



Institiúid na gComhairleoirí Treorach
INSTITUTE OF GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS

***SHARING
EXPERIENCES &
SUGGESTIONS
AROUND
ALCOHOL &
SUBSTANCE ABUSE***

***A COLLABORATIVE GUIDE
FOR PARENTS***

***The
Institute
Of
Guidance
Counsellors***



Institiúid na gComhairleoirí Treorach
INSTITUTE OF GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
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NAPD

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*National
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POSTPRIMARY



Sharing Experiences And Suggestions Around Alcohol & Substance Abuse
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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a stage in a person's life between childhood and adulthood. It is when a young person must move from dependency to independence, autonomy, and maturity. The young person - while still being part of a family unit - moves to become part of a peer group and eventually to standing alone as an adult.¹ This is part of the normal human developmental process. However, it is also a journey that brings much-discussed challenges, among which are the risks of alcohol and substance abuse.

Best practice has found that substance abuse education programmes should give priority to behavioural, rather than knowledge or attitudinal, outcomes and that adding community elements, and specific family oriented programmes, can enhance the effectiveness of such programmes.² With this in mind, this booklet aims to provide assistance to parents by outlining the views of experts in the field of adolescent development, and by sharing the lessons learned by parents, teachers, and teenagers from the various schools participating in this initiative. The booklet does not pretend to have all the answers; indeed, if a perfect solution were known, we would all be using it!

It is worth remembering that the vast majority of teenagers will develop into fine healthy independent adults. As the journey that is adolescence progresses, there will inevitably be bumps along the road. The cautionary notes made in this booklet are designed to reduce the severity of these bumps, and to minimise the chances of these bumps having a lasting impact on either your son's or daughter's ability to live an independent life, or on your long term relationship with him/her.

2. The Dangers

2.1 Alcohol

Ideally, as teenagers develop, their confidence and competence increase in parallel. However, when drink is taken, a teenager's confidence may temporarily be boosted ahead of his/her competence.³ This mismatch, whereby the teen's confidence gets ahead of his/her competence, can often result in a feeling of indestructibility. When this occurs, it generally results in a teenager being more likely to take part in risky behaviour. This is why one of the most important things that you can do as a parent is to support your teenager to **delay your child's drinking alcohol for as long as possible**. If you do this, it is generally accepted that the risks of harmful drinking in later life are greatly diminished.⁴

¹ K. Geldard & D. Geldard, *Counselling Adolescents*, 2nd ed., (London: Sage Publications 2006) p 3.

² Pauline Clerkin, *Development of Parents' Resource Manual Booklet to equip parents to provide early and appropriate responses to young people's substance use*. Dublin 2008, p 15 - 16.

³ Dr. Bobby Smyth, Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, *Preventing Drug & Alcohol Problems in Teenagers - What Parents Can Do*. Lecture, Lucena Clinic 6th Oct. 2009.

⁴ *Straight Talk - A Guide For Parents on Teenage Drinking*, Health Promotion Unit, H.S.E.

It is a reality that secondary school teenagers will encounter multiple opportunities to drink alcohol. We are all aware of the impact alcohol consumption has had on Irish society. Here are some points to note.⁵

- Early alcohol consumption is associated with an increased likelihood of developing alcohol abuse or dependence later in life - research shows that people who drink before they turn 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependency than those who start drinking at the age of 21.
- A national study involving 2,500 patients in six major hospitals across the country found that over one in four (28%) of all injury attendances in the A&E departments were alcohol related.
- In a survey conducted in 40 Galway secondary schools, 35% of teenagers claimed that alcohol was a contributory factor in reported first sexual intercourse, and drugs in 9% of cases.⁶
- Between 1990 and 2006 there were a total of 7,078 people killed on the roads, of which 2,462 were alcohol related.
- Alcohol has been identified as a contributory factor in a large number of public order offences.
- In a national survey, almost half (44%) of all respondents had experienced harm by their own, or someone else's, use of alcohol.
- Other studies show that 1 in 10 young people who have drunk alcohol have ended up in trouble with the police.⁷
- Early onset of drinking was linked to increased risk of heavy drinking in middle age.⁸
- About 20% of 12-14 year olds boys are current drinkers.
- 50% of 15-16 year old girls and boys have had a drink in the past month.
- Teenage drinkers are 11 times more likely to suffer unintentional injury.⁹

2.2 Cannabis

2.2.1 Alcohol As Gateway

The vast majority of those who take drugs already drink alcohol.¹⁰ Usually, it is either alcohol or tobacco that is the first drug with which teenagers engage. Unfortunately, for the teenager, they are often a gateway to marijuana and then to so called harder drugs.¹¹ In other words, young people who try one substance are more likely to move along the sequence to the next substance,¹² compared to those who have not tried any substance. Therefore, alcohol may be regarded as being central to the drugs problem and may also, with reference to teenagers, be regarded as a gateway to other self-harming behaviour.

⁵ *Straight Talk - A Guide For Parents on Teenage Drinking*, Health Promotion Unit, H.S.E.

⁶ Emer Mac, *Sex, Drugs and Alcohol: A Study of Teenage Behaviour in Galway City & County Secondary Schools* (1994).

⁷ *You, Your Child and Alcohol*, Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland.

⁸ John W. Santrock, *Adolescence*, 10th ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005) p 457.

⁹ Professor Joe Barry, Medical Adviser to the National Drugs Strategy Team.

¹⁰ Dr. Bobby Smyth, Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, Lucena Clinic 6th Oct. 2009.

¹¹ Daniel Romer, *Reducing Adolescent Risk*, (London: Sage Publications, 2003) p 58.

¹² Jeffrey Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 3rd ed., (London: Prentice Hall, 2009) p 424.

2.2.2 Attitudes Towards Cannabis

A considerable number of teenagers fail to recognize the dangers in smoking cannabis. Indeed, talking to 18 year olds, it is quite amazing to find - among some teenagers - a culture that seems to accept the smoking of cannabis as a very normal activity and to regard it as a relatively safe drug.¹³ Therefore, it is essential that it is to educate teenagers concerning the dangers of this drug. The medical journal, *The Lancet*,¹⁴ highlights the following effects associated with the use of cannabis:

- Anxiety and panic attacks, impaired attention, memory, and psychomotor performance while under the influence of cannabis.
- Possible increase risk of accident if a person drives a motor vehicle while under the influence of cannabis, especially if cannabis is used with alcohol.
- Increased risk of psychotic symptoms among those who are vulnerable because of personal or family history of psychosis.
- A cannabis dependence syndrome characterized by an inability to abstain from or to control cannabis use.
- Subtle impairments of attention and memory that persist while the user remains under the influence may or may not be reversible after prolonged use.
- Impaired educational attainment in adolescents and underachievement in adults in occupations requiring high-level cognitive skills.
- Adolescents with a history of poor school performance, who initiate cannabis use in the early teens, are at increased risk of using other illicit drugs.
- People with asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, schizophrenia, and alcohol and other drug dependence, can have their symptoms exacerbated by cannabis use.
- By the age of thirteen 7% of teens have smoked hash and by sixteen this rises to 20%.

Further evidence is highlighted in various editions of the *British Medical Journal*, which found the following:^{15 & 16}

- Weekly or more frequent cannabis use in teenagers resulted in an approximately twofold increase in risk for later depression and anxiety.
- A tenth of the cannabis users surveyed in the sample (by age 15) had developed schizophrenia disorder by age 26.
- The youngest cannabis users may be most at risk because their cannabis use becomes longstanding.
- The strongest evidence that cannabis use may be a risk factor for later psychosis comes from a Swedish cohort study, which found that heavy cannabis use at age 18 increased the risk of later schizophrenia six-fold.
- A physical dependence is the physical need for a drug that is accompanied by unpleasant withdrawal symptoms when the drug is discontinued.
- If there is not a physical addiction there may be a psychological addiction. Psychological dependence is the strong desire and craving to repeat the use of a drug for various emotional reasons; such as providing a feeling of well-being, or the drug's ability to reduce stress.¹⁷

¹³ *Know The Facts About Drugs*, Health Promotion Unit, H.S.E.

¹⁴ *The Lancet, Adverse Effects of Cannabis*, 1998.

¹⁵ *The British Medical Journal, Cannabis Use and Mental Health in Young People*.

¹⁶ *The British Medical Journal, Cannabis Use In Adolescence And The Risk For Adult Psychosis*. 2002.

¹⁷ John W. Santrock, *Adolescence*, 10th ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005) p 447.

2.3 Psychoactive Substances

Psychoactive substances are those substances we associated with the now banned 'Head Shops'. As the products available are constantly changing it is very difficult trying to keep up with new developments and substances. Current details, including pictures of the up to date substances, can be found on www.drugs.ie.

The following points are worth noting.

- Since the banning of these Head Shops the products are still available from dealers who sell the more traditional drugs.
- Some of the products are available on the internet. Therefore, it might be useful to be vigilant to packages arriving at your home addressed to your teenager, or to one of their friends, or addressed to a name you do not recognise.
- Some of these products are used as alternatives to ecstasy, cannabis, and cocaine.
- People who use the substances may do so because they have no connections that would allow them to obtain these substances through the usual sources.
- Some products available are cheaper than other types of drugs.
- Some products also give a greater *high* than other types of drugs.
- Despite the banning of some products parents still need to be alert to other products replacing those that may be banned.
- Finally, the focus of parents should be on prevention rather than trying to keep up with the constantly changing details of the substances available.

2.4 Solvent Abuse

One other area of substance abuse is the use of everyday solvents. This problem should not be seen as being confined to any one socio-economic group, as it affects all groups in society. Some points to note are as follows:

- There have been 30 deaths, mostly teenagers, from inhalation of volatile substances between 1998 and 2005.¹⁸
- The majority of users are teenage boys and girls who are still in school.
- Girls are marginally more likely to use them than boys.
- Common substances used are: glues, paint thinner, nail varnish remover, lighter fuels, and aerosol/deodorants.¹⁹
- Risks include death from inhalation of vomit or from an irregular heartbeat.
- Solvents can cause acute kidney, liver, and brain damage.
- These risks are more associated with individual susceptibility rather than the amount inhaled.²⁰
- Signs of solvent abuse include:²¹
 - Strong smells of aerosols or petrol.
 - An unusual amount of used aerosols or plastic bags.
 - A user appearing drunk for a short time.
 - Evidence of glue on clothing, hands, or face.
 - Glue sniffers rash - similar to acne - around the mouth.

¹⁸ www.irishmedicalnews.com

¹⁹ www.additionireland.com

²⁰ www.irishhealth.com

²¹ www.drugs.ie

3. What Can Parents Do?

From all of the above, it would initially seem that parents have to worry about all of the following; alcohol, cannabis, psychoactive substances, solvents, and other harder drugs. Is this the case? Consider the following. It can be argued that those that have developed a problem with cannabis started off by drinking and those that have a problem with psychoactive drugs or solvents also started off by drinking. Those that have a problem with harder drugs started off on cannabis and/or psychoactive drugs, and before that, started off by drinking. How many tee-total drug addicts have you seen? If this analysis is accurate, and if we can control teenage drinking, we minimise the chances of the situation getting worse.

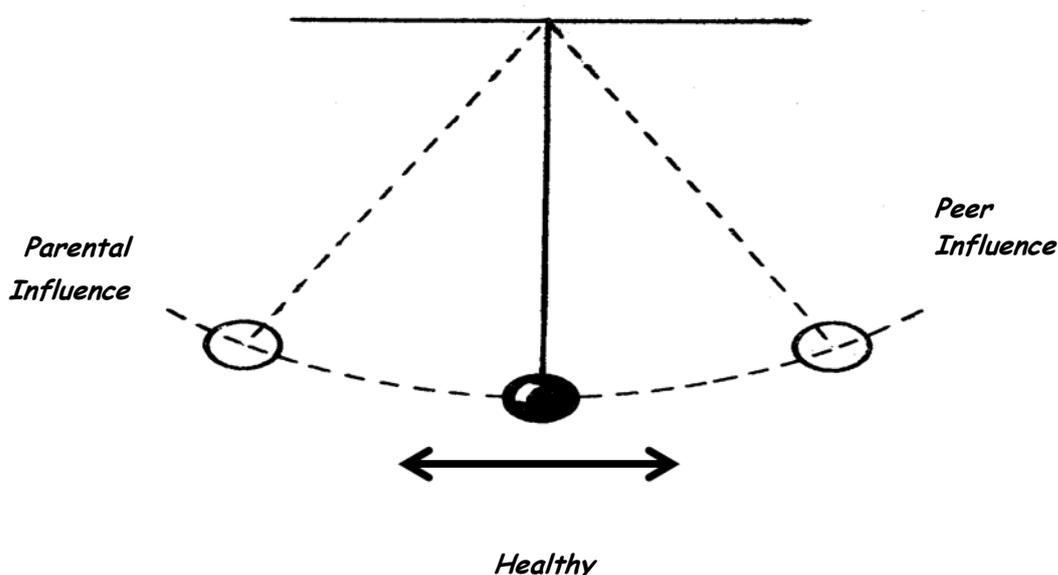
If this progression from drink to more dangerous substances is incorrect, we might then look for separate skills and knowledge to help prevent difficulties arising from all the issues listed above. However, the skills and knowledge to prevent cannabis/psychoactive substances/solvent/harder drugs abuse are exactly the same as those that should be used to delay drinking for as long as possible.

The question needs to be asked: what are the insights and skills parents need to delay drinking for as long as possible?

4. The Peer Group Influences

As a young baby, your child was 100% dependent upon you for all their emotional and physical needs. As they grew this dependence became less. One of the characteristics of the transition from childhood to adolescence is a decrease in the reliance an individual has on parents, with a corresponding increase in the influence of peers. The timing of this transition can vary from child to child but it usually corresponds with the onset of puberty. This changing dynamic in relations between a child and parents and that of his/her peers is a normal part of growing up. Indeed, it can be viewed as a necessary step to becoming an independent adult.

This shift in reliance from parents to peers can be represented by a pendulum.



In an ideal world there should be a healthy balance between a teenager's reliance on their parents and family and their reliance on their peers. It is when their dependence on their peers becomes greater than the influence of their parents that difficulties may arise.

Teenagers often feel a need to conform to the group activity and to being accepted. Sometimes, these can be positive forces: for example, when participation in a peer group teaches teens to see beyond themselves and to look out for others. Teenage peer groups can also be respectful of the decisions made by others. To quote a group of 6th years that have been through this experience recently, *"My mates drink - but I don't. They respect me for it - there is no peer pressure,"*²² and *"My friends don't drink - so I don't."*²³ However, when questioned further, these [male] teenagers say that they had encountered peer pressure to drink in 2nd year, or 3rd year. But they also found that this peer pressure later dissipated in 4th year or 5th year. This would seem to indicate that if teenagers avoid drink in 2nd and 3rd year, the chances of delaying drinking until the latter teenage years increase significantly.

How can parents maintain a healthy balance whereby they can have a greater influence than that of the peers?

²² *A Quote from a 6th Year Teenager.*

²³ *A Quote from a 6th Year Teenager.*

5. The Parent & Family Relationships

The strength of the relationship is ultimately the only real control you have over your child.²⁴

5.1 Nurturing Bonds

Think about how the strength of our relationship with our elderly parents can influence what we do for them. Think about how the bond with our partner drives us to do things for them and take their needs and feelings into account. Think about how we fell in love. It might be said that falling in love was as a results of going on dates, going to the cinema, or going away together. However, if we examine it more deeply, it was actually sharing our emotions and feelings during these times we spent together that was more important. It was sharing our values, sharing our inner thoughts, sharing the things that make us happy, sharing the things that make us sad, sharing the things that put us at ease, and sharing the things that makes us annoyed etc. All of this allows us to bond with another person. In short, sharing our inner thoughts and emotions is the bond that holds people together. This is true for all human relationships be it; partners, siblings, friends, and of course, parents and child and parent and teenagers.

Best practice would suggest that parents should share conversations about what is going on in the teenager's life and family life to maintain that vital bond with your teenager. Remember, when asking about your teenager's activities, friends, and whereabouts - make sure your teenager knows it's because you care about them, not because you distrust them.²⁵ Having meals together - without the teenager wearing headphones or watching the T.V. - is always a useful way to have regular communication between family members. However, too often we fall into the trap of talking to teenagers about facts; how much homework have you, when is your next rehearsal, what time is the match at, what happened last night?

As parents it is instinctive for us to satisfy their physical needs such as food and clothing. However, when do devote time to their emotional needs? When do we spend time being an emotional parent as well as their biological parent? When do we take time to talk about their feelings and emotions? When do we help them explore their emotions? When do we help them articulate their feelings? When do we facilitate a discussion about their inner thoughts?

²⁴ William Glasser, *For Parents & Teenagers- Dissolving the Barrier Between You and Your Teen*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2002) p 9.

²⁵ *You, Your Child and Alcohol*, Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland.

5.2 Empathy

A prerequisite to talking about feelings is empathy. *Empathy is understanding and feeling what another person is experiencing.* Establishing empathy is a continuous process not one event of action. It is listening thoughtfully to the feelings expressed and allowing the teenager to tell their story.²⁶ We should "listen with understanding and, to understand"²⁷. We should listen in an active, not passive, way. Active listening requires us to listen fully. This means avoiding formulating a response or thinking about how we might respond while the teenager is speaking. If we are doing this, we are not fully listening. If we are just waiting for them to stop so we can get our point across - we are not listening.

We should listen for emotions, not just facts while watching out for non-verbal behaviours such as eye contact, facial expression, and posture.²⁸ We should "stay out of their way"²⁹ when they are talking and not give in to the temptation to interrupt. Listening actively allows them feel they can talk freely without judgment and allows us to enter their world³⁰ and allows us to "perceive the world as they see it"³¹ - whether we agree with it or not.

If they say something with which we disagree, we often put a counter point to what they have said. We sometimes prefix this counter point with the word 'but'. This needs to be avoided as the word 'but'³² 'acts like an eraser'³³, wiping away what they have said. This can make them feel dismissed, not listened to, and isolated. Simply, replace the word 'but' with the word 'and' - this allows both points to be seen as valid. After all, their view point is valid to them. Now, you are both facing the same way, with more than one way of seeing the issue.

5.3 Giving Them A Nudge

Sometimes teenagers find it difficult to find the words to express how they feel. This is where they might need help. This can be in the form of suggestions around feelings they might be experiencing. These suggestions need to be rooted in the clues they give us. Figuring out these clues can be helped by active listening, reflecting, reframing, paraphrasing, summarising, and gently questioning,³⁴ about feelings as opposed to facts. We should also respond by having a physically attentive posture, making eye contact, listening to our own pitch and tone, and avoiding any rejection or an indication that what they are saying is viewed as irrelevant³⁵ or that they are being judged. We should also give them freedom to correct our interpretation of what they are feeling and have a collaborative conversation with a view to clarifying feelings.

²⁶ International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance, 2001, p 26

²⁷ Eleanor O'Leary, *The Psychology Of Counselling*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1982), p 23.

²⁸ Eddie McNamara, *Motivational Interviewing*, (Liverpool: Positive Behaviour Management, 2009) p22.

²⁹ Carl Rogers, *Client Centred Therapy*, (London: Constable 1999) p 27.

³⁰ Eleanor O'Leary, *The Psychology Of Counselling*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1982), p 23.

³¹ Carl Rogers, *Client Centred Therapy*, (London: Constable 1999) p 29.

³² Harry Barry & Enda Murphy, *Flagging The Screenager*, (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2014) p 171.

³³ W. R. Miller & S. Rollnick, *Motivational Interviewing*, 2nd ed. (London: The Guilford Press, 2002) p 75.

³⁴ Carl Rogers, *Client Centred Therapy*, (London: Constable 1999) p 64 - 78.

³⁵ Eleanor O'Leary, *The Psychology Of Counselling*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1982), p 27.

5.4 Reflecting It Back

Once you feel you have understood your teenager's perception of their world, it is now necessary to acknowledge these feelings and for them to perceive such acknowledgement. This can be achieved by reflecting back to them what they have said by using, if necessary, the same words they have used. Don't feel squeamish about doing this. Hearing our own words reflected back to us, accurately and without criticism or bias is invaluable. We know in that moment that we have been heard, that the other person is there for us.

As well as using the appropriate words, it is also important to mirror the emotions and feelings behind the words used. Paraphrasing and reframing what they have expressed are other techniques that can be used. These techniques should be used without adding to, or decreasing, the emotional feeling expressed by them. Reflecting back means that you accept how they feel. It does not include your evaluation or cast judgment on their feelings -this may be more appropriate and necessary at later time. Acceptance of their feelings is everything because being listened to and understood by another person makes us feel valued.³⁶ To quote one parent *"listen to your child - if you don't, someone else will."*³⁷

5.5 Summary of Active Listening

1. Ask open questions - This mean questions that don't have a 'yes' or 'no' answer, questions that start with 'how', 'when', 'what', 'who', 'why'.
2. Summarise - Summarise what you have understood: *"So, you're saying that you feel like an outsider when everyone else is drinking?"*
3. Reflect - Just repeating a word or phrase can encourage them to carry on talking: *"Yes, it's difficult"*.
4. Clarify - Ask more details: *"Tell me more about that"*, *"How exactly did that happen?"*
5. Give words of encouragement: *"Go on"*, *"Ah I see"*.
6. Leave open moments - Don't feel you have to fill the silence. Staying quiet while keeping your attention on them can encourage them to say something else.
7. React - Show that you've understood how they are feeling: *"That's really hard"*. *"It must be very difficult to cope with that"*.
8. Use non-verbal encouragement - Smiling, responding to the feelings they show with facial expressions or mirroring their facial expressions and keeping eye contact to show they have your full attention.

5.6 Enhancing Resilience

The exploration of their emotions and feelings outlined above also has the effect of strengthens the teenager's ability to identify their feelings, put words to them, and help them understand why there are feeling the way they do and to process these feelings. In other words, it also enhances their self-awareness. This, in turn, strengthens their ability to manage their emotions and enhances their mental resilience. This is really important for their overall metal well-being because evidence tells us that children who are emotionally and psychologically resilient are less likely to experience emotional difficulties and are more likely to overcome these difficulties if they occur.³⁸

³⁶ Paul Gilligan, *Raising Emotionally Healthy Children*, (Dublin, Veritas, 2015) p 126.

³⁷ *A Quote from a Parent.*

³⁸ Paul Gilligan, *Raising Emotionally Healthy Children*, (Dublin, Veritas, 2015) p 11.

5.7 Are Teenagers Grumpy All Of The Time?

Teenagers are sometimes characterised as being grumpy and difficult to deal with. They often respond to others using grunts and monosyllabic answers. What is all this about? Is their grumpiness a representation of their inability to express their feelings? Does their awkwardness and incoherence represent their limited ability to articulate how they feel? Are their temper tantrums their way of expressing emotions they cannot verbalise? Is their mis-behaviour an expression - in a non-verbal way - of an uncomfortable feeling, like anger? Are their emotional needs not being met? We all need a release valve for our emotions and if we can't talk them through, we will act them out. It is sometimes said that it is impossible to talk to teenagers when there are in this grumpy/awkward stage. However, it is because they are in this stage that it is all the more necessary to help them identify, label, and explore their feelings (as outlined above). Remember, some teenagers are moody some of the time but only a few are moody *all* of the time. If you encounter the latter - the issue may be worth further attention.

5.8 Their Sense of Belonging

By strengthening a teenager's bond with his/her parents we enhance their sense of being loved, their sense of being valued, and heighten how they feel about themselves in a positive way. Cumulatively, this boosts their sense of attachment and belonging. Satisfying this sense of belonging to the family unit is very important. Experts argue human behaviour is motivated by a desire to satisfy belongingness needs and if these needs are not satisfied in the home they are more likely to satisfy it elsewhere. Research has shown that if their belongingness needs are not met [young people] increase their alcohol consumption. Indeed, the research also shows that negative interpersonal interactions within close relationships play an important role in the consumption of alcohol and that many people drink in response to negative interpersonal interactions.³⁹ We all need to feel a sense of belonging. We all need to feel attached to others. If this sense of belonging and attachment is not anchored in the home, teenagers will pitch their anchor elsewhere; possibly with peers who feel similarly unattached to their home. Indeed, if individuals are not attached in a healthy way they may find themselves attaching to drink itself, other substances, or even negative habits such as gambling.

5.9 The Value of It All

Relationships are about emotional experiences⁴⁰ and it is this sharing of our feelings that allows us to bond with our teenagers. This bonding is a two way process in that the teenagers will also feel a strong bond with the parent. It is worth noting that in a study of 400 adolescents, parent involvement and adolescents' positive regard for their parents were related to less smoking and less drinking among teenagers.⁴¹ Remember, it is clear that the evidence indicates that a "good quality parent-child relationship"⁴² is associated with both delayed alcohol initiation and reduced levels of later alcohol use. The stronger the bond the greater the influence we have over them and what they do - even when - and particularly when - you are not with them.

³⁹ *Self & Identity*, Hamilton & DeHart, www.tandfonline.com. Routledge, Chicago, 2016.

⁴⁰ Patrick Ryan, *You Can't Make Me! How To Get The Best Out Of Teenagers*, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2010) p 87.

⁴¹ John W. Santrock, *Adolescence*, 10th ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005) p 458.

⁴² S.M. Ryan, et al, *Parents Factors Associated with Reduced Adolescent Alcohol Use*, (Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 2010) p 779.

When your child was 6 years old, they snuggled up with you on the sofa for both emotional and physical comfort. Now that they are teenagers they may not need that physical comfort but certainly still need that emotional comfort. We all do, no matter what age. It is this continuous process, week in week out, that will allow us to maintain the bonds with teenagers. This process of sharing how we feel is very simple while at the same time very difficult - yet also very natural. After all, we have emotional ability to fall in love. Several parents⁴³ have remarked that in their experience, they felt their teenager needed them more as a parent in their adolescent years than when they were 7/8 years of age. Remember, the strength of the relationship is the most effective influence you have over your teenager - especially when you are not with them. To quote two teenagers, "my parents don't want me to drink"⁴⁴ and "I don't drink because I don't want to let my parents down."⁴⁵ There's something to strive towards!

6. Why Do Teenagers Drink?

6.1 Feeling Grown Up

The teenage years can be seen as a transition from childhood to adulthood. It is a period where we strive for greater independence and autonomy to make our own decisions. It is marked by a need to prove to ourselves and those around us that we are becoming adults. Teenagers can do these using healthy activities such as deciding on what clothes to buy or decorating their own rooms. However, teenagers can decide to act out these feelings in negative ways.

Teenagers will often admit that they drink to "feel grown up"⁴⁶ or "to prove they are adult"⁴⁷. Some teenagers say it allows them feel "they are making their own decisions"⁴⁸ and makes them feel "independent"⁴⁹. Others say they drink for the "thrill of getting away with it"⁵⁰. It can be argued that what is driving these teenagers to drink is an *emotional need* to feel more adult and independent. Can we fulfil this need in a different, healthy way? Can we give them more autonomy in the home environment? Can we find safe ways to allow them feel more adult? Can we help them manage their need to feel grown up by talking about these emotions? Can we sit and listen and empathies with these feelings? It is interesting to note that in conversation with 4th and 5th year teenagers, the vast majority of girls⁵¹ [as opposed to the boys] insisted that they did not use drinking as a means to prove they are growing up. They stated that they used other methods such as make-up, choosing their own cloths and decorating their own rooms. Can the girls teach the boys a lesson here?

⁴³ A Quote from Parents (3).

⁴⁴ A Quote from a 5th Year Teenager.

⁴⁵ A Quote from a 5th Year Teenager (22).

⁴⁶ A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (98)

⁴⁷ A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (98) & website.

⁴⁸ A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (10).

⁴⁹ A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (36) & National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism, U.S.A., 2006.

⁵⁰ A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (10).

⁵¹ A Quote from 5th Year Girls (37/47).

6.2 Fitting In

The adolescent years can also be marked by a strong need to fit into a peer group and be accepted by their peers. Teenagers will admit to drinking to "feel accepted"⁵² by their peers, to "fit in"⁵³, and to "bond with their friends"⁵⁴. In addition, teenagers will drink so as not to "feel left out"⁵⁵, so that they are "not the only one not drinking,"⁵⁶ or "because everyone else does"⁵⁷ or to avoid "being judged [in a negative way] for not drinking"⁵⁸. Once again drinking for these reasons is driven by an emotional need i.e. to be accepted by what their peers. Therefore, it could be argued that teenagers fear being thought of negatively by those that matter to them. Don't we all? If someone things badly about us it results in us feeling bad about ourselves. So to avoid feeling bad about ourselves we will avoid the negative judgement of others. In other words when we are concerned about what others think of us it is to avoid feeling bad about ourselves.

6.3 Self-Image

Indeed, this self-image and feeling about themselves as a driver to drink can also been seen in other reasons teenagers drink. For example, adolescents have said they drink to "make it easier to make friends" or to "talk to members of the opposite gender,"⁵⁹ or to "feel more confident"⁶⁰ or "less self-conscious"⁶¹ or "being able to open up"⁶². Once again it could be argued that these reasons tell us more about what teenagers think of themselves rather than what others think of them.

To help us further understand this, it is interesting to examine why some teenagers choose not to drink. Adolescence who don't drink or only started when they turned 18 cited the following reasons;

- "it is a false form of happiness"⁶³
- "I prefer to be myself"⁶⁴
- "I'd rather people liked me for who I am"⁶⁵
- "I didn't feel the need to follow the crowd"⁶⁶
- "I don't need it to have fun"⁶⁷

These quotes were summarised very simply by one teenager who said

- "I don't need to"⁶⁸

It could be viewed that these teenagers are secure enough in themselves to drink. Secure enough so as not to let the view of their peers have a negative impact on their own self-image.

⁵² A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (74).

⁵³ A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (63).

⁵⁴ A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (75).

⁵⁵ A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (68).

⁵⁶ A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (10).

⁵⁷ A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (9).

⁵⁸ A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (21).

⁵⁹ A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (25).

⁶⁰ A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (63).

⁶¹ A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (4).

⁶² A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (6).

⁶³ A Quote from a 5th Year Teenager (5).

⁶⁴ A Quote from a 4th Year Teenager.

⁶⁵ A Quote from a 5th Year Teenager (4).

⁶⁶ A Quote from a 5th Year Teenager.

⁶⁷ A Quote from a 5th Year Teenager (7).

⁶⁸ A Quote from a 5th Year Teenager (16).

How can parents help their teenagers strive towards this mind-set?

6.4 It's Good Fun!

The emotional reasons teenagers cite for drinking include, feeling grown up, fitting in, and enhancing their own self- image. However, a large number of teenagers⁶⁹ said that drink helped them "enjoy the night more" and they "got a good buzz" and it helped them "enjoy the crack". This needs to be acknowledged and not ignored. Fulfilling the emotional needs of feeling grown up, fitting in, and positive self-image can be addressed by parents as outlined above. However, how do we tackle the fact that drinking can be fun?

While there may be direct and targeted methods that can fulfil the emotional need of feeling grown up, fitting in and self-image issues, it has to be acknowledged that there may be no direct method or argument that can counteract the fact that drink can help us "enjoy the night". The obvious answer would seem to be that we should provide alternatives to fulfil their need for fun. For teens, providing alternatives can be short lived and very difficult to sustain especially as teenager's progress through the adolescent years. Also, trying to directly counter the "fun" aspect of drink may be futile simply because they may win that argument. Does this mean that parents are helpless and should give up on tackling this reason to drink? Maybe not.

While acknowledging that drink can be fun, can we **convince** them not to use drink to enhance their night out? Can we **persuade** them to hold off drinking for this reason until the latter end of their teenage years? Can we **influence** the decisions they make about this when they are out with their friends? Can we obtain the power to **convince, persuade** and **influence** them as much as possible?

Think of other people in your life you can convince, persuade, and influence. Think of people who can convince, persuade, and influence you. Why is this? Is it the strength of these relationships? If so, the answer is very, very simple yet sometimes very difficult to do. We simply need to enhance the relationship and bond with our teenager, and enhance it again and again and again and again. There is no other way or alternative.

⁶⁹ A Quote from 4th & 5th Year Teenagers (61).

7. Being Comfortable With Themselves

7.1 Confidence & Self-Esteem

The quotes in the preceding section on self-image would suggest that teenagers who have high levels of 'self-esteem' and high levels of 'confidence'. Let's examine the meaning we place on these terms.

Using the phrase 'build their self-esteem' automatically instructs us to tell them how great they are, how brilliantly they can do things, how well they have performed. In short, keep constantly telling them how great they are will boost their confidence! However, there is one very important aspect that is missing from this approach. They are not brilliant at everything - nor will they be. They are not perfect and have flaws. Consider the following scenario. Two people are called for an interview for the same job. Neither has any experience and both are straight out of college. One interviewer decides to ask a question someone with no experience could not possibly answer. This was done - not to check the answer or to catch them out - but rather to see how they react in a situation where they don't know the answer. One interviewee resorts to pretending to know what to do and spoofs and does so very confidently. The other interviewee, pauses, and then says, "I don't have enough experience to answer that question; I would have to ask my co-workers and boss for guidance and help". Now who is the more confident interviewee? The second interviewee is not afraid to admit - to themselves and to others - that they do not know something and they have the ability to ask for help from others. Is this interviewee a more confident person who is not afraid to expose a flaw? This scenario adds an extra meaning to the word 'confident'. Is the word 'confident' an adequate word to describe what we want to strive towards? Would it be more accurate to use the phrase 'comfortable with self'? In other words, being comfortable enough in ourselves to expose our flaws and not let that exposure and the response of others to have a negative impact on what we actually think of ourselves. Therefore, using the phrase 'comfortable with self' can be more instructive to us than the word/s 'confident' or 'high self-esteem'. How can we help teenagers become comfortable in themselves?

7.2 Doing What Is Instinctive

Firstly, do what is instinctive. Praise their achievement and qualities. These may be academic achievements, sporting, or musical. Or they may be personal qualities such as kindness, being empathic towards others, or having a caring nature. This is particularly important when a teenager is not academic and may be struggling in school. In addition to finding non-academic attributes, their effort, not results, should be praised.⁷⁰ Indeed, if teenagers are good academically, it can be unhealthy to define them solely as such. It is always preferable to praise the efforts rather than the results. Remember also, it is natural to express pride in them when they achieve something. However, avoid them feeling that they will only elicit pride if they do well and achieve. Tell them you are proud of them when they are sprawled on the sofa watching T.V. and eating pizza!

⁷⁰ Carol Travis & Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made- But Not By Me Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions and Hurtful Acts* (London: Pinter & Martin Ltd. 2008) p 233-234.

7.3 Doing What Is Not Instinctive

Secondly, let's do what is not instinctive, discuss with them what they cannot do or find difficult to do. Discuss in a way that they do not feel they are being defined by what they cannot do. Discuss in a way that makes it clear that it is the trying that matters not the result. Discuss in a way that it is normal for everyone to be good at some activities and not so at others. Look for situations where they are not doing well and praise their persistence and effort. Discuss occasionally - not constantly - anything to do with academics. Check that it is not your constant focus. Discuss in an accepting way, i.e. that the flaws and failings are accepted. Discuss in a way they know that their flaws do not result in them being viewed in a negative way. Discuss and explore the feelings brought on by these difficult activities. Discuss in a way that does not make it a big deal and discuss with a bit of humour! Avoid discussing in a way that it is something that needs to be "fixed", because a lot of the time it can't be. Again, this is particularly important when it comes to academics. Remind them that a low result will never be criticised if the effort was maximised.⁷¹ Remember which interviewee had greater self-esteem/confidence, or more accurately, which interviewee is more comfortable with themselves.

In compiling this booklet, a group of ten mixed-gender 5th year students was surveyed. Two of the group, Michael and John, did not drink. Michael was not "slagged", while John was. When asked why this was the case, they all responded by saying that "Michael doesn't care what people think of him and is confident enough to still be involved in what is going on, while John is slagged because he just sits there and says nothing"⁷².

8. Attractive Peer Groups

8.1 'Normal' Peer Pressure

As stated earlier, teenagers feel a need to conform and be accepted by their peer group. In conversation with male teenagers they said they had encountered peer pressure to drink in 2nd year, or 3rd year but they also found that this peer pressure later dissipated in 4th year or 5th year. However, in conversation with female teenagers⁷³, the majority insist that they did not experience peer pressure to drink. They did acknowledge that there was peer pressure in other areas of their lives, but not when it came to drinking. Is this more to do with the confidence and self-esteem of teenage girls compared to the boys? Or more precisely, can the girls teach the boys about being *more comfortable with themselves*?

8.2 The 'Cool Gang'

One major issue that can impact on how teenagers feel about themselves is how they compare themselves with their peers.

The teenage years can be dominated by changes both physically and emotionally. This can result in an obsession with developmental issues brought about by puberty and constant comparisons of their development with that of their peers. When listening to teenagers talk about these issues they talk about wanting to be in the 'cool gang'.

⁷¹ www.nymag.com "How Not To Talk To Your Kids" New York Magazine.

⁷² A Quote from a 5th Year Teenager.

⁷³ A Quote from a 5th Year Teenage Girls (40/47).

It is interesting to see how and why teenagers view certain other teenagers as being in the 'cool gang'. A 'cool gang' member is often seen as those that are taller, better-looking, more sexually developed, better able to talk to members of the opposite sex, have a girlfriend/boyfriend, and have more defined physical attributes. They may also be more accomplished e.g. in sports or academics. This can be an attractive group of teens to other teenagers and can result in the teen who is not part of the group feeling uncomfortable with, and critical of, themselves.

Particular care needs to be taken when a teenager tries to impress or befriend those in the 'cool gang'. They may do things out of character or try to change who they are to impress them. They may be used and manipulated by the gang members into doing something that is inappropriate or their approaches to the 'cool gang' may be rebuffed and later construed as bullying. These issues are more about how the teenager feels about themselves rather than how they feel about their peers or how their peers feel about them.

Discussing these issues with your teenager can be a useful exercise that will allow them accept themselves for who they are at a given moment in time. This discussion might remind them that it is normal for all teenagers feel this way towards each other. That all teenagers develop at different paces and that we all catch up with each other. It can also be useful to point out that it may not be the other individuals they are attracted too, but rather the attributes of these other teens. Don't forget to discuss what attributes others might find admirable in them. Remind them that you did this when you were teenager and that all adults continue to do this to some degree. However, as adults we don't let these comparisons make us feel bad about ourselves and we do not let these comparisons hold us back.

8.3 'The Hard Gang'/'Too Cool For School Gang'

This group of teenagers is more worrying. These are the teenagers who are the first to smoke, the first to drink and possibly the first to smoke cannabis. They arrive in school on Monday morning and boast about what they got up to over the weekend and boast about the 'adult' activities they engaged in. These adult activities can seem attractive to other teenagers.

It can be useful to explain to your teen that these teenagers are acting like this for emotional reasons and that they are engaging in these activities to fulfil an emotional need or an emotional void. It can be argued that, for these teenagers, the attachment pendulum has swung too far away from the family/home and too far towards their peers. Why? Is there a difficulty within the home? Is there a difficulty in an important relationship in their lives? What is missing in their lives that they need to behave like this? What emotional need are they fulfilling? If you find your teenager is attracted to this group, immediate action may be needed. Avoid taking solace from the fact that they are 'only drinking' and not taking drugs.⁷⁴ Avoid the assumption that they have got in with a 'bad crowd'. Indeed, if a teen in such circumstances is hanging around with peers who have similar characteristics, all the parents of all the teens are more than likely to make such a statement, that he/she has got in with a bad crowd. They can't all be right! Sometimes parents in this situation focus their attention on hoping their teenager's peers will change, or are convinced that it is the parents of these peers who need to solve the problem. However, this approach is not productive as it shifts the responsibility to others needing to change. This abdicates control. The focus should be on why the teenager my chosen to associate themselves with peers who have these destructive interests.

⁷⁴ Dr. Bobby Smyth, Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist Lucena Clinic 6th Oct. 2009.

Here again, it is worth noting the insights of teenagers who have travelled this road. "I blamed peer pressure, and my parents then think it's my mates' fault"⁷⁵ and "The gang blame peer pressure - when they actually want to drink themselves"⁷⁶. As every motorist who complains about being stuck in traffic should be reminded, 'stop complaining about the traffic - you are the traffic'. Remember, getting involved in the wrong crowd is a symptom not a cause.

It would appear that teenagers who attach themselves to this group do so to satisfy their belonging needs. However, there is another type of teen that skirts - if not joins - this group. These are very much attached to their home. However, they feel micro-managed and smothered and as a result they cannot express their independence and autonomy. If they cannot express these needs at home, this peer group's autonomy and activities become very attractive.

Finally, when discussing friends with your teen, avoid criticising them as individuals. After all they like them and will see any criticism of a friend as a criticism of themselves. Any discussion should focus on specific behaviours that may be inappropriate.

8.4 Positive Behaviours/Positive Feelings & Negative Behaviours/Positive Feelings

All human behaviour - be it positive or negative - has a purpose. We partake in positive behaviour to obtain positive feelings for ourselves. Similarly we engage in negative behaviour to gain - consciously or unconsciously - a positive feeling. This latter point is difficult for some adolescents to grasp, as they are sometimes unable to identify why they behave in a particular manner. It therefore needs to be asked what these teens are getting - psychologically speaking - from their involvement with this peer group. Is he/she obtaining a sense of belonging from the peer group to compensate or replace that feeling which should be obtained from home? Let's tease these out. Since the balance between family pressure and peer pressure will be coloured by the qualities of the family system,⁷⁷ it is therefore necessary to ask *why* a teen has formed a peer bond outside the normal range. Addressing this question of *why* is a necessary prerequisite if the tips outlined elsewhere in this booklet are to be of any help.

Consider the following scenario. A 15 year old girl posts an inappropriate photograph on social media at the request of her boyfriend. On first glance the conversation with the girl might focus around how to use social media. However, this misses the point. Should the conversation with the girl focus on the following questions? How is your relationship with your boyfriend? Is it an equal relationship? Why did you act on his request? What was to be gained from him by posting the photo? What was the emotional gain in posting the photo? How would you have felt if you hadn't complied with his request? What would it have done to your relationship? In other words this is an emotionally driven action. If we avoid this and focus solely on how to use social media, this girl will act out these emotions either by repeating such a mistake on social media or allowing the emotions drive another inappropriate action elsewhere. This scenario illustrates how our actions are driven by our emotions and therefore help us target the reason why a teenager might want to drink or why they might want to hang around with the 'hard gang'. To help parents understand what teenagers gain emotionally from negative activities the following is worth noting.

⁷⁵ A Quote from a 6th Year Teenager.

⁷⁶ A Quote from a 6th Year Teenager.

⁷⁷ K. Geldard & D. Geldard, *Counselling Adolescents*, 2nd ed., (London: Sage Publications 2006) p 35.

8.5 What Drives Disharmony At Home

The engagement by some teenagers in negative activities can result in disharmony in the home. In such situations the parent/teenager relationship can become fraught. On first sight the negative behaviours can be seen as a cause of the fraught relationship. However, it could be argued that it may be the other way around; the fraught relationship may be the cause of the negative behaviour. In other words if we fix the relationship we may fix the behaviour -not the other way around. Most of the time negative behaviours are symptoms of another problem - not the causes. Remember, throughout our lives we all need to bond with something. Hopefully this is with family and through healthy friendships. If we don't do this, it can be through unhealthy friendships - possibly with others who have not bonded to their family -, or we may bond to drink or drugs or with an unhealthy habits like gambling.

9. Parenting Styles

The experts document various parenting styles that can influence a teenager's journey through adolescence. It is generally agreed that the most effective parenting style is that of *authoritative parenting*⁷⁸ (as opposed to authoritarian). This is a positive parenting style that:

- Encourages children to be independent but still places limits and controls on their actions.
- This style is associated with long term goals of helping teenagers grow into confident individuals, who are separate and independent but also appropriately connected to their family, and are able to form their own intimate relationships in the future.
- It develops clear and fair behavioural guidelines without being restrictive and punitive.
- These parents have the final call in any decision.
- These parents expect high standards of behaviour from their children while giving their children some freedom to help them develop their own independence.
- These parents show an abundance of parental involvement, interest, and active participation in their teenagers' lives and have households with routine traditions and schedules to help develop a sense of security and belonging.
- Authoritative parents do not allow what is going on in their own lives overshadow their teenagers' lives and, most importantly, do not allow their teenagers perceive that this may be the case.
- Authoritative parents are emotionally open and responsive to their children while maintaining control of their own emotions.
- They teach their teenagers the consequences of their actions and do not shield their teenagers from those consequences.
- Authoritative parents don't lecture; instead, they nurture a two-way dialogue with their teens.

As well as positive parenting styles being well documented, there is also research evidence of styles or approaches to parenting that have proved not to be successful or effective. The research suggests that a wise parent avoids the following:

⁷⁸ John W. Santrock, *Educational Psychology*, 2nd ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004) p 74.

- Trying to be a cool parent in your teenager's eye or the eyes of their friends.
- Backing down or giving up avoiding confrontation.
- Buying them drink in the hope that you can control the situation in the hope that they won't drink when you are not around. If teenagers are allowed to drink at home,⁷⁹ it greatly increases the permission they give themselves to drink outside the home. Indeed, in compiling this booklet several teenagers said their parents adopted this approach but all admitted to drinking behind their parents' backs at social outings and in the park.
- Avoid cushioning them from the consequences of their action, e.g. don't give them a note to excuse homework not being done if they have no legitimate excuse. The teenager learns that no matter what they do, they will be supported by the home⁸⁰ and they will learn that their parents will get them off the hook when a greater difficulty arises.
- If they are involved in an incident with their peers, don't allow them to suck you into a conversation about what their peers did. What *they* did is all that matters.
- Don't grant them the freedom and independence that might only be appropriate to those in the latter stages of the teenage years. Teenagers may feel they have a licence to behave in a more adult way that is beyond their years when out socialising on a Friday/Saturday night. It is very difficult to rein in this behaviour or reverse the freedoms that the teenager has grown used to. The toothpaste can never be put back into the tube! Moreover, if the autonomy granted at home conflicts with ground rules in school prolonged disciplinary difficulties in school can arise.
- Avoid relying on boundaries and strict discipline *only* to prevent underage drinking. Sometimes in these cases the teenager 'goes mad' once they reach 18 or once they leave school. They seem to want to make up for lost time.
- It is worth quoting a parent who made the following comment about best friend parenting: "*when I realised that trying to be my daughter's best friend was fulfilling a need in me and was not what she needed from her mother, I subsequently did not make the same mistakes with my two younger sons.*"⁸¹

In modern times it is now very common for both parents to be working fulltime. Traditionalists too easily jump to the conclusion that if both parents are working fulltime it can have a detrimental effect on their child's development resulting in disciplinary issues. However, this is disingenuous to say the least, because the vast majority of teenagers from homes where both parents work are not disadvantaged in any psychological, cognitive, or emotional way. These students are normal healthy individuals with no such long-term disciplinary problems. However, there is a phenomenon that does exist with a tiny minority of families where both parents work. As stated above, this has nothing to do with the absence of a parent, but rather reflects on the quality rather than the quantity of the time parents spends with their child. The quality of such time spent together may not be sufficient to establish that deep emotional bond with both parents that each child needs. This unintentional lack of attachment that is established within the child can cause long-term relationship issues regardless of the amount of time spent with parents⁶⁶ and can occur if both parents are working or if only one is.

⁷⁹ Dr. Bobby Smyth, *Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist*, Lucena Clinic 6th October 2009.

⁸⁰ David Shaffer and Katherine Kipp, *Developmental Psychology, Childhood and Adolescence*, 7th ed. (California: Thomson-Wadsworth, 2007) p 602.

⁸¹ A Quote from a Parent.

10. Should We Serve Drink At Home?

One issue that is often debated is that of serving alcohol to a teenager at the dinner table. Some parents believe that introducing their child to drink in such a manner can teach them to respect drink. Parents normally cite the experience of the familial culture on the continent when teenagers are given drink at an early age and grow up to enjoy a drink for its own sake rather than simply to get drunk. It is pointed out that the lack of an Irish style drink culture in these countries proves that such an approach works.

However, it is argued that there is no scientific evidence to support this assumption.⁸² Indeed, in recent years research has shown that "a higher rate of adult-supervised use [of alcohol] contributes to higher rates of alcohol related problems. This clearly contradicts the position that supervised alcohol use will have a reduced effect on the development of adolescent alcohol problems and that providing opportunities for drinking in a supervised context did not inhibit alcohol use"⁸³. This contradicted the assumption that "youth will learn how to use alcohol safely in controlled, supervised settings and apply that knowledge to future opportunities to drink"⁸⁴. Moreover, another study concluded that "the evident suggests that the provision of alcohol is associated with higher levels of later alcohol use"⁸⁵. Indeed, other research indicates that children whose families refused to serve alcohol to them at home were less likely to drink in other situations⁸⁶.

Indeed, there is a school of thought that argues that it is the lack of a drinking culture on the continent that allows teenagers to be safely exposed to drink, rather than the other way round. It is pointed out that, because Irish society's overall attitude to drink is so destructive, it is not safe to copy the approach in other countries. If you know of cases where this approach seemed to work, the question has to be asked; was it actually the strength of the relationship between parent and teenager that brought about the desired effect? Moreover, in compiling this booklet, several teenagers said that their parents had adopted this approach. But all of these teenagers also admitted to drinking behind their parents' backs at social outings, and in the park. Conversely, several teenagers said they don't drink because "It was family rule - nobody drank until 18"⁸⁷.

⁸² Dr. Bobby Smyth, Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, Lucena Clinic 6th Oct. 2009.

⁸³ B. J. McMorris, et al, *Influences of Family Factors and Supervised Alcohol Use on Adolescent Alcohol Use & Harms*, (Healthy Youth Development Prevention Centre, University of Minnesota, 2011) , p 426.

⁸⁴ B. J. McMorris, et al, *Influences of Family Factors and Supervised Alcohol Use on Adolescent Alcohol Use & Harms*, (Healthy Youth Development Prevention Centre, University of Minnesota, 2011) , p 426.

⁸⁵ S.M. Ryan, et al, *Parents Factors Associated with Reduced Adolescent Alcohol Use*, (Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 2010) p 776.

⁸⁶ www.teendrinkinglaw.viv.gov.au (Australian Research).

⁸⁷ A Quote from 4th Year Teenagers (10).

11. Parents' Own Drinking

One other parenting factor that can have an influence on a teen's attitude to drink is parents' attitudes to their own drinking. Patterns of drinking are strongly influenced by the lifestyle of family members⁸⁸, and parents can influence alcohol use through their own attitudes, values, and behaviour [towards drink]⁸⁹. To quote those who have first-hand experience, "My parents drink a lot and that makes it O.K."⁹⁰ and "My Dad drinks 10 pints on a Saturday night - so he can hardly lecture me"⁹¹, and "it is normal to drink a lot because my parents do"⁹². If teenagers see a parent drinking frequently to excess they are likely to see such behaviour as examples of the norm. Indeed, parents can unconsciously send a message that excessive drinking is how every family is and how everyone lives. For example, a parent may have a hangover after a night's drinking and this hangover may be the source of slagging or jokes at the breakfast table.

Teenagers may witness drunken behaviours, such as rage, hostility, falling down, stumbling, slurring words and other such activities and view those as part of normal, everyday life. The latter can be a regular feature of some children's lives and be a source of some considerable distress. Watching someone they love drinking too much on a regular basis brings heartache and pain. The drinker can become unreliable become an undependable partner or father/mother. Children are often afraid of the frequent arguments and fights, and are often confused about the changes in their parent's personality. There are an estimated 61,000 to 104,000 children in Ireland under the age of 15 living with parents who have problems with alcohol whether alcohol-dependent/alcoholics, regular heavy drinkers or occasional binge drinkers⁹³. The lives of these children are largely unknown in the public arena but the numbers equate to the sum total of 150 full primary schools. A 2009 survey on alcohol dependency suggests that men have more than a 20% lifetime risk of developing alcohol-use disorders, while women's risk is 8 to 10%⁹⁴. Much of that risk is inherited⁹⁵. A family history of alcohol problems increases the risk of developing alcohol problems four fold⁹⁶ so mention of the high risk of dependency in certain families is important information for young teens. It is also worth making the point that if a teenager's parents never drink, it is no guarantee that a teenager will not abuse alcohol.

⁸⁸ K. Seifert Hoffmung, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 5th ed., (Houghton Mifflin, 2000) p 453.

⁸⁹ John Conger & N. Galambos, *Adolescence and Youth*, 5th ed., (New York: Longman, 1997) p 320.

⁹⁰ A Quote from a 6th Year Teenager (3).

⁹¹ A Quote from a 6th Year Teenager.

⁹² A Quote from a 6th Year Teenager.

⁹³ www.alcoholireland.ie (from *Alcohol Problems In The Family*, European Commission - Euro Care - WHO - COFACE, 1998 p 13.)

⁹⁴ M. Russell, *Prevalence of Alcoholism Among Children of Alcoholics*, (NY: Guilford, 1994) p237-45.

⁹⁵ *The Lancet*, Volume 373, Issue 9662, Page 495, 7th February 2009.

⁹⁶ M. Russell, *Prevalence of Alcoholism Among Children of Alcoholics*, p237-245.

12. Talking To Other Parents

It is vital to talk to other parents. You will find that you are not the only one worrying about the same issues. You will find that you are not the only one trying to hold the line on the same rules. You will find that it will be easier to work together on the same issues than to try to do so in isolation. You might also discover that the amount of pocket money you were told is given to your child's friend is not, in fact, true. To quote one teenager "I don't drink because I don't have the money to buy it." You might find that the curfew time your child's friend has is earlier than you were told. You might also find that the house was not actually supervised when you were told it was, etc. This networking is that bit easier for those parents and teenagers who have moved together from the same Primary School to the same Secondary School. If, however, your child is new to his/her secondary school, it might be necessary for new parents to make a special effort to introduce themselves to other parents. A recent study has shown that "if parents are given accurate and credible information about what [other] parents are doing and how they feel about their children engaging in drinking, then they are more likely to maintain or even raise their standards and to enforce them constantly."⁹⁷ Remember, "it is important not to believe everything your child says!"⁹⁸.

13. Setting Boundaries

It is important that rules are not simply imposed but negotiated and talked through. When people have a significant say in decisions that affect them deeply, they are more likely to take ownership of those decisions. Therefore, they are more likely to make the decisions work, and less likely to sabotage them⁹⁹. Indeed, it has been found that high levels of threats produce a 'boomerang' effect; as the threats increase, adolescent attitudes towards alcohol and drug use become more, rather than less, favourable¹⁰⁰. So, set realistic rules and boundaries, and stick to them.

Remember, research shows that parents who talk to their children about drugs, and know what their children are doing, and who they are with, can reduce the chances of their children using drugs¹⁰¹. Here are some areas that might be useful when setting these boundaries.

⁹⁷ J. Hummer, et al, *Parents Know Best, But Are They Accurate?* *Journal of Studies on Alcohol & Drugs*, (Dept. of Psychology, Loyola Marymount University, California, July 2011) p 526.

⁹⁸ A Quote from A Parent.

⁹⁹ Bernard Mayer, *The Dynamics Of Conflict Resolution, A Practitioner's Guide*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) p 191.

¹⁰⁰ D.D. Schoenbachler, D. Ayers & G. Gordon, *Adolescent Response to Anti-Drug Public Service Announcements*, p 9-21.

¹⁰¹ *Don't Lose The Head*, The North Dublin City & County Regional Drugs Task Force, 2008.

13.1 General Boundaries

1. Set rules around the use of the T.V. and the computer. The over use of a computer, be it for the Internet or the use of games, is one activity that can cause a teenager to become detached from the family. If your son or daughter gets agitated when he/she is told to stop using the computer, he/she may be developing a problem. Indeed, if this agitation/restlessness continues¹⁰² until he/she is allowed to resume computer use, this problem may urgently need to be addressed. Also, if possible, have the computer in a family room with the screen facing outwards.
2. Try and avoid a situation developing where your teenager gets into the habit of locking their bedroom door.
3. Know your child's friends' names and their parents' names and talk to the parents of your child's friends and agree boundaries together. This united front can avoid "you're the only Mum/Dad that won't let me..."
4. They must always tell you where they are/have been, and whom they were with, and they must always phone if they are going to be late. Agree times to return home. If they have given you reason not to trust them, you might have to insist that they ring you from the land line of the house they are in.
5. Agree that you will always check with the other parents if they are at a house party or a sleep over or if they say they are getting a lift from a friend's parent. It is worth noting that in certain circumstances parents,¹⁰³ who are hosting other children in their home; often comment that they are surprised that only two of the four parents of the children present telephoned to check where they were.
6. Set spending limits, when necessary, they must account for money spent.¹⁰⁴ Teenagers cannot buy drink without money. This money has to come from somewhere. It may also be necessary to check - in a non-intrusive way - that the clothes or shoes they claim were bought were actually purchased.
7. Agree when it is not appropriate to go out. You don't have to say yes! Should they be allowed to go out every time they want to?
8. "I was introduced to drink by a friend who had a free house, and whose parents left drink around the place. They did not check if any was missing"¹⁰⁵. This point, made by other teenagers, needs to be taken on board when there is an unsupervised house and when drink is left lying around.
9. If your child's peer group normally consists of teenagers of the same gender, it is interesting to note that a lot of adolescents drink¹⁰⁶ to gain the confidence to talk to teens of the opposite gender. To counteract this, parents suggest¹⁰⁷ that it is useful to try and organise activities involving teenagers of the opposite gender. These activities may be the usual ones, e.g. cinema, bowling etc. Inviting the boys and girls to mix in a healthy environment can only reduce the need for drink to be taken when future encounters occur. This is particularly important if your teenager attends a single sex school. One interesting comment from a male 5th year student was "I drink because it gives me the confidence to dance - normally I can't dance"¹⁰⁸.

¹⁰² *Internet Addiction: The Emergence of a New Clinical Disorder*. Cyber Psychology and Behaviour, University of Pittsburgh. Vol. 1 No. 3., p 237-244.

¹⁰³ A Quote from a Parent.

¹⁰⁴ *Straight Talk - A Guide For Parents on Teenage Drinking*, Health Promotion Unit, H.S.E.

¹⁰⁵ A Quotes from 6th Year Teenagers (6).

¹⁰⁶ A Quote from a 6th Year Teenager.

¹⁰⁷ A Quote from a Parent with five teenage boys.

¹⁰⁸ A Quote from a 5th Year Teenager.

10. One difficulty that can arise is when your child cannot be contacted because, according to them, his/her mobile was mislaid, or the battery was flat. It can happen legitimately once or twice. However, if this becomes a continuous problem, here are a few suggestions for addressing the issue: (i) A rule being set¹⁰⁹ whereby they must charge their phones a few hours in advance of going out. If they do not, you may consider not letting them go out. (ii) Some parents opt to ring all their child's friends persistently, until it becomes easier for the teenagers to return their calls rather than put up with the embarrassment of your ringing their friends.¹¹⁰ (iii) If the phone is not charged before going out, they must take your phone with them.¹¹¹ (iv) Finally, it may be necessary to deny them permission to go out on the next occasion if, on a previous occasion, they did not answer the phone to you. Remember, let your teenager know the consequences of his/her actions beforehand.
11. Do not accept the word of another teenager about the whereabouts of your child, especially on the phone. Always check with that teenager's parent.¹¹² If you cannot obtain the telephone number of other parents, it might be useful for the entire group of parents within a year group in a school to agree to share telephone numbers through the class/year parents' representative.
12. Sometimes, parents may come across a friend of their child drunk, or misbehaving in a worrying way outside the school environment. This parent may feel it is the right thing to telephone and pass on the information to the other parent. In this situation, there is sometimes a reluctance to make this call for fear of a negative reaction by the parent receiving the call or that there may be a negative impact on their own teenager. It might be useful for the entire group of parents within a year group in a school to agree that any such telephone call will be received in a positive light, i.e. that the motive is to help through giving the information, rather than the information being seen as a criticism of the teenager or of the parents themselves. It might also be useful for each parent to tell *their* teenager that this is what *you* want other parents to do. In addition, there should be an agreement amongst all the parents collectively that no one will tell the teenager who passed on the information.

¹⁰⁹ A Quote from a Parent.

¹¹⁰ A Quote from a Parent.

¹¹¹ A Quote from a Parent.

¹¹² A Quote from a Parent.

13.2 The Local Disco

1. At some point, you will eventually be asked whether your teenager can go to the local disco. Do not answer immediately.¹¹³ Do not be pressurised by "John's/ Jane's parents have said yes." Always check with the other parents.
2. Ensure your children always have a lift home from you or another parent. A system of rotation between parents may be useful, and always agree a time for arriving home and, if possible, agree this time with other parents. If you are collecting your teenager, agree a time for them to meet at a designated location outside the venue.
3. If you are collecting your teenager and their friends, it might happen that one of the friends does not turn up on time or has drink taken. All parents should agree that the driver should ring those teenagers' parents. Teenagers should be told beforehand by their parents that this is the rule. It might be useful for the entire group of parents within a year group in a school to agree such an approach. To quote one 5th year "I drink when I know Amy's Mum is collecting us, she won't rat on me - she's cool!"¹¹⁴.
4. If you are the parent not on the roster for a lift home, it should always be a rule that your child checks in with you when he/she arrives home. It is always worth the inconvenience of staying up late to ensure this rule is adhered to. It is too easy for teenagers to hide the fact that they have taken drink by simply popping their head into their parents' bedroom to say they are home. As one 5th year teenager put it "I tend to drink when I know I can arrive home and just shout upstairs and I know they won't check"¹¹⁵. Another commented "I would not drink if I knew they were sitting up waiting for me"¹¹⁶.
5. A lot of teenagers have their first experience of drink in the hours before their visit to the local disco - normally in a secluded place near the venue.
6. The provision of taxi money to teenagers can sometimes cause problems. For example, a group of four friends may all be provided with taxi money by each of their parents. Given that only one of the teens may need to pay for the taxi, this leaves a lot of excess cash to go "fishing"¹¹⁷. This is when teenagers find an older person to enter an off licence to purchase drink on their behalf.
7. After a period of time, the novelty of the local disco wears off and teenagers seek out alternative venues. Knowing that a parent is happy for the teenager to go to the local disco, it is not unusual for teenagers to be dropped off at the local disco and, when the parent driver has left, these teenagers then make their way to an alternative venue such as an unsupervised house or open area, and return to the disco in time to be collected¹¹⁸.

¹¹³ A Quote from a Parent.

¹¹⁴ A Quote from a 5th Year.

¹¹⁵ A Quote from a 5th Year.

¹¹⁶ A Quote from a 5th Year.

¹¹⁷ A Quote from a 6th Year.

¹¹⁸ A Quote from a Parent.

8. Be aware that the production of false I.D.s is a very lucrative business amongst teenagers. This is particularly handy for teenagers who at the age of 15 or 16 can make themselves look eighteen years old. Indeed, some teenagers don't have to obtain false I.D.s as *"we get real I.D.s from friends who are 18 or 19 years old"*¹¹⁹.
9. Discuss the dangers of drinking shorts, mixing drinks, alco-pops, and drinks being spiked.¹²⁰ According to some 5th year students, most had their first experience of drink by tasting alco-pops or spirits or cider. It is interesting to note that according to 5th year students girls, when they first drank alcohol, they drank alco-pops because *"they are easy to drink, and taste nice"*¹²¹. In addition, as boys mature, they are *"slagged if they drink alco-pops - because they are girly drinks and lads should drink beer"*¹²². Moreover, *"some of the lads tend to drink cider instead of beer if money is an issue, because cider is cheaper"*¹²³.
10. Sometimes, girls may choose want to wear clothes that you would not always approve of to a disco. They may leave the house wearing clothes you approve of, and later change somewhere else before entering the disco.¹²⁴
11. Remind your children that they can ring you at any time to be collected if they find themselves in a situation that makes them feel unsafe or uncomfortable. This means that when they are out, you're on standby. Alternatively, they can text you to ask you to ring them and tell them they are needed at home. This allows them to blame you and save face in front of their peers.

¹¹⁹ A Quote from a 5th Year Teenager.

¹²⁰ *Teenagers and Alcohol: A Guide for Parents*, Australian Government - Department of Health.

¹²¹ A Quote from a 5th Year Teenager.

¹²² A Quote from a 5th Year Teenager.

¹²³ A Quote from a 5th Year Teenager.

¹²⁴ A Quote from a Parent.

13.3 House Parties

1. If you are hosting a party for teenagers, and the rule for your child is that they do not drink, you need to be vigilant that guests do not bring drink to the party. Insisting that all guests be introduced to you as they arrive can help this. You should be alert to ruck sacks¹²⁵ being brought into your home.
2. At some point, you may decide to allow your teenager to drink. The future consequences of this decision should be thought through. A time will come when your teenager - who you now allow to drink - will want to have a party or some friends over to the house. You will now be faced with a decision with regard to other parents' children. Can you host a house party where your teenager is the only one who drinks? If you are providing drink, you are not only morally, but also legally, obliged to inform other parents, as you may be open to legal action. **You can only supply alcohol to children [under 18] in a private residence if you have the explicit consent of that child's parent or guardian.**¹²⁶ You must ascertain the views of other parents with regard to *their child*. When it comes to parents' rights, treat other parents as you would wish to be treated by them. Parents should not be afraid to let other parents know their views. A united voice will greatly assist this, even if it is only 2/3 parents. If you are the parent who is on the receiving end of criticism regarding providing drink, it is incumbent upon you to respect the views of others even if you disagree. To quote a 6th year, *"I went to parties where the parent of the teenager holding the party had given their teenager permission to drink - but they turned a blind eye to my drinking"*¹²⁷.
3. If your child is attending a house party in another home, it might also be useful to check if there will be drink available.
4. Tell other parents when the party starts, and finishes. There have been incidents when teenagers were at two parties in one night, in different homes, with different rules, and their parents thought they were in the one venue all the time.
5. Check that there is actually a party taking place. There have been circumstances when teenagers have told parents they are at a party when they are elsewhere - knowing that their parents would not approve.
6. When your child gets to the age that either they or their friends start driving, it is important to lay down extra boundaries as circumstances change. These should include not getting into a car with a driver who has been drinking or has been taking drugs. Indeed, has your child an obligation to prevent a friend from driving when under the influence of any substance?
7. Another issue arises in 5th/6th year. During that period, there can be an 18th birthday party - including friends from other schools - almost every weekend. As well as posing a problem with academics, it also provides too many opportunities to drink excessively over a continuous period of time. It might be useful for the entire group of parents to agree to merge 18th birthday parties to reduce the number of opportunities to drink. It may also be useful to avoid parties during Christmas Exams/Mocks/State exams by holding parties in advance of these periods, or postponing parties until the exam periods finish.

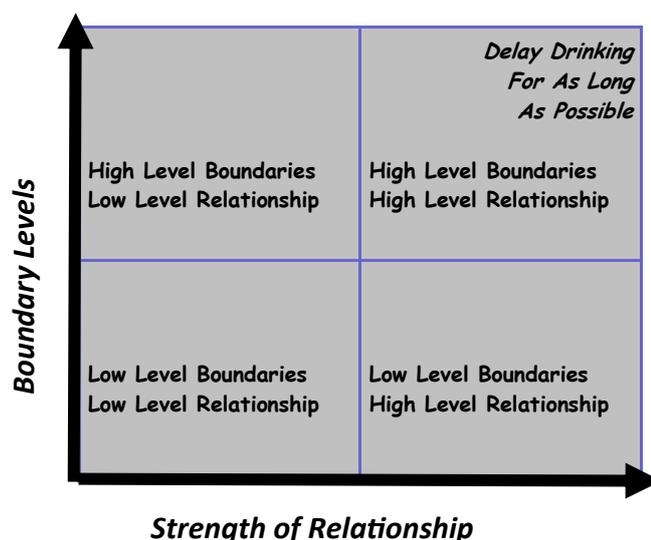
¹²⁵ A Quote from a Parent.

¹²⁶ Intoxicating Liquor Act 1998 - As amended 2003.

¹²⁷ A Quote from a 6th Year Teenager.

8. It is also worth remembering that older siblings having a house party where drink is available provides opportunities for younger siblings to obtain drink.¹²⁸
9. According to some teenagers, they normally only drink when there "is a social event on, like a disco or house party"¹²⁹. Given this fact, there is a need for extra vigilance at the following times.
 - The night the Junior Certificate results are released.
 - The weekend at the start of the October mid-term & Halloween night itself.
 - The days the Christmas exams finish and the Christmas holidays begin.
 - House parties over Christmas.
 - The weekend the spring mid-term starts/ends and when mock exams finish.
 - When the Easter holidays start and finish.
 - The weekend the summer holidays begin and end, as well as events such as concerts and outdoor music festivals.
10. The aftermath of big sporting events such as soccer, basketball, rugby, hockey or G.A.A. matches can cause particular problems. After such sporting events, win or lose, emotions are high. Excessive drinking heightens passions and excitement. As a result, teenagers can feel invincible and engage in activities in which they would not normally participate. Often, a pack mentality takes over, and can result in activities that may cause criminal damage, or result in serious injury. Teenagers need to be reminded of the long-term consequences of getting a criminal conviction. Having a criminal record can result in difficulties with future job and visa applications. Furthermore, there are a considerable number of third level courses that now require Garda vetting.
11. Parents¹³⁰ have suggested that it is difficult to arrange family based alternatives to divert attention from possible negative activities. As a result, parents find if they collectively arrange alternative activities together, it becomes easier to persuade teenagers to participate in these healthier activities.

Remember, enforcing boundaries as the only means of delaying teenag drinking is unlikely to work without nurturing a strong emotions based teen/parent relationship.



¹²⁸ A Quote from a 6th Year Teenager.

¹²⁹ A Quote from a 5th Year Teenager.

¹³⁰ A Quote from a Parent.

14. Initiating The Conversation

It is important to have a conversation with your teenager about drinking *before* an issue arise.¹³¹ The timing of this conversation is important. Since teenagers are less likely than younger children to ask for information, parents need to take the initiative and talk with teenagers about drinking. Parents¹³² have pointed out that difficulties around this subject begin to emerge at the middle of, or end of, First Year for some teenagers, or in Second Year for others, or Third Year for others. The timing seems to depend on the level of both physical and/or psychological maturity. In addition, other parents¹³³ point out that in Transition Year a collective/group dynamic seems to come into play that acts as a draw for individuals to express their maturity and growing sense of adulthood. It is therefore argued that it may be too late by the age of 14/15 to have this all-important conversation, and that it might be appropriate to enter into this conversation to coincide with the onset of puberty. It is argued that while your child is still malleable, you should make the first move. Here are some pointers for having that conversation.

- Elicit their views on, or perceptions of the subject of drink.
- When doing so, ask open-ended questions, not questions that can be answered using a yes or no. For example, *why do you think people drink? What do you think the dangers are?*
- It is recommended that you respect their views if you want the same in return. It is important not to interrupt or be judgmental, even if you don't agree with their position.¹³⁴
- Some parents have used opportunities that arise when watching television programmes, such as a soap opera, and use the story line to ask of their teenager what they would do in a similar situation if they were offered drink or drugs.
- Don't try to scare a teenager away from drugs by giving them information about the harmful side effects, as it *alone* is not effective.¹³⁵ Indeed, "fearful communication" seems to elicit defensive reactions ("*it won't happen to me*") and is generally ineffective in preventing adolescents from experimenting with substances.¹³⁶ Moreover, studies have shown that simply providing information about the dangers of drink and drugs may actually increase a predisposition to drug use in some circumstances.¹³⁷

¹³¹ *You, Your Child and Alcohol*, Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland.

¹³² A Quote from Parents (3).

¹³³ A Quote from Parents (3).

¹³⁴ *You, Your Child and Alcohol*, Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland.

¹³⁵ Linda Nielsen, *Adolescence*, 3rd ed., (California: Thomson/Wadsworth, 1996) p 556.

¹³⁶ S.J. Patterson, *Journal of Drug Education*, 1994, p 177-191.

¹³⁷ G.J. Botvin, *Prevention & Societal Impact of Drug & Alcohol Abuse*, (Washington D.C. 1999).

- Begin the process of explaining your expectations to your child. In doing so, it is important for them to feel that you want them to become independent and have the appropriate freedoms that they need to develop. It is important to emphasize that these freedoms need to be balanced with your *right and need* to know your child is safe. It is important for teenagers to know what is expected of them.¹³⁸
- Another issue that might be useful to discuss is what strategies that they can use to avoid being pressurised into drinking. Reassure them it is *Okay* to avoid situations where there might be drinking. For example, a lot of teenagers don't want to drink but fear that saying no will make them unpopular. Therefore, they want their parents to deny them permission.¹³⁸ This gives them an excuse to turn down an offer of drink and to blame their parent when he/she is offered a drink. Give them permission to say, "*my parents will kill me*".
- One method that sometimes works with teenagers is to make the points in such a way that they have a responsibility to prevent others from doing the wrong thing. For example, ask them to make sure nobody in their peer group makes fun of others who don't drink.¹⁴⁰ This has a number of effects. It heightens their concept of what is right and wrong, and it gives them the feeling that not only do you trust them not to drink, but that you also think they have the maturity to prevent others from doing so. This approach taps into their growing sense of maturity and adulthood and enhances self-esteem. Remember, teenagers who have a strong self-image are better able to say "no" and withstand peer pressure.¹⁴¹
- When having this conversation, remember, that no two siblings perceive the same parents in the same way. What may have worked for one child may not work for another. It is also interesting to note the comment of a 5th year student, "*Because my older brother got away with drinking at my age, it was unfair to stop me*"¹⁴². Indeed, several teenagers stated they drank to "*be like and copy their older brother/sister*"¹⁴³. This highlights the difficulties that can arise with younger siblings when a precedent is set with older siblings. Also, if you have older child please don't make comparisons, it severely knocks their self-esteem¹⁴⁴ and drives all teenagers mad.
- If someone in the family has a problem with alcohol, don't hide it from your child; allow the topic to become part of the conversation, when appropriate.

¹³⁸ *Teenagers and Alcohol: A Guide for Parents*, Australian Government - Department of Health.

¹³⁹ A Quote from a Parent with four teenage boys.

¹⁴⁰ *Teenagers and Alcohol: A Guide for Parents*, Australian Government - Department of Health.

¹⁴¹ Jeffrey Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 3rd ed., (London: Prentice Hall, 2009) p 434.

¹⁴² A Quote from a 6th Year Teenager.

¹⁴³ www.drinkaware.co.uk

¹⁴⁴ Harry Barry & Enda Murphy, *Flagging The Screenager*, (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2014) p 179.

15. Clearly Defined Expectations

Teenagers want and need boundaries. Tell them what you expect of them. Reach an agreement on consequences for breaking rules. Make sure it's something fair and appropriate and something on which you are prepared to follow through. It is also important to monitor, and affirm adherence to, clearly defined expectations.¹⁴⁵ Reward your children when they keep to the set of boundaries. It may be useful to renegotiate the rules when circumstances change; for example, because of age/maturity. Remember that while parents continually need to provide the adolescent with opportunities for change, they also need to continue to exert a level of parental control, remembering that the adolescent is not yet an adult.¹⁴⁶

When imposing sanctions or, more appropriately, withdrawing privileges, discuss with your child the one rule that is non-negotiable: your right to know they are always safe at all times. They may respond by saying they are old enough to look after themselves. This misses the point. You should accept they are mature enough to look after themselves and that this is why you give them the freedom to go out. Let them know this. However, you need to shift the conversation to your concern about the dangers out there and your need for them to *let you know* they are safe. It might be worth pointing out that if an adult in the house has indicated that they will be home by a certain time, and they do not return by that time, you will still be worried and would expect a phone call. In other words, this rule applies to all who live in the house regardless of age.

It is important that your child perceives no difference between Mum's and Dad's interpretation and implementation of these boundaries, and the consequences for over stepping these boundaries.¹⁴⁷ With this in mind, it might be useful to use the words "*we expect you to...*" rather than "*I expect you to...*" when having a conversation about expectations.

Also, when there are older siblings in the house it is important to ensure the older sibling is aware of what you expect from their younger brother/sister, and that the older sibling does not unintentionally, or intentionally, undermine the implementation of the boundaries. In the words of those who have been there, "*My older brother/sister gets me drunk.*"¹⁴⁸

Some parents approaching the setting of boundaries as a business contract. Indeed, some parents have even entered into signed contracts with their children about these issues. This never works. If tempted, it is worth remembering the discussion around the strength of the parent/teen relationship mentioned throughout this booklet.

At times, it might seem easier to back down, or give in to your child, when boundaries are broken. However, to do so is to gain short-term peace but always with negative long-term consequences. Remember that their adolescence will last a number of years and that you are in this for the long haul, and that there will be many occasions when important decisions will have to be made. Sticking to your position, regardless of how unpopular it is, is well worth it in the long run. It is very hard, if not impossible, to put the genie back into the bottle. To quote one parent, "*being afraid to confront or stand your ground is a recipe for disaster.*"¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Dr. Bobby Smyth, Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, Lucena Clinic 6th Oct. 2009.

¹⁴⁶ K. Geldard & D. Geldard, *Counselling Adolescents*, 2nd ed., (London: Sage Publications 2006) p 27.

¹⁴⁷ Dr. Bobby Smyth, Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, Lucena Clinic 6th Oct. 2009.

¹⁴⁸ A Quote from a 6th Year Teenager.

¹⁴⁹ A Quote from a Parent.

16. When the Conversation Gets Difficult

At some point, your child may go against the rules you have set or, indeed, may come home drunk. So, if some day, your child does arrive home having taken drink or drugs, it is suggested that you stay calm,¹⁵⁰ and don't get drawn into an argument while they are under the influence.¹⁵¹ Check that they are physically okay and, since alcohol can camouflage other drugs,¹⁵² it is important to ask them if they have taken any other substances. In short, focus on the medical safety issues on the night, and postpone the disciplinary issues until later.

While you may not have yet found that your child has arrived home drunk, your parental instinct may tell you something is not quite right. You may notice some of the following:

- Becoming irritable and argumentative.
- A change in the normal circle of friends.
- A dis-improvement in personal appearance.
- Lack of energy.
- Increased signs of depression or anxiety or mood swings.
- An inclination to be away from the family.
- Loss of interest in hobbies.
- Dilated pupils, bloodshot eyes, circles under eyes.
- Change in weight, up or down.
- Loss of appetite or constantly hungry (known as the 'munchies').
- Your child may come home chewing gum or mints, or smelling of excessive after-shave/perfume.¹⁵³ To quote the experts, "When I have been drinking it is easy to hide it from my parents when I come home."¹⁵⁴
- You may come across paraphernalia associated with making cannabis joints including: a pouch of, or traces of, loose tobacco, torn pieces of cardboard from cigarette boxes, or filter paper packets.¹⁵⁵
- You may find burn holes in his/her clothes.
- Money may disappear.
- Drink in the house may disappear or be watered down.
- Your child may go out for the evening with a rucksack.
- He/she may be spending too much time in his/her room or become very secretive and disengage from family members.¹⁵⁶
- If substance abuse mainly occurs at the weekend, you may notice a change in mood mid-week.
- If there is a prolonged period away from home/peers, e.g. on a holiday during which there is not access to any substances, there may be a noticeable change (positive or negative) in his/her mood.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁰ *Teenagers and Alcohol: A Guide for Parents*, Australian Government - Department of Health.

¹⁵¹ *Straight Talk - A Guide For Parents on Teenage Drinking*, Health Promotion Unit, H.S.E.

¹⁵² *Teenagers and Alcohol: A Guide for Parents*, Australian Government - Department of Health.

¹⁵³ *Straight Talk - A Guide For Parents on Teenage Drinking*, Health Promotion Unit, H.S.E.

¹⁵⁴ A Quote from a 6th Year Teenager.

¹⁵⁵ *Understanding Substances & Substance Abuse*, Department of Education & Science. p 47.

¹⁵⁶ *Parenting Positively, Teenage Well-Being*, Family Support Agency & Barnardos 2009, p. 11-12.

¹⁵⁷ A Quote from a Parent.

There is no definite way to distinguish some of the above symptoms from some of the normal, adolescent, characteristic behaviours. However, the more of the above symptoms you notice, and the longer they persist, the greater the possibility is that something may be wrong.

When faced with any of these situations, many parents react by trying to take control. They may become very strict, and battle with their teenagers to ensure they toe the line. This approach is problematic: teenagers with very strict parents may rebel even more strongly, escalating the conflict, or they may go 'underground' with their problems. Your calmness will instil calmness and if you respond with anger you will get anger back. As your teenager may already feel bad about what they have done, avoid inducing more shame and guilt¹⁵⁸ as this will make them feel even worse and therefore, less like to change.

Human have a natural tendency to avoid persuasion. We do not like to be told what to do. In fact, we have a reflect tendency to activate the other side of an argument when we hear an opposing view expressed. Indeed, it is common for people to become resistant when they feel their choices are limited or they are being threatened.¹⁵⁹ Therefore, avoid telling them what to do. Get them to argue their point of view and then get them to verbalise how you might feel. Ask them to verbalise how you might feel and ask them for suggested solutions. People are often more persuaded by what they hear themselves say than by what other people tell them.¹⁶⁰ Also, make it easy for them to admit their wrongdoing and avoid putting them in a position where they might lie and always praise their admitting and always accept their apology and always remember to search for the emotional need they are trying to fulfil. The more we understand their feelings the more we can help them understand their feelings and change them.¹⁶¹

As previously stated, all human behaviour - be it positive or negative - has a purpose. We partake in positive behaviour to obtain positive feelings for ourselves. Similarly, we often engage in negative behaviour; ironically, to gain - consciously or unconsciously - a positive feeling. This latter point is difficult to grasp for some teenagers, as they are sometimes unable to identify why they behave in a particular manner. It therefore needs to be asked, what teenagers are getting - psychologically speaking - from their behaviour? Are they trying to feel grown up? Are they curious about drink? Are they trying to feel independent or confident? Are they trying to fit in with their peers and be accepted? Are they trying to rebel? Are they trying to cope with some unhappiness, or with rejection, or with low self-esteem? To help with this conversation it might be worth re-reading Section 5 of this booklet.

¹⁵⁸ David Coleman, *Parenting Is Child's Play - The Teenage Years*, (Dublin: Penguin, 2010) p 42.

¹⁵⁹ W. Reinke, K. Herman, R. Sprick, *Motivational Interviewing for Effective Classroom Management*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 2011) p 60.

¹⁶⁰ W. R. Miller & S. Rollnick, *Motivational Interviewing, 2nd ed.* (London: The Guilford Press, 2002) p 39.

¹⁶¹ David Coleman, *Parenting Is Child's Play - The Teenage Years*, (Dublin: Penguin, 2010) p 60.

17. Seeking Help

All families have their ups and downs. There may be periods of difficulties with relationships between husband and wife, between parent and child, or between siblings. Indeed, there may also be the trauma of redundancy, illness, or bereavement that may impact on the atmosphere in the home. Some teenagers who experience such family difficulties can continue on and cope without these difficulties impacting on their lives. However, other teenagers can, and do, encounter situations whereby difficulties in the home have such an emotional impact that they hinder their emotional development and, as a result, increase the chances of their getting involved in alcohol and substance abuse.

In such situations, the provision of information to the Year Head/Tutor/Guidance Counsellor is vital if the school is to help your child. Such a request will always be treated in the strictest of confidence, and the information only used to adapt the school's responses to cater for your teenager's situation. Without such information, the school may inadvertently treat your child's possible *acting out* or *acting inwards* as purely a disciplinary matter and, without knowing, add to his/her difficulties. If you choose not to tell the school, please seek help privately. Seeking help will never make things worse. Not doing so may actually exacerbate the situation. Some quotes summarise what teenagers said about this issue; "I drank and smoked weed to numb the pain I felt in my head", "I do it do self-medicate" and "some drink to remember, I drink to forge"¹⁶².

18. Conclusion

Some parents may feel that the suggestions made in this booklet are an attempt to preach a certain parenting style. However, this is not the case and we ask that the suggestions made be taken in the spirit in which they are intended; that is, to be helpful and to provide assistance, and to pass on our experience of teenagers parents and experts in this area.

We do not pretend to have all the answers. Indeed, this booklet does not contain the perfect solution to the problem of alcohol and substance abuse. There is no perfect answer or simple answer. In fact, some people may dismiss the suggestions made because they actually don't provide a perfect or easy solution. Human nature dictates that when we encounter a problem we seek out one act or event or set of words that will fix the problem. Because there is none, we should remember that this is a *continuous process* that lasts over a period of years and that to seek out a quick fix only serves to cause frustration. Consider the issue of losing weight. To lose weight we often seek out a simple quick fix solution that never works long term. However, there is one prove sure-fire very simple approach to losing weight, i.e. less food/more healthy food and more exercise. Why do we seek alternative to this - because the best approach is very hard work. Similarly, the enhancing of our relationship with our teenager is hard work, but it should also be seen as the approach that optimises the chances of delaying drinking for as long as possible.

It is worth restating that the vast majority of teenagers will develop into fine, healthy, independent adults. As the journey that is adolescence progresses, there will inevitably be bumps along the road. The cautionary notes made in this booklet are designed to reduce the severity of those bumps, and to minimise the chances of those bumps having a lasting impact on either your child's ability to live an independent life or on your long term relationship with them. Finally, remember that nobody can be a perfect parent - but being the best you can be is usually enough.

¹⁶² A Summary of Quote from 5th Year Teenager (18).

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