



LITTLE TALKS CAN HAVE A

**BIG IMPACT**

# A guide to chatting with kids about alcohol.

[DrinkSense.ca](https://www.drinksense.ca)



# Little Talks, **BIG IMPACT**

**Tying their shoes. Riding a bike. Their first job.  
Getting a driver's license.**

There are so many joys and firsts to celebrate with the kids in your life. But there are other firsts, that might feel harder to prepare them for: their first party, the first alcoholic drink, the first time they go to a bar.

How you model and talk about alcohol in everyday moments will have a big impact on the youth in your life. This guide will help you prepare for those conversations.

## **BEING INFORMED**

Having all the facts about alcohol will help you have honest and fact-based conversations with the youth in your life. You may not drink alcohol, or you may brew your own beer – either way, as children grow, they will be exposed to many different people with many different customs.

Make sure you know the facts about alcohol and are ready to have well-informed conversations.

**First, let's start with understanding alcohol.**

- Alcohol in beer, wine, and spirits is ethanol and is made from fermented fruits, vegetables, and grains. This is the type of alcohol that is sold at Liquor Marts, beer stores, or restaurants and bars. Alcohol found in household products (e.g., hand sanitizer or hairspray) is not ethanol and is poisonous to drink.
- Alcohol is a depressant. This means that once in the body, it slows the nervous system. The more alcohol consumed, the slower the body will work. The side effects of consuming alcohol could range from feeling relaxed with small amounts to unconsciousness with large amounts.
- Alcohol affects different bodies in different ways. How alcohol will impact a person will depend on size, weight, health, hormones, sex, experience drinking alcohol in the past, and if they have recently had a meal. No two people will experience the side effects of alcohol in the same way.
- Alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream from the stomach. If you've recently eaten, it is absorbed more slowly. If your stomach is empty, alcohol is absorbed faster.
- Once in the bloodstream, alcohol travels to organs and tissues like the brain, liver, kidneys, and muscles. The liver breaks down approximately 90% to 95% of the alcohol in your bloodstream before being removed by the kidneys.
- Combining drugs and alcohol is dangerous. Legal medications and illegal drugs change how your body works, and changes how alcohol affects your body. Mixing alcohol with other drugs or depressants can enhance the effects of alcohol.

## Next, it is important to understand that how youth consume and are affected by alcohol is different than adults.

How your child is exposed to and uses alcohol will depend on their friends, community, culture, and your influence.

- Binge drinking can be a popular way for young adults to drink alcohol. This means having five or more drinks at one time, which prevents the body from properly processing the alcohol. Binge drinking puts people at higher risk of effects like vomiting, loss of consciousness, alcohol poisoning, and associated risks of violence and motor vehicle accidents.
- Teens and young adults are naturally impulsive and inclined to take risks; it is a normal part of development. Impulsivity and curiosity combined with alcohol might result in youth finding themselves in circumstances they are not ready for or that are unsafe. Because of the effects of alcohol, your normally responsible child may take life-altering risks without fully understanding the consequences.
- Similar to other substances, there is a link between consuming alcohol as a teen and developing a dependency in adulthood. The earlier your child begins drinking, the increased risk of having an addiction in adulthood.
- Young people are often unaware of the different side effects of alcohol and are unprepared for how it will impact them personally. For example, alcohol can amplify your feelings – not just confidence and happiness but sadness and loneliness too.

## HOW MUCH IS 1 DRINK?



**Beer**  
341 ml/12 oz  
5% alcohol content



**Cider/Cooler**  
341 ml/12 oz  
5% alcohol content



**Wine**  
142 ml/5 oz  
12% alcohol content



**Spirits**  
43 ml/1.5 oz  
40% alcohol content

## TALKING IT THROUGH

**Children are always watching and learning from the people around them, and they learn the most from those closest to them.**

Learning about alcohol use is no different, so remember to be open to talking with them at any age. Every conversation is an opportunity for you to provide honest and factual information that can help them make positive choices.



# TIPS FOR TALKING

- Be curious and open to hearing their thoughts. If you are truly interested in having a conversation, avoid being judgmental of the questions they ask or the information they share.
- Answer honestly, every time. If you avoid their questions now, they'll avoid asking you in the future. If you don't know the answer, tell them that and offer to find the answers together.
- Have lots of *little* talks. Short, consistent, and age-appropriate conversations about alcohol helps the message stay relevant and meaningful without feeling awkward or uncomfortable.
- Talk often, using everyday circumstances to provide context for your conversations. Drinking at a restaurant, a party in a movie where teens are drinking, a family BBQ where alcohol is present - there are opportunities for little chats throughout your day-to-day life.



# SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN

(ages 5-9)

Children this age are interested in how the body works, so focus your conversations on the impact alcohol has on the body. If you are in settings where alcohol is served, use that as an opportunity to chat about drinking.

Some key messages to share could include:

- Identifying which drinks have alcohol and which do not.
- Alcohol is something that enters your bloodstream and affects your body and brain.
- It's a beverage that some adults drink, but it isn't appropriate for growing bodies.
- It can affect your brain, liver, kidneys and other organs as it moves around the body.
- Too much alcohol can make you sick.





# PRETEENS

(ages 10–13)

**This is the age when children may first try alcohol. It is important to prepare them for that first experience, even if they haven't asked you any questions yet. Let them know you are always available to talk.**

Answer their questions openly and honestly. Children this age may be curious about why you or others in their lives drink, or how it is portrayed in TV, movies, and on social media.

Your kids may also be of the age where you can talk about consequences and your family's history with alcohol.

**Talk with your kids when you buy alcohol or are at events where alcohol is served.**

**If you watch movies or TV shows that include drinking, ask your child if they noticed and what their thoughts are. Ask if they or their friends have tried alcohol.**

**Key messages can include:**

- Why you, or other people, may choose to drink alcohol in moderation (to feel relaxed, at celebrations, etc.). Alternatively, explain why you choose not to drink alcohol.
- Alcohol affects bodies differently, and isn't appropriate for growing and developing bodies and brains.
- Alcohol can make risky behaviours seem okay, and people can get hurt both emotionally and physically from the decisions they make while drinking.
- Alcohol is a depressant and can slow how the body works.
- Alcohol can become addictive, and starting to drink early in life increases the risk of having an addiction as an adult.
- Alcohol impacts all parts of our body, and drinking too much or too often can cause permanent damage to different parts of the body.



# TEENS

(ages 14-17)

**Older teens will have more opportunities to try alcohol and other substances. On average, the first time a teen binge drinks is around 14.**

It is important to have ongoing chats about how to respond to offers of alcohol or other substances, and remind the children in your life that you're available to help if they need it.

Your ongoing and judgement-free support will be the most valuable tool you can offer your teen. Develop a plan together on what to do if they are in an unsafe or uncomfortable situation. Plan for what to do if they are offered alcohol, if they have tried alcohol, or if they feel they need help. This should include making sure they have a person to call if they don't feel safe or need to get home.

Chat with them about what their plans are when they're out with friends if alcohol is present. Ask them if they know anyone who drinks, and what they think about it. If they begin drinking, talk to them about never drinking and driving.



## Key themes when talking with your teen can include:

- Tailor the conversation to your child specifically, acknowledging their age, weight, health and sex will impact how alcohol will affect them.
- Talk about ways to reduce alcohol's effects on the body, such as only drinking when eating a meal or drinking slowly.
- Drinking and driving don't mix. Help them plan a safe way home if they are going out.
- Remind them that alcohol affects bodies differently and that their friends' experiences with alcohol won't necessarily be their experience with it.
- What binge drinking is, and why it is risky.
- How alcohol can decrease inhibitions and lead to more risky choices. Help your teen learn that important decisions and alcohol don't mix.
- What the signs of intoxication and alcohol poisoning are, and what to do in an emergency.
- Mixing alcohol and other substances can be dangerous, even prescribed medications.

# YOUNG ADULTS

(ages 18+)

Once your child is legally able to drink alcohol, it is still important to promote positive behaviours that lower their risks and encourage a balanced lifestyle if they choose to drink.

At this age, it is important to remind your young adult to plan for a safe and fun time – they do not need to have excessive amounts of alcohol to have a good time. This should include:

- Eating a meal before they go out.
- Planning a safe ride home.
- Reducing the risks by knowing who they are out with and how to take care of each other.
- Knowing their limits and when to stop drinking.
- That you're just a phone call away if they need help.

## RESOURCES

As your child grows and develops, so will your conversations. Being prepared, informed, and open will allow you to talk with your children about alcohol and other substances so they are better prepared to make low risk, educated, and informed choices in the future.

For up-to-date information about the responsible use of alcohol, and tools to support your little talks about alcohol, visit [DrinkSense.ca](https://www.drinksense.ca).

Throughout this guide, we have focused on alcohol, but there are many substances your child will be exposed to as they grow up, and they may have similar risks like increased risk-taking or overdose. Some substances like cannabis have specific risks of mental health challenges related to use at a young age or frequent use.

To find information specific to cannabis, visit our website <https://www.mbill.ca/content/cannabis-facts-tips-resources>

**If you are concerned about your child and substance use, please contact:**



- Addictions Foundations Manitoba: toll-free 1-866-638-2561
- Teen Talk: 204-982-7800
- The Link: 204-477-1722
- Youth Addictions Centralized Services: toll-free 1-877-710-3999





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***DrinkSense.ca***

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