

AlcoholNZ article

Title

Teenagers and alcohol – Taking a strengths-based approach to keeping them safe from alcohol

At a glance

- This article was published in print form in HPA's June 2016 *AlcoholNZ* magazine (available on alcohol.org.nz/alcoholnz).
- Dr Sue Bagshaw is the author of this article. She draws on her expertise, experience and knowledge of the evidence to discuss:
 - developmental issues that are happening during adolescence and the impact drinking alcohol can have, including on the developing brain and how young people view risk and rewards
 - how resilience (the ability to bounce back) and protective factors fit in and why these are important
 - what taking a strengths-based approach means for young people and those supporting them, especially those with alcohol problems.

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Teenagers and alcohol

Taking a strengths-based approach to keeping them safe from alcohol

*The following article has been written by **Dr Sue Bagshaw**, Director of the Collaborative Trust, which provides training and undertakes research and evaluation focused on helping young people develop well. She is also a Clinical Senior Lecturer at the Christchurch School of Medicine, University of Otago.*

When my four children were growing up, we, along with many parents, thought that it was the right thing to do to 'teach' our children how to drink. The logic was that the use of alcohol is a widespread social custom in our culture, and that children need to learn how to handle it while they are still in the care of their parents. Today that advice has changed, particularly in light of emerging research on the effect of alcohol on the developing brain.

As a primary care doctor, I have worked with young people in various settings – at Family Planning, at a centre for treatment of drug use and then in a Youth One Stop Shop providing health and social services for 10 to 25-year-olds. I have learnt a lot from young people and their parents and enjoy their energy and ability to bounce back. In this article I will briefly touch on some of the developmental issues, including development of the brain, that are happening during adolescence and the impact drinking alcohol can have. I will then discuss resilience and protective factors and why these are important. Finally, I will cover what this means for young people and for those supporting them.

In this article, I use the word 'teenager' to refer to young people aged between 11 and 19 years and 'young people' to refer to those between 10 and 24 years of age. This is because young people develop at different times and different rates so a range of ages reflects reality more than referring to a specific age for specific steps of development.

The developing adolescent brain and alcohol

The effect of alcohol on the developing brain seems to be different from that on the developed brain. There will be more on this in another article in this issue of *AlcoholNZ*. Understanding the way the brain develops in the teens and early twenties, after sexual and reproductive puberty, is highly relevant to understanding the harm of alcohol. If we understand this better it can help us know how to minimise the harm.

It used to be thought that once sexual and reproductive puberty is complete there is no more left to be done and a child has become an adult. Since the development of MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scanning and the ability to study how the brain develops and works, it has become apparent that there is a long way to go before the child has become a fully formed adult, after the body changes have finished.

Alcohol consumption can be damaging at any stage of brain development, from conception and growing in the womb till completion. Currently we do not know enough about how much alcohol would be damaging and at what stage it is most damaging, but we do know that in adults there is a correlation between brain damage and amount and duration of use. There is now research to show that there is a marked effect on the memory areas of the brain in teenagers who drink alcohol (Tapert et al., 2004). This may be an indication of binge drinking, that is, more than five drinks at one time, but it may also indicate that new ways of laying down memory in the brain, which are highly active for young people, are much more easily destroyed by alcohol. Many other effects of alcohol on the developing brain have been shown. It seems that, until we know more, we should be encouraging young people to delay using alcohol until their brain development is complete.

Understanding how young people view risk and rewards

Risk and taking risks are a significant part of life for everyone. Many people feel that young people decide about taking risks in a different way from adults. In fact, they probably don't. Most people take a risk to achieve what they want. Adults try to weigh the pros and cons, which are generated by knowledge and experience, but in the end take the risk because they 'want to'; the end result is so important that it is worth taking the risk.

Young people are no different. They do not have the knowledge and experience, or the full brain development that provides the skills of fine judgement and impulse control, that adults have but they do things because they feel that they will achieve what is important to them. To understand the risk taking of teenagers, we must understand what is important to them. The point of difference may well lie in the difference between what is important to an adult and what is important to a teenager.

So how can adults prepare young people for the use of alcohol or in fact any activity that has the potential to create addiction? Understanding what is important to a young person is crucial. This is going to differ between individuals according to their personality and family and cultural context but some generalisations can be made. Anyone who has been in a high school playground on multi-day can observe the importance of belonging. Dress is considered an essential sign of belonging, as are speaking the same language and taking part in the same activities. Belonging is very important to young people.

The approval of parents also matters to teenagers, even though some parents would not believe it. Teenagers in high schools across New Zealand would like to spend more time with their parents than they do (Clark et al., 2013). Spending time with teenagers will help parents understand what teenagers find important. For example, if a curfew is in place and the consequence of not keeping it is denial of permission to do an activity that is valued (such as having access to their cellphone) then the curfew will be kept even if it means driving with a drunk driver or being a drunk driver or taking any other risks that are to hand. Parents need to be aware of the implications of the consequences they impose. It is also important for parents to monitor their young people's activities and provide clear boundaries for those activities (Bobakova, Geckova, Klein, Reijneveld & van Dijk, 2012).

The role of reward is also important to understand. Everyone enjoys the satisfaction of achievement, and gaining reward provides that for young people. It is a much greater motivator for teenagers than the avoidance of punishment. Thus consequences that provide reward are going to be more effective in encouraging good behaviour than those that take away that sense of achievement. This is again probably linked to the changes in the brain occurring at this time.

The difference in the importance of time structures between adults and young people is also relevant. Adults tend to want things done to fit in with their timetable, and small children fit in with that as they have no choice. Teenagers have, and in fact are expected to have, their own timetables and are learning how to organise their activities to fit the demands of timetables. Frequently clashes occur when teenagers do not fit in with the timetables of the adults who try to control them. Adults need to learn that their timetable must blend with that of their teens and that they can no longer expect an 'automatic' fit. This is probably one of the most important steps to enable young people to learn self-discipline as opposed to discipline that is imposed on them. One of the key goals of parenting is for the child to be able to control their own behaviour.

So what does this mean for alcohol use by teenagers?

We all know that children learn more from observing and imitating the adults around them than from what we tell them. Teenagers are no exception. So the first thing to do to help young people is to provide a role model of a way to drink alcohol. If we want them to go out and socialise but limit their alcohol use, then that's what we need to do. If we want them to wait until their developing brains are not so affected by alcohol use, we need to provide them with opportunities and challenges from which they can reap rewards that are meaningful for them, so they are happy to delay the use of alcohol.

Joining a sports team is ideal, also rock climbing or kayaking, and for others it might be playing a musical instrument in an orchestra or band. Playing video games seems to be a ubiquitous pastime which has its pros and cons. Action games potentiate the learning process and provide lots of rewards, but can be as addictive as alcohol. There is growing evidence that television is harmful to the brains of small children, but we still have a lot to learn about how video games affect the brains of teenagers.

How resilience and protective factors fit in

Resilience has been described as the ability to bounce back. It has been thought of as protective factors or assets that can be encouraged to grow in a child and young person so that they can bounce back (Benson, Scales & Syvertsen, 2011; Ginsburg & Jablow, 2011), and it has been thought of in terms of relationships and the environments that grow those relationships (Masten & Tellegen, 2012). The early pioneers in resilience noted that a common factor that helped young people from very violent and low socio-economic backgrounds was a positive, strengths-based relationship with at least one caring adult. Resilience and bouncing back are important as they help to make risk taking and getting into risky behaviours less harmful.

The context for growing these relationships in cultures all across the world is the family. It has long been known that secure attachment with one caring adult in the first three years of life (Bowlby, 1958) predicts positive behavioural development later. It has also long been known that authoritative parenting styles with a high degree of consistent love and warmth, and clear boundaries which are negotiated, are the most effective in encouraging positive, less risky behaviour.

So what does this mean for us as we try to provide a great environment for our children and teenagers so that they don't get involved in too many harmful, risky situations?

First – in the first few years of life make sure that babies feel secure and that they are fed when they are hungry, get plenty of cuddles, are played with regularly, and are clean and warm.

Second – as they grow older, provide clear expectations of what they are allowed and not allowed to do. Always try to give a reason and be consistent.

Third – we all get angry and lose our tempers, but don't take it out on the child. Try to get over it quickly and apologise for losing control. By doing that, we are showing them how to regain control and maintain good relationships.

As they grow, they need the freedom to develop emotionally, not just physically. Most people learn by making mistakes. They need the freedom to make mistakes but they need parents to be there to help them get up again.

Everyone needs a cheerleader in their lives. Parents and caregivers should become coaches and guides, and, above all, excellent negotiators. The boundaries set when children are little are about keeping them safe physically; the new boundaries for teenagers can be wider but emotional safety is now key. Teach them to respect others and themselves through our example of respecting them.

When young people have confidence, they can make good decisions. That confidence comes from a secure, loving relationship with their whānau, who find things to praise them for, support them in finding things they are good at, give them challenges, and reward them.

If our families all did that for their children, with the help of our schools, maybe alcohol and other drug use would not have to play such a large part in their lives.

What about young people with alcohol problems?

Sadly, for many different reasons, our families and schools are often not as nurturing as they might be. The wonderful thing about development is that it is never too late. The most important thing for young people with alcohol problems is for the adults around them to recognise the underlying reasons young people use alcohol. It may be that they:

- are just out for a good time – and how do we have a good time in Kiwi culture? We get drunk
- are bored and there is nothing else to do but go out with mates and get drunk
- are very shy and find it difficult to make friends – alcohol is a great help for that
- have bad memories of being abused sexually, physically or emotionally and are trying to drown out the pain
- are ill and have anxiety or depression and are trying to treat themselves with alcohol.

Sometimes parents are too close to find out the reasons and that's where helping services can provide a listening ear and help the young person figure out what is going on. Youth services with youth workers who can encourage the young person to join a group with things to do other than drinking are a great help. Organisations such as St John Youth New Zealand, Scouts New Zealand, GirlGuiding New Zealand, church youth groups and many other youth organisations and groups are there to provide challenges and things to do. Counsellors and doctors are helpful if the reasons for drinking are more serious. Youth One Stop Shops around the country provide all those services in one place, and school health services can also be helpful.

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