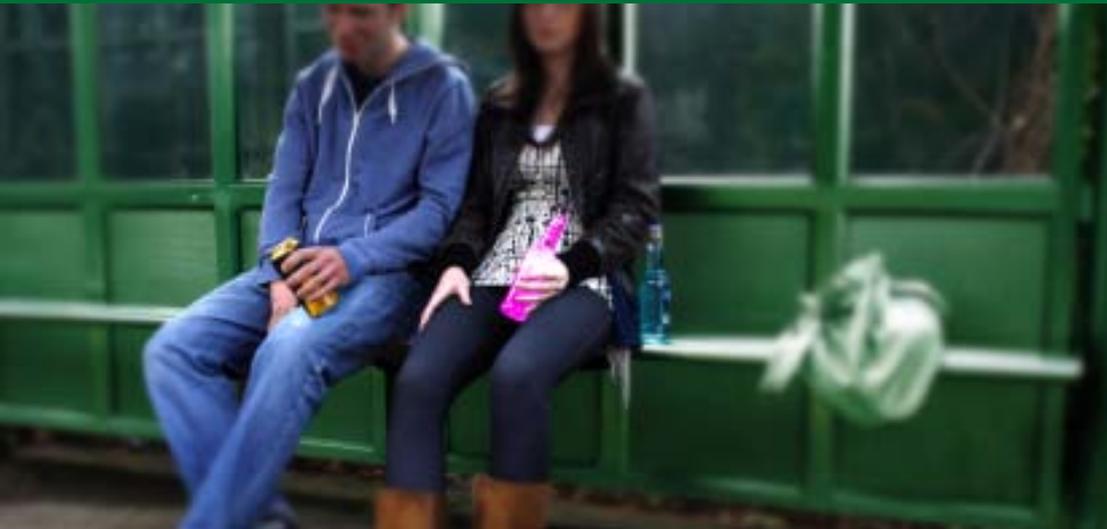


# YOU, YOUR CHILD AND ALCOHOL



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru  
Welsh Assembly Government

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## GUIDANCE ON THE CONSUMPTION OF ALCOHOL BY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

**From Dr Tony Jewell**  
Chief Medical Officer for Wales



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Over the past decade, public concern about the impact of alcohol on health and our society has steadily mounted. Particular concern has focussed on the level and pattern of drinking among children and young people in Wales and its consequences on health, crime, violence and anti-social behaviour.

As such, I have used all the available evidence to make policy recommendations and to develop the following three guiding principles which will help protect our children and young people from the risks associated with alcohol consumption.

The three guiding principles are:

- Children under 15 shouldn't drink alcohol. There is clear evidence that alcohol can harm the developing brain, bones and hormones
- Drinking at age 15 and older can be hazardous to health. Binge drinking and heavy alcohol use puts young people in peril - from injuries, fights, regretted sexual activity, and other substance misuse
- If parents use alcohol responsibly, it's more likely their children will too. Parents and carers can protect children from misusing alcohol by maintaining a close relationship with their children, setting clear rules about alcohol, and supervising their children's drinking.

During the development of the Welsh Assembly Government's substance misuse strategy, Working Together to Reduce Harm (2008)<sup>1</sup>, there was a clear consensus that there should be a much greater focus on tackling the potentially risky and harmful consumption of alcohol among children and young people.

The task becomes more urgent when we consider the statistics that demonstrate that young people in Wales are drinking alcohol at substantially higher rates than most of their counterparts in Europe and North America.

Research<sup>2</sup> shows that:

- 4 out of 10 Welsh 15-year-olds drink alcohol on a weekly basis;
- 2 out of 10 15-year-olds report having being drunk for the first time at the age of 13 or younger;
- since 1990 the amount of alcohol consumed by 11 to 15-year-olds has doubled; and
- more than 250,000 young people aged 11 to 16 in Wales reported being drunk at least twice - this is more than a quarter of that age group.

Other research<sup>3</sup>, published in 2009, has reviewed the evidence of the potential risks associated with alcohol consumption among young people.

In particular, it explored the relationship between the age at which young people start drinking and the acute and longer-term consequences of alcohol consumption among people under the age of 18.

Establishing a sensible relationship with alcohol early on in life can help young people to minimise the potential longer term risks to their health, and help reduce pressures on family, friends and the health service, who often have to be on hand to deal with the consequences.

This is why we need to take action now to protect our children and young people, and help them to understand how risks change with both age of drinking and the frequency and quantity of alcohol they consume.

On a positive note the majority of young people under the age of 15 do not drink, and many young people aged 16 to 17 do not drink on a regular basis. We need to build on these foundations, working with the parents or carers of children and young people in carrying through these guiding principles.

### Why the guiding principles matter...for children

**Children under 15 shouldn't drink alcohol. There is clear evidence that alcohol can harm the developing brain, bones and hormones**

The potential harms include:

**Alcohol misuse** Children who begin drinking at a young age drink more frequently and in greater quantities than those who delay drinking. Vulnerability to alcohol misuse in later adolescence appears to be greatest among those who begin drinking before the age of 13.

**Developmental problems** Heavy drinking in young people can affect brain functions related to motivation, reasoning and other processes. Heavy drinking during adolescence may also affect normal brain functioning during adulthood. Young people who drink heavily may experience adverse effects on liver, bone, growth and hormones.

**Risky behaviour** Beginning to drink in the early teens is associated with increased health risks, including alcohol-related injuries, involvement in violence, and suicidal thoughts and attempts. Drinking at an early age is also associated with unwanted sexual activity, unwanted pregnancy, using drugs, employment problems, and risky driving behaviours.

## **Why the guiding principles matter ... for young people**

**Drinking at age 15 and older can be hazardous to health. Binge drinking and heavy alcohol use puts young people in peril - from injuries, fights, regretted sexual activity, and other substance misuse.**

The potential harms include:

**Inappropriate sexual activity** Teenagers who use alcohol are more likely to have had unplanned sexual intercourse and contracted sexually transmitted diseases. There is evidence that young women who binge drink are more likely to have experienced sex that they subsequently regretted, forced sex, or attempted forced sex, and that the risk of emotional and physical harm and unwanted pregnancies increases.

**Violence** Young people who drink frequently or binge drink are more likely to be involved in fights, to be injured fighting, to commit violent offences including sexual offences and to carry weapons.

**Longer-term** Young people who binge drink in adolescence are more likely to be binge drinkers as adults and have an increased risk of developing alcohol dependence in young adulthood. Young people who binge drink at an early age are more likely to experience drug use and dependence, be involved in crime, and achieve lower educational attainment as adults.

## **Why the guiding principles matter ... for parents and carers**

**If parents use alcohol responsibly, it's more likely their children will too. Parents and carers can protect children from misusing alcohol by maintaining a close relationship with their children, setting clear rules about alcohol, and supervising their children's drinking.**

Factors that influence alcohol use include:

**Parental behaviour** Parental use of alcohol increases the likelihood that children will also consume alcohol. In addition, a family history of alcoholism is associated with an increased risk of alcoholism in children. On the positive side, the use of incentives, setting limits and consequences for behaviour, and negotiating boundaries and rules for appropriate behaviour are associated with less alcohol use in early adolescence, and lower rates of problematic drinking in early adulthood.

**Quality of relationships** Warm and supportive parent-adolescent relationships are associated with lower levels of adolescent alcohol use, as well as lower rates of problematic alcohol use and misuse.

**Peer pressure** Peers - children and young people of the same age - play an important role in the onset of an individual's drinking behaviours. The effect of peers has been shown to be particularly powerful when parent-adolescent relationships are poorer in quality.

## **Putting the principles into practice**

For many parents, bringing up the subject of alcohol with their children is no easy matter. Parents may think that they have little influence on their children's decisions as they enter into their teenage years, or they may even be a little unsure how to broach the subject.

The truth is, parents often underestimate how much influence they actually have on their children and the power they have to set appropriate boundaries.

But for parents to feel confident enough to talk to their children about alcohol and to empower them to set appropriate boundaries, they may need more information and advice.

The Welsh Assembly Government's Strengthening Families Programme recognises that many of the factors that protect young people from alcohol and drug abuse, or put them at greater risk of such abuse, are linked to family life and parenting.

The programme aims to develop parenting and communication skills, and enhance young people's ability to avoid health-damaging behaviours. The Strengthening Families Programme is now established in Caerphilly, Swansea, Flintshire, Carmarthenshire, Merthyr and Wrexham.

I will shortly be issuing an information leaflet designed to help provide parents with the guidance they need to talk to their children about alcohol, and to help give them the confidence to do so.

The Welsh Assembly Government is also launching a public awareness campaign to inform people about its new approach and set out the guiding principles to help reduce the levels of alcohol consumption by children and young people in Wales.



**Dr Tony Jewell**

**Chief Medical Officer for Wales**

## References

1. The Welsh Assembly Government's substance misuse strategy, Working Together to Reduce Harm, published in 2008, is available at:  
<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/housingandcommunity/safety/publications/strategy0818/?lang=en>
2. Information about alcohol consumption among children and young people in Wales, together with international comparisons, is available in the Health Behaviour of School-aged Children reports, published by the World Health Organization, and available at:  
<http://www.hbsc.org/>
3. 'Guidance on the consumption of alcohol by children and young people' (2009) published by the Department of Health and available at:  
[http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_110258](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_110258)

## For more information

Drink Wise Wales is any easy-to-use bilingual website giving information on sensible drinking, where you can calculate how much you are drinking, and learn about how alcohol affects your body. There's also information on the number of calories in popular alcoholic drinks, and a reaction game demonstrating how alcohol can slow you down.

[www.drinkwisewales.org.uk](http://www.drinkwisewales.org.uk) and [www.yfeddoethcymru.org.uk](http://www.yfeddoethcymru.org.uk)

DAN, the Wales Drug and Alcohol Helpline, provides free and confidential information or help on issues relating to drugs or alcohol.

**Call 0800 6 33 55 88**

The Why Let Drink Decide website provides separate sections for parents and for teenagers. The section for parents provides facts, advice and information about the relationship between teenagers and alcohol - all the information they need to start talking to their children about alcohol. For teenagers, the site gives advice on how to stay safe, stay in control, and the facts on how alcohol can affect them and their friends.

[www.whyletdrinkdecide.direct.gov.uk](http://www.whyletdrinkdecide.direct.gov.uk)

The Health Challenge Wales website provides practical advice on a range of healthy living issues, including sensible drinking.

<http://wales.gov.uk/hcwsubsite/healthchallenge/?lang=en>