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Teenagers are drinking at a younger age and at risky levels. The average Australian starts drinking alcohol at 15.5 years and more than a quarter of our 14-19 year olds are putting themselves at risk of harm at least once a month.

New research is telling us just how important it is for teenagers to delay the age at which they first drink alcohol.

We used to think that the teenage brain was the same as an adult brain; that it had already reached full development. But now the science is telling us something very different.

From the age of around 12 or 13 through to the early twenties the brain is in a state of intense development, moulding and hardwiring in readiness for the challenges of adulthood. Through a process called ‘frontalisation’ the brain is growing and forming all the critical parts it needs for learning, memory, planning, emotional stability and thinking.

The new science tells us that alcohol disrupts brain development during this critical phase of growth. Teenagers who drink alcohol risk their brains not reaching full capacity, which means they might never reach their full potential as an adult.

As a parent, the best thing you can do to help your teen become a happy, healthy adult is to encourage them to delay drinking alcohol for as long as possible until at least the age of 18. From a brain science point of view, even after that time it is best to minimise alcohol intake until the brain has finished developing.

The longer teenagers delay drinking alcohol, the best chance they give their brains to develop fully and reach their full potential to succeed and be happy in life.

Useful facts

- The National Health and Medical Research Council’s 2009 Guidelines for children and young people state that “not drinking at all is the safest option. Parents and carers are advised that children under 15 years of age are at the greatest risk of harm from drinking and that for this age group, not drinking is especially important.” For teenagers aged 15 -17 years, the safest option is “to delay the initiation of drinking as long as possible.”

- Teenage drinking is not just bad for the brain it’s dangerous too. Alcohol inhibits a teenager’s ability to consider the consequences of their actions, leading them to take stupid risks like getting in fights, drink driving and unwanted sex.

- Younger drinkers are also more likely to develop alcohol-related problems later in life.

- Drinking alcohol can become a negative distraction for teenagers not only from study, but sport, creative pursuits, family life and socialising with friends. These activities are important for building confidence and maturity during the teen years.

- Young children soak up everything happening around them, including the way you drink, because this is how they learn. As they become older and start to question more, it’s important to set a good example because you still have the power to positively influence their drinking behaviour.
Tips for parents for delaying teen drinking.

1. Set firm family guidelines which reflect the delay message so that teens are clear about your expectations and understand your thinking.

2. Highlight that not drinking is the norm for young people. Two thirds of 12 - 15 year olds have never had a drink of alcohol. Let older teens know that they are not alone, with one in five 16 - 17 year olds sharing in their decision to not drink.

3. Talk to pre-teens or teens about the new brain science which shows how alcohol can impair the developing teenage brain and stop teens reaching their full potential.

4. Encourage pre-teens and teens to get involved in other activities that do not involve drinking, but instead offer challenging opportunities, such as sport and creative pursuits.

5. Discuss the delay message with other parents. Share the knowledge about the new brain science and try to come up with a common standard related to teenagers and drinking.

6. Consider adult drinking behaviours. Teenagers are still heavily influenced by the role modelling of parents. So, if a parent drinks heavily then expect a teenager to drink at risky levels, too.

More information

For more information and explanations about alcohol and the developing teenage brain look at the video and supporting information by Professor Ian Hickie, Executive Director of The Brain and Mind Research Institute, go to drinkwise.org.au