



# A QUICK GUIDE TO ALCOHOL IN SOCIAL CONTEXTS

Teenage parties can be a difficult prospect for parents and carers. As children get older, pass the parcel and musical statues often give way to film nights and sleepovers, and the refreshments move on too, with many teens asking whether alcohol can be provided. This quick guide, developed in conjunction with [Tooled Up Education](#), covers the most important things that parents and carers need to know about alcohol within the context of social situations, as well as signposting to further sources of information. Please note that the information in this guide refers to UK guidance and law, and may be different in other locations. However, advice on how to talk to young people is equally applicable wherever you live.



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## WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

This resource is a follow-on to another DSM Foundation publication on alcohol which can be accessed [here](#). That quick guide covered the effects and impacts of alcohol, whereas this will consider social contexts in which alcohol may be present, and the related topics of alcohol first aid and spiking. Note that the [advice on underage drinking](#) is very clear. In the UK, the Chief Medical Officers recommend an alcohol-free childhood as the best and safest option, and say that if children do drink alcohol it shouldn't be until at

least 15 years of age, and at that point only under supervision and once a week at most. The CMOs also state that teenagers who do drink should understand that alcohol can have serious effects on their health and development.

With this in mind, this guide will consider a number of different scenarios and provide some tips that parents can follow and/or pass on to their teenage children.

## HOSTING A PARTY



Your child's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday is looming and they ask if they can have a party – just a few friends, but they fancy having a barbecue so they'd like the run of the house and garden... and a few alcoholic beverages to go with the food?

## TIPS

- ✓ **Find out who is being invited.** The list needs to be closed, not an open invitation on social media, so it doesn't get out of control with dozens of strangers turning up.
- ✓ **Set boundaries.** What are the start and end times? Is anyone staying over?
- ✓ **Make sure it is safe and secure.** Behaviour can get erratic, so scan and remove potential sources of injury. Lock away valuables, barricade doors to rooms that you don't want people going into, use unbreakable tableware and put out recycling bins and rubbish bags.
- ✓ **Be there.** They might want you to go out and leave them to it, but it is highly inadvisable. And get some back-up, not just as company, but to be an extra pair of hands. If there is an emergency, for example, someone will be taken out of the equation, so more than one adult is a must.
- ✓ **Don't be invisible.** Circulate during proceedings (providing a steady stream of food is a good way to make this appear natural) so you can see how things are going.
- ✓ **If you provide alcohol for underage drinkers, remember that if something goes wrong, it is in your home and on your watch, so it is your responsibility.** It is sensible to check with other parents that they are OK with it.
- ✓ **If you agree to providing alcohol, don't put it all out at the beginning and wait to see how it goes.**
- ✓ **Long drinks are best.** The lower the alcohol content the better. Beer is your friend. Wine and spirits most definitely are not.
- ✓ **Watch out for mixed drinks, such as sangria, punch and cocktails.** They are more vulnerable to spiking as they are usually in open receptacles.
- ✓ **Keep an eye on bags.** Many teens may try to smuggle in alcohol (or worse) so be vigilant for those who keep returning to their belongings.
- ✓ **Provide food.** A full stomach will help absorb alcohol, and someone who has taken food from you may feel beholden to you and therefore be better behaved. Pizza works well as it is a good source of carbohydrate yet doesn't lend itself to food fights.
- ✓ **Engage with your child.** It is their party and they need to feel they can come to you if there is a problem, but also share the responsibility... and that includes clearing up!



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## GOING TO A PARTY



Your child comes home from school and mentions a gathering at a friend's house to celebrate the end of exams. You ask a few questions, and soon are met by that old adage: "Everyone else is going... their parents are fine with it."



## TIPS

- ✓ **Don't submit to pester power.** It could set up difficulties going forward.
- ✓ **Stick to your guns.** If something doesn't seem right, it is OK to say that you aren't comfortable with it and so the answer is no.
- ✓ **Ask to speak to the adult who will be present at the event.** That way you can check arrangements first hand, and you'll have a contact number other than your child's.
- ✓ **Set up an escape plan.** Agree a code that they can send you if they feel uncomfortable. It could be a single x or a particular emoji. If you receive it as a message from them, you call and provide them with an excuse to leave without losing face in front of their friends, such as, "My mum has locked herself out of the house". One condition: you must agree that you won't ask questions about why they wanted to leave, otherwise they may think twice about using it again.
- ✓ **Discourage pre-party drinking.** You don't know what they'll do while out, but already having alcohol in their system increases the risk of them encountering problems.
- ✓ **Encourage them to stay in control** by pacing themselves. They should eat beforehand, alternate alcohol with soft drinks to stay hydrated and help limit their alcohol consumption, and check in with themselves about how they are feeling – physically, mentally and emotionally.

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## GETTING HOME DRUNK



You are waiting to pick up your teen from a party – parked around the corner as instructed. Collection time has passed so you call your child, only for their phone to be answered by their best friend. He tells you that your child is a bit worse for wear, and then you see the pair of them staggering up the road towards you. The friend is OK but your child has definitely had way too much to drink.



## TIPS

- ☑ **Deal with the here and now.** They will be in no fit state for a lecture. Instead, check for **signs of alcohol poisoning**, which can include confusion, severely slurred speech, vomiting, loss of coordination or responsiveness, irregular or slow breathing, low body temperature, unconsciousness and loss of bladder or bowel control.
- ☑ **If you suspect alcohol poisoning**, put them in the recovery position and check their breathing. Keep them warm and stay with them so you can monitor their symptoms. Call 999 if you are concerned. If they are awake, give them water if they can drink it, and again, stay with them. Don't leave them to sleep it off. Their blood alcohol level may continue to rise and hence their condition may worsen.
- ☑ **Set aside a time when they have recovered to talk about what happened.** Be careful to keep the conversation a dialogue and not a monologue. You want to explore how events developed over the course of the evening and how they feel about it, so they have a strategy for the next time they are in a similar situation.
- ☑ **This is a good opportunity to discuss the dangers of alcohol.** Consider not only the effects to their body, but also the vulnerable position that they put themselves in. You could discuss the impact of loss of control on friendships (can they remember everything they said and did?) and the potential for photos to have been taken, which will become part of their digital footprint if shared, and so on.

# A QUICK GUIDE TO ALCOHOL IN SOCIAL CONTEXTS

## SPIKING



Your mobile screen lights up with a call from your child, and you answer it in surprise, knowing that they have gone to a concert and aren't due to come home for a few hours. It turns out to be your child's friend, saying that something isn't right. After just a couple of drinks, your child became very agitated before disappearing, and was found in the bathroom being very sick. Half an hour on, they are no better, barely conscious and mumbling nonsense, and the friend says that they think they might have been spiked.



Spiking is when someone puts alcohol or drugs into another person (most commonly via a drink) without their consent or knowledge. Anything can be used to spike, but it is often drugs that have a sedating action, as they make people more vulnerable to crimes such as theft or assault. The effects vary because such a wide range of substances can be involved, but common symptoms include confusion, drowsiness, vomiting, and loss of coordination and inhibitions.



## TIPS

- ✓ **Tell the friend who has called to stay with your child** and not to leave them alone or go off with someone they don't know or wouldn't normally trust.
- ✓ **If they are worried** – or you are, when you get there – **call 111** or **an ambulance** if they seem very badly affected.
- ✓ **Get your child's precise location.** Ask the friend to send you a **What3Words** reference so you can find them quickly when you arrive.
- ✓ **Report it.** Spiking is a crime, and needs reporting, both to the venue (which may have CCTV and be able to work out what happened) and to the police.
- ✓ **Say thanks.** Thank the individual who had the presence of mind to call you. They have been a good friend.
- ✓ **Stay with them.** When you get your child home, stay with them until the effects have worn off, which may take several hours.
- ✓ **Talk.** When they are feeling better, talk to them about what happened and provide support. Someone who has been spiked is likely to be embarrassed or even ashamed, when actually they are a victim. They need looking after, as the emotional impact may stay with them long after the physical effects have faded.

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## PREVENTING SPIKING



A few months on, and your child is offered a ticket to see their favourite band play. They didn't book themselves as they were anxious about going out after the spiking incident, so ask you what they can do to try and reduce the risk of being in that vulnerable position once again.



## TIPS

- ☑ **Stick together.** Stick with their friends so they can look out for each other but also spot the early signs that something isn't right – as was the case in the previous scenario.
- ☑ **Plan ahead.** Work out their journeys there and back and find out about safety measures at the venue, including whether they participate in the [Ask for Angela](#) scheme. This enables individuals to discreetly inform a staff member that they feel unsafe and need help.
- ☑ **Charge their mobile.** Mobile phones are invaluable at keeping people safe, so make sure it is fully charged and has plenty of data. Ensure that their 'In Case of Emergency' details have been populated.
- ☑ **Know the origins of drinks.** This means not accepting drinks from someone unknown (or not trusted).
- ☑ **Don't leave drinks unattended and try to keep them covered.** For bottles, a spikey can be placed in the neck or even the individual's thumb. For open cups, special covers are available, or takeaway drinks lids often fit the disposable glasses used at parties (and also mean people can identify which drink is theirs; a safety measure in itself). Even a hand placed over the top reduces the surface area available to tip something in.
- ☑ **If anything about a drink seems off – the taste, smell or appearance – don't drink it.** Similarly, if someone is behaving in a way that makes others feel uncomfortable, move away.
- ☑ **Testing kits are available but are of limited usefulness** as alcohol is one of the more common substances used to spike.



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## WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

Healthy, open, non-judgemental conversations with young people can be – literally – life-saving.

**Fiona Spargo Mabbs OBE**, founder and director of the **DSM Foundation** has written two books that are packed with advice and information.

### Award-winner, **I Wish I'd Known**

interweaves the story of one family's terrible loss with calm, measured and practical suggestions for parents about young people, drugs and decisions.



### **Talking the Tough Stuff with Teens**

draws extensively on hundreds of conversations with young people and parents in focus groups and

school and college workshops, to give a warm and compassionate framework for tackling tough conversations about difficult things, without judgement or anger. It covers everything from curfews and screen time, to sex, self-harm and suicide.

Resources to check out



**The DSM Foundation**, our drugs education charity, has a number of resources to support parents and carers in their conversations with young people about alcohol including **practical strategies to help them stay safe**. The organisation has also published a **blog on spiking**.

The Guardian newspaper has a feature called **Teenage parties – a parents' guide**, in which the author describes her first hand experiences in this area.

Information on alcohol poisoning is available from **St John Ambulance**, and on spiking from **Frank**.

Remember that none of the resources listed here are a substitute for clinical advice and if you are worried about your child, your first port of call should always be your GP (or other relevant medical professional).

**Tooled Up Education** is thrilled to be collaborating with the DSM Foundation. **Tooled Up** brings evidence-based resources to school communities and enjoys strong relationships with some of the most respected researchers and organisations in the world. The **Tooled Up Team** dedicates its time to studying thousands of hours of research evidence and turning this into easy to use resources, in the form of videos, articles, podcasts, activities and tips to try.