

# Tackling Teen Drinking

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A new survey released last weekend found that the number of underage drinkers picked up by paramedics has grown by a third in the last 8 years, with a quarter more girls than boys treated for alcohol poisoning. So how do you deal with your teens if you're worried they're drinking too much? Janey Downshire & Naella Grew run [Teenagers Translated](#), which provides expert courses for parents and teenagers on how to deal with what are a bewildering range of issues they face. Janey and Naella have written a special article for us on the challenges of teenagers and alcohol:

“Teenage drinking is a very emotive issue which many parents feel is out of our control. At Teenagers Translated we run courses to help improve adult relationships with teenagers and as parents of teenagers ourselves (7 between us) we are aware of the plethora of issues facing us as parents. Alcohol consumption is one of the highest on our list.

We all hear dreadful stories, but what really matters is “what about my child, what can I do to discourage my child from having the same attitude as their peers towards alcohol”?

We don't want our children to grow up believing that throwing up through drinking too much is either cool, or normal. We are facing many other serious issues, for instance porn and teenage sex. A common thread throughout all of these issues is the teenager's attitude: its no big deal, so what's the problem?

One problem we have identified is that the more out of control parents feel, the more tempting it is to just opt out and pretend it's not happening. Many parents are multi-tasking, working hard, juggling busy lives. Our child progresses from the safety of the nursery out into the big bad world and it's a world we can't relate to.

Amidst feelings of helplessness and ignorance we clutch at straws: we can impose stricter boundaries (and enter the battleground), we can vent some of our fears by sharing dramas with friends or we can disengage.

The latter is a classic self-preservation technique. We appear to be dispassionate, but all the while we are hiding our deep rooted fear behind a mask of seeming indifference. What our child picks up is a permissive parenting style: if I go quietly they won't kick up a fuss (do they care anyway?) We feel that this is an area where parents can get some leverage and make a difference to the behavioural outcomes of their child. Teenagers switch their focus from their parents to their peers as part of their quest for independence and where there is little opportunity to talk in a non-judgmental environment at home, they will look for reassurance from their peers.

What teenagers need is to feel that they belong, that they really do matter, that you are interested in them (but you are not hovering over them). What we want our teenagers to know is that they are too special to damage their brains irreparably – because this is what is happening through alcohol abuse. Alcohol is poison and the damage done to teenage brains never repairs itself.

One statistic which we heard was: 2 drinks per day for 2 years during the teenage years results in a whopping 10% loss of memory, not to mention the roots of the pathways of addiction which are being set up with every rush of dopamine high which hits this vulnerable, plastic, changing brain. That is the rational argument, but what has struck us as parents is the realisation that beneath the bravado of many teenagers lies fear, and the one way we can successfully subdue our emotions is with the calming effect of an alcoholic drink.

Teenagers are unable to see the consequences of their actions, without an opportunity to think through issues and choices for themselves. The average teenager is limited to 38 minutes a week of meaningful conversation with an adult they respect. Keeping channels of communication open gives them an opportunity to pause and reflect on where they stand on specific issues – in an instant gratification world where there are no limits.

Talking about values, what they are worried about and what is important to them is how our child develops their own inner moral compass, sets their own limits and develops their own sense of autonomy. Having a good relationship with parents also leaves them feeling calm and contented. In fact it has the same effect on the body as a drink.

We can also try to educate our teens in ways that are meaningful to them – lecturing does not work. As parents, we need to recognize when our child wants to talk to us and allow them to express their opinions because this gives us an opportunity to find out how they feel about issues so that we can start to have confidence in their judgment.

But if our child does choose to open up to us (which might feel quite risky for them) and then we then have to be careful as to how we react. A knee jerk response will cause them to go back underground. They need to trust us, just as much as we need to trust them. We also need to respect their efforts to get things right. Once our child resorts to lying or not talking to us, we know that they are avoiding telling us the truth, and we need to ask ourselves why.”