

# Responding to your teen's alcohol use



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**It's already one o'clock in the morning when your 16-year-old daughter finally arrives home. Smelling like alcohol, she stumbles through the doorway and has trouble getting her shoes off. Before you can even ask her where she's been and why she's an hour past her curfew, she mumbles something about having to be sick...**

Finding out your teen has been drinking can be a real shock. And seeing your child intoxicated to the point of throwing up or passing out may bring on more than just dismay and disillusionment—it may be downright scary. Not only do you have the immediate concern of alcohol poisoning to deal with, there is also the swirl of emotional and social questions to manage. You might start wondering if your teen has a drinking problem. Or, you might get angry and start pointing fingers at the people you think are responsible for your child's sorry state of being. You might blame your teen's friends for being a bad influence, or your own child for not turning down offers of beer and other libations. You might even blame yourself for not being strict enough—or for being too strict—in laying down family rules and expectations.

As a parent of a teen, you need to recognize that, despite your best intentions, your child will probably make some choices that are not consistent with what you've tried to teach them. But instead of lashing out at your kids the moment they mess up, you might want to consider this: while most teens try alcohol, few develop full-blown drinking problems. Also worth remembering is the fact that what your teen needs most during this time of risk-taking and experimentation is your support.



# The best way for you to deal with a teen who has been drinking is to respond responsibly

**Stay calm.** While you may be furious with your teen, responding in anger will not help your situation. What's more, if intoxicated, your teen won't be in any condition to have a meaningful discussion with you anyway. Try to find solace in the fact that your child is at home with you and safe.

**Monitor your teen's condition.** Try to find out how much alcohol your teen has consumed. If they've only had a few drinks and seem reasonably coherent, send them off to bed. (You can check up on your child periodically, if necessary.) If your teen is clearly impaired, help them into bed. Make sure your teen sleeps on their side—by lying on their backs, they run the risk of throwing up in their sleep and then choking—and keep an eye on them during the night to ensure they don't roll over. If at any point you believe your child is in danger, call for medical help.

**Talk when your teen is sober.** Discussing your teen's drinking when the alcohol has worn off—and when you've had a chance to sleep off your frustration—will increase your chances of having your concerns heard and understood.

**Learn about your teen's drinking.** Talk to your teen about why they were drinking, where they got their alcohol, and how often they've indulged in the past. Learn as much as you can about their understanding and beliefs about alcohol, and about how drinking makes them feel. Find out if they're drinking because they like the buzz, or because they have no reason not to drink, such as a goal that would conflict with substance use.

**Share your concerns.** Tell your teen how you feel about their drinking, whether it's related to their breaking of house rules, or concerns for their safety, or both. Explain what it is about their drinking that scares you, and provide them with facts about alcohol and its effects on the body.

**Determine the consequences.** If you have a family plan that addresses alcohol use and your teen, you may have already determined the fall-out for their using alcohol. If not, you may want to take this time to discuss the issue of consequences and explain why and how you plan to implement some household guidelines on substance use. Your guidelines should outline what your teen can expect as consequences for any future experimentation with drinking. For example, they might lose privileges with the family car, or have to do extra chores around the house.

**Discuss alternative choices.** If your teen is drinking because they like the buzz, suggest activities that will naturally boost their adrenaline levels, such as rock climbing or mountain biking. Having a cool goal that conflict with substance use, such as a skateboarding competition, may make alcohol use less attractive to your teen.

**Seek help.** Not every parent is equipped to handle substance use issues on their own. If you need help understanding or communicating with your teen, look for local resources and organizations that can assist you. You could try talking to a school counsellor or your family doctor. You could also contact your regional Health Authority for assistance, or call the toll-free Alcohol & Drug Information & Referral Service at 1-800-663-1441.

**A teen's experimentation with alcohol is not the end of the world.  
In fact, the experience can teach you a few important lessons as a parent:**

- 1 Keep the lines of communication open.** By successfully talking through this experience, you make yourself more available to your teen. As a result, your teen will be more likely to bring other issues to your attention in the future.
- 2 Assess your supervision level.** It will not help either one of you if you suddenly decide to monitor your child's every move. Teens need to have opportunities to make good decisions and demonstrate trustworthy behaviour. That said, you may want to keep a closer eye on where they are and who they're with.
- 3 Educate yourself.** If you haven't thought much about substance use before this point, now is the time to become more knowledgeable about teens and their use of alcohol and other drugs. Learn about risk and protective factors to increase your chances of raising a happy, healthy teen. You can start by reading the information available at [www.silink.ca](http://www.silink.ca).

# ABCs of Alcohol

**Alcohol is a depressant drug that slows down your central nervous system. One or two drinks can create a feeling of well-being, while moderate amounts can cause drowsiness, induce sleep, and relieve pain. Heavy drinking impairs your thinking, judgment, motor skills, and ability to estimate distances.**

**Alcohol is the most widely-used substance among teenagers.** In British Columbia, 33% of 13-year-olds have tried alcohol. Canada-wide, 62% of 15- to 17-year-olds and 91% of youth aged 18 and 19 have used alcohol in the past year.

**Some teenagers drink to relieve the pressures of home life and school.** Others want to fit in with their friends. Still others seek out the “high” that comes as a result of consuming large amounts of alcohol in a short period of time.

**Among Canadian teens,** 46% of males and 43% of females who have tried alcohol reported drinking large amounts of alcohol in a short period of time during the last month.

**Alcohol affects teens differently than it does adults.** While teens may sometimes look or act like adults, they are in fact still developing physically, mentally, and emotionally.

**For health and safety reasons,** teens between 16 and 18 years old shouldn't drink more than one drink per hour, and they shouldn't consume more than three drinks in one evening. Teens 15 and under shouldn't drink at all. (Legally, teenagers can only drink in the confines of their family home.)

**Substance use problems of all types** are most common among people who feel isolated or marginalized. Kids without connections or meaningful relationships in their lives tend to seek solace in alcohol and other “feel-good” substances.

**The younger a person begins using alcohol,** the greater their chances of developing an alcohol or drug problem later on in life.

**Studies show there is a link between early alcohol use and criminal activity.** What's more, young drinkers are more likely to have unsafe sex, and they tend to be involved in more accidents and violent situations.

**Approximately 40% of Canadian teens** killed in motor vehicle accidents every year have alcohol in their systems.

**Consuming alcohol in combination with other drugs,** including over-the-counter or prescription medications, is dangerous and can lead to overdose and death.

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[www.silink.ca](http://www.silink.ca)

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[www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)

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