son and that you know what and where he is drinking and you may well be right but it is certainly worth thinking about that somewhere in the Western Cape there are 15 out of every class of 30 learners who have consumed alcohol within the past month, and that 13 of those have done so to get completely drunk. If we are to accept that it is happening (and it clearly is) then it becomes important as parents to be thinking about what you are doing to help your son stay on the right side of the law.

### **Western Cape Liquor Bill, Section 39**

This states that:

- No person may sell liquor to a person under the age of eighteen.
- No person may give or supply alcohol to a person under the age of eighteen - or allow such a person to consume alcohol *unless in negligible quantities and in the presence of their parents or guardians.*

Reading this without legal advice it seems to say that the only way a child may be legally allowed to drink alcohol under the age of 18 years is in the presence of their parents. "Negligible quantities" one can assume means: not enough to impair their immediate functioning. In fact there is another point later in the bill which states that a parent who allows their child to abuse alcohol (get drunk) can be prosecuted for child abuse or child neglect. The law therefore seems pretty clear that if your son under the age of 18 years he is not allowed to drink alcohol, unless with your permission, and never enough that he is drunk. **It is illegal for under 18's to get drunk** and if he is caught you as the parent are held responsible.

This is a debate that has been raging for a very long time and I came across an article on Parent24 (online news site) about teenage drinking and there were in excess of 50 comments left at the end of it with each one presenting their own view and perspective of managing this aspect of teenage behaviour. In reading through them I was disappointed to find that here were no clear and solid positions that I could pull out and say this is the definitive answer. "Should I allow my teenager to drink" is one of those questions that you as a parent need to answer for yourself and in such a way that you feel peaceful and confident enough to enforce this position. What continues below is information to help inform your decision.

## Alcohol in your Child's World

It is not new that teenagers are drinking alcohol but the research we saw above suggests that the patterns of teenage drinking are changing. They are starting younger; there is a growing proportion of children between 11 -15 years old who drink alcohol. The amounts are increasing; they are no longer testing or experimenting but rather drinking with the intention of getting drunk. Five or more drinks within a few hours is a lot of alcohol.

There is also a change in attitude towards adolescent drinking. It seems that teenagers are less concerned now about the risks of alcohol consumption (although they are generally not good at thinking of the risks) and it is increasingly believed that being intoxicated is acceptable. Parents are also feeling less concerned about the effects of alcohol on their children, they don't see it as necessarily harmful or dangerous and are often complicit in providing alcohol for their children. An American survey done by the National Centre on Addiction and Substance Abuse (2006) and it was found that 80% of parents of teenagers agreed it was normal for their children to be underage consumers of alcohol.

## BRAIN, RISKS AND WHY

### Neurological Effects of Alcohol

The teenage brain is vulnerable. It is undergoing important developments and in so doing acquiring the capacity for abstract thought, the ability to hold various points of view in mind simultaneously, and reason and solve complex problems. Their brain continues to grow and develop right throughout their teens and into their early 20's. It is therefore highly vulnerable to insults of various kinds including drug use, head injuries, poor nutrition and alcohol.

The effects of ongoing alcohol use during this period are:

- **Decreased concentration** and an inability to maintain focus, hold their attention and avoid distractions.
- **Long term memory impairments** so they have more difficulty in learning new material and then also recalling information they have learnt in the past
- **Working memory impairments.** This is the brains ability to hold and work with information in order to complete the complex tasks of problem solving, reasoning and comprehension. Mental maths is a good example of using your working memory, or giving directions to someone.
- **Decline in academic achievement.** Perhaps obvious if all these other things are happening but something that is of concern is that it does not improve once the drinking stops. If damage is done during this period of growth the impact is lasting.

Interestingly enough they also found that teenagers are less susceptible than adults to some of the effects of alcohol, such as:

- Alcohol induced sedation
- Balance disturbances

- Motor-co-ordination impairments

This makes it much more difficult to tell if they have been drinking simply by looking at them and they can mask the quantity of alcohol they have consumed. It also makes teenagers assume that they have a higher alcohol tolerance and therefore drink more.

### Risks Increase with Alcohol

**Alcoholism:** If you started drinking before the age of 15 years you are four times more likely to develop alcoholism. This is perhaps logical that adults who have a dependence on alcohol are likely to have drunk a lot as teenagers, however, one of the factors that contribute to this is that teens will use alcohol as a means to feel more confident and sociable. The result of this is that if used frequently alcohol has a negative effect on their social and emotional development as they do not learn how to cope without it. Teenagers who drink a lot therefore enter adulthood with deficits in these areas and are then less equipped to meet the demands adult life.

**Crime and Violence:** Teenagers are significantly more likely to find themselves in situations that put them at risk of falling victim to acts of violence, crime or sexual assault. Impaired judgement, poor impulse control mean that they can far more easily find themselves in harm's way or in situations they would normally have avoided. Their judgement is also impaired and therefore could find themselves doing something they regret and facing criminal charges. Getting into fights and accidents happen far more easily when under the influence of alcohol and one of the leading causes of death for 15-20 years is alcohol related car accidents which includes pedestrian accidents where they stumble or fall into the road.

**Suicide:** Alcohol can often be used as an effort to try and cope with depression and stress and yet in the long run tends to only make it worse. The loss of inhibitions as well as increased impulsivity contributes to suicidal behaviour and ends up making it more likely that they will be successful in their attempts.

**Risky sexual behaviours:** Adolescents who drink are more likely to be sexually active and alcohol is also associated with high risk sexual behaviour which increases the risk of pregnancy, sexually assault and sexually transmitted diseases.

### Why do Teenagers Drink?

**It is fun and everyone is doing it:** Teenagers are astute observers and have been for a long time. They observe and learn all the time and society and the media offer powerful messages of the coolness and desirability of alcohol. It always seems that you have more fun when drinks are included. They also see other teenagers doing it and will quite understandably ask, "What's so bad about it?"

**It makes me feel better:** Teenagers have a tough time at the best of times where there are lots of changes and increased expectations. Friends always look like they are doing so much better than you are and socially girls are fast becoming all that matters. They often feel ill-equipped to cope and useless

at it most of the time. Alcohol is a pretty easy way to get away from those not so great feelings and feel better about themselves and feel more able to talk to girls and develop relationships. Alcohol is also a powerful anxiolytic drug that reduces symptoms of stress and anxiety. Teenagers with undiagnosed or unmanaged anxiety or depression symptoms are more at risk of using alcohol as a way to manage their painful feelings. It is also instantaneous (teens want things *now*) and this works fast and does wonders to help them feel more confident. There is a lot going on for teenagers and alcohol can very easily help them to feel more in control and alive, rather than stressed and isolated.

**Parental cues:** The example parents set for their children is a powerful force in moulding their behaviours. The way you as parents drink and engage with alcohol is one of the ways your children will think about and act towards drinking themselves. Parents who minimise or deny their own use or abuse of alcohol set a tone that their children will notice and consider in their own situations. Another aspect to this is the emotional tone of the home. Conflict-filled and hostile family environments increase the teens stress levels which in turn increases their risk of turning to alcohol as a way out.

**Rebellion:** Parents and teenagers often have a love-hate relationship towards each other. Parents and their sons bump heads, argue and disagree a lot of the time. This is often at its most vehement when it comes to social occasions and spending time with friends and away from their parents. Teenagers often feel really angry and irritated towards their parents who are holding them back and treating them like children. Having a drink becomes a very fun and rewarding way to defy their parents and act out the anger they feel about being bossed around.

**They are also testing themselves:** They are on their way to being a grown up and are having to learn all that is required to live like a grown up. There is therefore something highly enticing about drinking which is so easily associated with adult life. There is a strong pull towards testing pushing the limits and drinking allows them to do this. They are excited about the opportunity of trying on the adult hat and will think, "Yes I am not 18 but quite frankly I feel 18, so what's the fuss?!"

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

### Why Teenagers Need Boundaries

**They need guidance:** They are testing themselves but they do not possess all the tools. They are trying to be all grown up and they believe that they are but in fact you as parents know that they are not. There is a lot they still do not understand about life. They are not the all-knowing, all-powerful super heroes that they are trying to convince you that they are. They need help along the way.

**Manage the risks:** There are risks involved and as parents it is your responsibility to manage these risks. Teenagers spend very little time if any thinking things through and they certainly don't work too hard to assess the dangers or risks associated with their choices or course of action. There are risks and dangers

which become even more dangerous when they are drinking and under the influence of alcohol. As their parents they need you to step in and manage these risks where you can. It doesn't mean keeping them locked up and chaperoning their every move. But it does mean keeping tabs on their whereabouts and their environment.

**It feels safer:** They need to push the limits and will seek those out. Teenagers are not all that confident a lot of the time and a way that they can feel more secure is knowing how secure they are in their parent's arms. They are trying to be more independent which means pushing out further and further. Yet it is scary and daunting and what helps them is knowing there is only so far they can push before they get stopped. Children who don't encounter limits will push and push until they eventually find them, sadly for some they only really find that in the bars of a jail cell.

**Choices mean learning:** They are learning to be an adult and do not think things through all that much generally. If they have boundaries in place and clear expectations of them they are given choices. They have the choice to either listen to their parents, or to not and come to their own decision and course of action. It is the results of these choices that has the greatest impact and offers them the chance to learn and develop themselves.

### Setting Your Boundaries

**They must be yours:** You need to believe in the boundaries you set and see the value of them because they are going to be challenged and severely. You cannot be half hearted about them or undecided. Be clear for yourself of what it is and why it is. Also it is better not to do it alone, consult other adults or parents, it will help you feel more certain about the lines you are drawing.

**Less is more:** Having a few "non-negotiables" rather than a list of "these would be nice" is far more likely to hold firm against the flood. They need to be simple and crystal clear and leave as little space as possible for interpretation or confusion. This helps your son to know what to do and helps you relax and know where the line is drawn.

**Consult your teenager:** Do this only once you have your plan and suggestions. Bringing your son in and then allowing a bit of space to negotiate the finer details will do wonders in getting his buy in and cooperation.

**Review and revisit them:** Things change constantly in your child's life, each term is different. So take time to review and revisit what is happening and what you expect from him. Asking your sons input on how well the rules are working is both a useful learning experience and a way of keeping him on board.

**They are choices:** To you it is a rule and an expectation that is in place to protect and nurture the well-being of your son. To him it is, and can only be, a choice. He *chooses* to follow or deviate and it is for this reason that consequences are as important as the boundaries.

## Consequences

**Need to fit the crime:** Their intention is to help the teenager learn from their mistakes, not punish them into oblivion and be racked by guilt and regret. But it must also make an impact and create the chance to think.

**Keep your emotions out of it:** It is not a personal insult and challenge to your integrity if they break your rules; it is because they are teenagers testing things for themselves. If you are able to not get emotionally caught up in the event but rather treat it in a matter of fact way it allows the child to be more open to learn from it rather than battling their way through the complicated arena of anger, disappointment and resentment.

**Mutually agreed upon:** Having your sons input on the consequences you set up helps ensure that they will have the desired effect and increases the likelihood that he will stick to them too. Your teenager may surprise you.

**Stick to them:** Giving in and not following through only decreases your credibility as a reliable and sturdy force. If they are able to wangle their way out of things through keen argument and cunning wit then well done to them, but you are losing strength you really need in your efforts to manage their behaviours and will be in a weaker position in future. Pick your battles and then win.

**Chance to rebuild:** Allow them the opportunity to lighten a consequence. You are trying to stop bad behaviours, however, you can also be making efforts to develop good ones. By giving them the chance to build back some freedom by meeting some expectations you are also reinforcing positive behaviours which is very valuable in their development.

## SOME PARTY RULES

### Parties and Social Gatherings

These are great fun and a very important part of your son's social development. They can also be relatively safe provided sufficient planning takes place around them.

- **Contact the parents** hosting the party to check the facts and this also builds trust between families and protects all involved.
- Talk to your child about **your expectations and the consequences** of not living up to them.
- Don't give your child large quantities of **cash**.
- Make it clear that they can **under no circumstances leave the party** without getting your express permission.
- You (or a trusted adult) should **pick them up at an agreed time** – but they should also know that they can call you any time if they need to leave.

- **Sleepovers are not advisable** unless you have reason to trust the host family completely.
- **Be awake when your children return home** – or get them to wake you and have a brief conversation with them.

### Hosting a Party

- Keep party at a manageable **size** – ensure there is a workable child adult ratio.
- **Agree to guidelines** with your son as to how the party will progress – including start and end times.
- Agree to which **parts of the house or garden can be used for the party**
- **Be a visible presence at all times**
- **Be aware of people who leave and return**
- **Secure your own alcohol supply**
- **Provide lots of food** and encourage them to eat it.
- **Agree an invitation list** before the party starts and resist late additions and especially gate crashers
- For larger parties **provide security** at the gate and to control the perimeter.
- **Ban, take in or search bags**
- **Your responsibility only ends once the child is collected.**

### Conclusion

We know **teenagers are drinking** – and perhaps more than we realise. We will not change that. In the same way we cannot change **adolescents from needing to push the boundaries** in order to understand their capacities and limitations. So as parents all you can do is **manage the risk** (by being there, notice if it happens, talking about it, and following through with the consequences). Make **rules that define the space** in which they can be thoughtless or rebellious. And when they break the rules (and they will) don't feel bad or upset because they need to make mistakes and it is the **consequences** that offer them the chance to learn. They will be irritated and angry with you and that is ok. The reality is you cannot control your teenager and to do so would be significantly detrimental to his development. What you can and should hope to do is to **make them think**. If you can achieve that it is a big step in the right direction.

## Useful Resources Used in this Presentation

- **Youth Risk Behaviour Survey**
  - **2002** (facts) - <http://www.mrc.ac.za//public/facts26.htm>
  - **2008** (full pdf) - [http://www.mrc.ac.za/healthpromotion/yrbs\\_2008\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://www.mrc.ac.za/healthpromotion/yrbs_2008_final_report.pdf)
- **Parent 24** - [http://www.parent24.com/Teen\\_13-18/Development\\_Behaviour](http://www.parent24.com/Teen_13-18/Development_Behaviour)
- **Industry Association for Responsible Alcohol Use** - <http://ara.co.za/viewpoints/our-view>
- **Recovery Matters** - <http://www.recoverymatters.co.za/pages/1578/teens-and-alcohol>
- **Anne Caywood** – Teenagers need Boundaries
- **Dan Kindlon, Michael Thompson** - Raising cain

*This is a general overview of the challenges facing parents with regards to Alcohol and their Teenagers as presented to the parents of Rondebosch boys in August 2010. It is intended to be used as a resource for parents in thinking about this aspect of their teenager's life and behaviours and should not be reproduced without permission. For further information contact:*

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