



# Rethinking teen drinking

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Adolescence is an exciting and important time in development; there are many opportunities, but there are also some risks. A tricky issue for almost every parent is alcohol. Everyone has an opinion about the age teens should start drinking, and how much influence their parents should wield.

We do know that alcohol can influence their development. And we know that adolescent brains are different from adult brains. Adolescent brains are changing rapidly, and very open to what they are experiencing. If an adolescent and an adult drink the same amount, the adolescent is more likely to be harmed by it.<sup>1</sup> Having a good understanding of what we know about teen drinking can help parents, whānau and others guide teens successfully. This article looks at the risks of teen drinking, how much it is happening in New Zealand and the ways in which drinking in adolescence is different from adult drinking, as well as the kind of influence parents and whānau can have.

## The effects last longer than the 'high'. The risks of alcohol

Alcohol related risks can be both short-lived and long-term. When we think about teens and drinking we tend to think of the immediate effects, such as their increased risk of being involved in car accidents, assaults and injuries due to drunken-ness.<sup>2</sup> And indeed these tragic things are more likely to occur for those who drink alcohol.

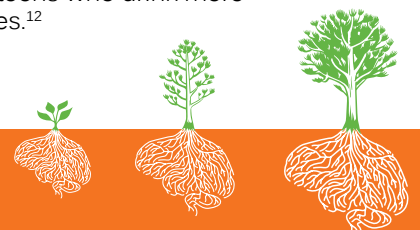
One risk that we may be less aware of is criminal behaviour.<sup>3</sup> Research shows that those who drink as teens are more likely to be involved in stealing.<sup>4</sup> Adolescent drinking is also associated with increased mental health difficulties such as depression,<sup>5</sup> and with alcohol abuse or dependence in adulthood.<sup>6</sup>



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Sexual behaviour is affected by drinking as well. Teens who drink are at greater risk of early sexual activity,<sup>7</sup> unwanted sex,<sup>8</sup> risky sex, including having multiple partners,<sup>9</sup> sexual abuse, unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.<sup>10</sup>

Drinking alcohol increases the risk of deliberate self-harm and suicide.<sup>11</sup> Researchers are learning the way in which alcohol affects neurotransmitters, the chemicals used by brain cells to send messages. It has been shown that drinking as a teen can lead to feelings of greater unhappiness, increased aggression, more difficulty finding effective solutions to problems, and more impulsive behaviour. These things in turn can lead to great vulnerability and make teens who drink more likely to harm themselves.<sup>12</sup>





Unsurprisingly, parents' attitudes and behaviour towards alcohol influence their teens. Whether or not young people drink, and if so, how they drink, is influenced by their parents in a significant way.

Many parents wanting to support their teens think that they can teach them to drink safely by giving them alcohol and watching over them.<sup>25</sup> Although this is well-intended and commonly believed, many studies now show that parent approval of any level of drinking and parents supplying alcohol is linked to worse, not better outcomes.<sup>26</sup>

Adolescents who have parents who usually know where they are, what they're doing and who they're with, are likely to drink less.<sup>27</sup>

### Is everyone else really drinking?

A large study of New Zealand secondary school students, aged 13-18 years, showed a wide range of behaviours. More than half the students had tried alcohol (57%) and almost half (45%) had further drinks after their first one. Of those who were drinking, over half (56%) had drunk alcohol once or less in the past month. Of concern is that almost a quarter of drinking students (23%) had been binge drinking in the past month, and a small but very worrying group (5%) reported drinking several times each week or on most days.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, a large group have not tried alcohol (43%). This figure is important; teens who think that many of their friends and school-mates are drinking, are more likely to do so themselves.<sup>14</sup> Parents too are influenced by what they think everyone else is doing. And this influences their children, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. When parents expect their teens to drink, their teens are likely to drink more.<sup>15</sup>

While teens may feel as though 'everyone else is drinking,' the reality is a large proportion of under-18s are not.

### The age someone starts drinking does matter

The age at which children or teens first drink alcohol matters. The younger they are when they start to drink, the greater the chance that they will have alcohol-related problems<sup>16</sup> or other substance abuse<sup>17</sup> in adulthood.

One large study found that those who began drinking before they were 14 had a 40% chance of alcohol dependence, while those who waited until 20 years or older had a 10% chance. Those who started drinking before they were 15 were 2 to 3 times as likely to develop alcohol abuse or dependence, than those who began drinking when they were 19 or older.<sup>18</sup> Every extra year that young people wait before beginning drinking lessens the chance of later alcohol abuse or dependence.<sup>19</sup>

Children don't have to have a whole drink to be affected. A study found that children who had sipped alcohol before they were 10 years old, were almost twice as likely to be drinking by 15 years.<sup>20</sup>

It's because of research findings such as these that guidelines in several countries, including Aotearoa, recommend that people under 15 years not drink any alcohol and those under 18 years, delay drinking for as long as possible.<sup>21</sup>

### Parents do make a difference

There are lots of factors that influence whether or not young people drink, and if so, how much and how often. Alcohol marketing,<sup>22</sup> the number of places to buy alcohol,<sup>23</sup> and social media<sup>24</sup> all have an impact.

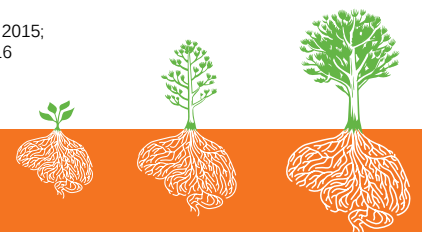
...many studies now show that parent approval of any level of drinking and parents supplying alcohol is linked to worse, not better outcomes.

### Those who are already vulnerable

Sadly, those who've experienced maltreatment, including sexual abuse, and seeing family violence are more likely to begin drinking at a younger age and more likely to develop alcohol dependence.<sup>28</sup>

Both genes and experiences can contribute to alcohol problems.<sup>29</sup> A family history of alcohol problems does not make alcohol issues inevitable, but does make them more likely.

- <sup>1</sup> Spear, 2014
- <sup>2</sup> White & Bariola, 2006; Fergusson & Boden, 2011
- <sup>3</sup> Fergusson & Boden, 2011, cited by Matua Raki, 2017
- <sup>4</sup> Clark et al., 2013
- <sup>5</sup> Fergusson et al., 2009
- <sup>6</sup> Palmer et al., 2009
- <sup>7</sup> Rothman et al., 2009
- <sup>8</sup> Clark et al., 2013
- <sup>9</sup> Windle et al., 2009
- <sup>10</sup> Matua Raki, 2017
- <sup>11</sup> Norstrom & Rossow, 2016
- <sup>12</sup> Borges et al., 2016
- <sup>13</sup> Adolescent Health Research Group, 2013
- <sup>14</sup> Gazis et al., 2010, cited by McDonough et al., 2016
- <sup>15</sup> Madon et al., 2006, cited by Steinberg, 2016
- <sup>16</sup> Ministry of Health, 2015
- <sup>17</sup> Windle, 2009
- <sup>18</sup> Dawson et al., 2008
- <sup>19</sup> Grant & Dawson, 1997
- <sup>20</sup> Donovan & Molina, 2011, cited by Donovan & Molina, 2014
- <sup>21</sup> Ryan et al., 2011
- <sup>22</sup> Anderson et al., 2009
- <sup>23</sup> Kelly et al., 2016
- <sup>24</sup> Lyons et al., 2014
- <sup>25</sup> Jones et al., 2015
- <sup>26</sup> Abar et al., 2014; Jones, 2016; Colder et al., 2018; Mattick et al., 2018
- <sup>27</sup> Savage et al., 2017
- <sup>28</sup> WHO, 2015; Oberleitner et al., 2015; Newton-Howes & Boden, 2016
- <sup>29</sup> Park et al., 2011







One study found that a young person's environment had a bigger impact than their family history of drinking on whether or not they developed alcohol-related problems.<sup>30</sup> Those with a family history of alcohol issues may benefit even more than others from parents and whānau encouraging them to delay beginning to drink.<sup>31</sup>

Studies on the brain are finding that some people who go on to have problems with alcohol had brain differences before they began drinking, which may have made them more prone to developing problems. Of course, we can't always tell who those at greater risk might be; it's possible these are the teens who would most benefit from delaying drinking.

### “But you drink- why shouldn't I?” What's different about drinking in adolescence?

Whilst some teens may look like adults, alcohol affects them differently to how it affects adults. Just because they may be towering over their parents in height, doesn't mean they're adults just yet!

Animal studies suggest that adolescents are less sensitive to some of alcohol's short-term negative effects on their movement and sleepiness but more sensitive to some of its positive effects, such as feeling more social. As a result, adolescents may find it more difficult to recognise signs that they should stop drinking which may contribute to their drinking more than adults.

A lot of things are changing during adolescence. Along with changing bodies, schools, taste in music, and clothing styles, their brains are changing too. In recent years we've realised that there are a lot of changes happening in the brains of young people; much more than was previously thought. This is a really important time for them as they gradually leave childhood behind and move towards becoming adults. What happens during these years affects how well placed they will be to become the adults in their whānau and wider communities. Positive experiences, chances to practice skills and follow their interests, with strong, loving whānau support, will set them up to do well.

During times of rapid brain development, the brain is more easily affected by what happens to a young person. This means that the brain of an adolescent is more open to positive opportunities; it can also be more affected by not-so-good things. This is one of the reasons why drinking in adolescence is different from drinking in adulthood. The effects of alcohol are happening when the brain is busy growing, and alcohol can affect how the brain grows.

The ways in which alcohol affects the adolescent brain are complicated; it depends on lots of things, such as which area of the brain we're looking at. Gender can make a difference too.

Some studies look at the physical brain structure, and find things such as that heavy drinking is linked to some areas of the brain being smaller. Other studies look at how the brain is functioning – the way alcohol can put teens at higher risk of poor decision making and problem-solving, for example.

Some things are clear though; drinking in adolescence, especially when it's heavy, can change the brain.

While most of us know about the possible short-term effects of drinking too much, such as slurred speech and difficulty taking in information, it's less widely known that problematic drinking in adolescence can have more lasting effects on the brain and how it works, even after a period of non-drinking. Drinking can affect adolescents long after their hang-over wears off.

### Conclusion

Drinking alcohol in the teen years carries a number of risks; these are greater than for similar levels of drinking in adulthood. As in other areas of our young people's lives, parents, whānau and other adults play an important role. Their own behaviour, their attitudes and their expectations of young people can all have an impact.

**Research clearly indicates that delaying the age at which young people are introduced to alcohol reduces the risk of alcohol related problems.**

If you enjoyed this article here are some others that may be of interest.



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<sup>30</sup> Seglem et al., 2016

<sup>31</sup> Park et al., 2011

<sup>32</sup> Windle et al., 2009

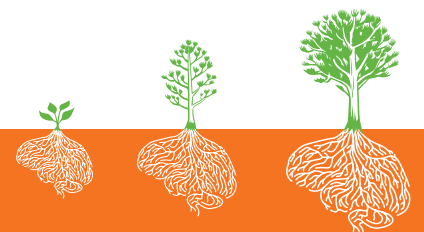
<sup>33</sup> Spear, 2014

<sup>34</sup> Spear, 2014

<sup>35</sup> Squeglia et al., 2014

<sup>36</sup> Pfefferbaum et al., 2017

<sup>37</sup> Brown et al., 2000



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