



Alcohol and Drugs: A Parent's Guide

Practical advice to help protect your child
from alcohol and other drugs

Acknowledgements

This guide is an update to the HSE's Alcohol and Drugs: A Parent's Guide (2018). We wish to acknowledge and thank all contributors who helped with the development of this guide and to all those who contributed to this latest update (2026).

Important information about this guide

The information in this guide is suitable for young people who are not dependent on alcohol and/or drugs. If you are a parent or guardian looking for further information on what to do if you think your child may be dependent, please see Section 6 at the end of this booklet.

What do we mean by substance use?

In this guide, substance use means using alcohol or other drugs.

What do we mean by a young person?

In this guide, a young person is anyone under the age of 18 years.

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1. Introduction

This guide is for parents and caregivers. It offers practical advice to help you talk with your child about substance use and support them when facing peer and social pressures.

How this guide can help

- share ways to reduce the risk of alcohol and drug use
- give you ideas for having open conversations with your child
- provide advice on recognising substance use and what to do
- provide links to further support and information.

Why parents matter

As a parent or caregiver, you have a strong influence on a young person's life and their decisions, even as they get older.

Simply telling young people not to use alcohol or drugs is usually not enough. They are influenced by many factors, including their community, school, friends, family, and online environments. Even as children get older and spend more time with friends, parents continue to have a strong influence on how they think and act around alcohol and other drugs

Research shows that when parents clearly communicate they do not approve of alcohol or drug use, young people are less likely to use them.

Young people are more likely to delay or avoid substance use when parents:

- set clear expectations about alcohol and drugs
- talk openly and honestly in an age-appropriate way
- take an interest in their child's lives and friendships
- model healthy behaviours themselves
- know where they are and who they are with.

What makes a difference is how you communicate, the expectations you set, and the example you give. Even if it doesn't always seem like it, what you say and do matters.

Why does age matter so much?

Starting to use alcohol or drugs at a younger age is linked to a greater risk of harm later in life. Research also shows that the later young people start using substances, the better their long-term health and wellbeing outcomes.

This is because young people's bodies and brains are more sensitive to the effects of substances. Science tells us that young people's brains are still developing into their mid twenties. Alcohol and other drugs can interfere with this development and affect areas responsible for decision-making, learning, memory, and emotional control. This can impact how young people think, feel, act, and behave.

The effects of alcohol and drugs aren't always predictable. They vary from person to person and depend on the substance used, the amount taken, the person's physical and mental health, and the environment.

They can have immediate effects that increase the risk of harm, including:

- accidents and injuries
- poor judgement and risk-taking – they may do something they regret
- feeling unwell, anxious, or low
- poor sleep
- problems at school, sports, or hobbies
- difficult relationships with friends and family
- getting into trouble with the Gardaí and having a criminal record
- self-harm and suicide
- drug-related emergencies, including hospitalisation or death.

These risks can be higher in social situations where there is pressure to fit in.

Over time, alcohol and drug use can affect health and development.

This may include:

- ongoing impacts on mental health and wellbeing
- learning and memory difficulties
- increased likelihood of more frequent or additional substance use
- a higher risk of dependence
- long-term health effects including cancer, high blood pressure, heart disease, liver damage (alcohol increases risk of over 200 health conditions)
- difficulties with education and future opportunities.

The safest option for young people is to delay alcohol and drug use for as long as possible. By supporting your child to delay or avoid substance use, you play a key role in protecting their health and overall wellbeing.

2. Quick Guide: 6 Steps to Protecting your Child from Alcohol and Other Drugs



**Build a close
relationship**



**Set clear rules and
expectations**



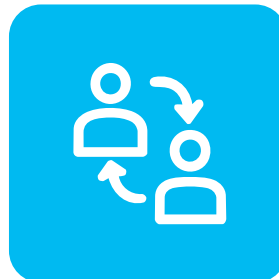
**Be a positive role
model for your child**



**Keep communication
about alcohol and
drugs open**



**Help your child
stay safe when they
socialise**



**Stay involved and
connected in your
child's life**

3. Why and How Young People Use Alcohol and Drugs

Knowing how and why young people use alcohol or drugs, and what's happening in Ireland right now, can help you have supportive and informed conversations with your child. It is reassuring to know that most young people in Ireland do not use drugs, and rates of alcohol and drug use are lower than people may think. Understanding the facts, including the actual figures on alcohol and drug use, can help reduce pressure on young people and support healthier behaviours.

Substance use among young people in Ireland

Research shows the following patterns in Ireland:

- the most common age to first drink alcohol is 15 years old
- by age 15-16, about two thirds of young people have tried alcohol at least once
- by age 16, about 1 in 8 young people have tried a drug, usually cannabis
- by age 18, two-thirds of young people have never used drugs
- 1 in 3 young people have been in a situation where they could have used drugs but chose not to.

These figures show that while many young people try alcohol, they are starting to drink at a later age than they used to. Fewer young people use drugs, and regular and frequent use is not the norm among young people.

Why young people use alcohol and other drugs

Young people may use alcohol or other drugs for different reasons, including curiosity, to experience short-term pleasure or relaxation, to get through social situations, or to cope with stress or boredom.

While substances may seem to offer short-term relief or enjoyment, they can make difficulties worse over time.

It can be helpful for young people to understand that using alcohol or drugs to get a short term 'lift' can leave them feeling worse and make it harder to cope the next time. Supporting young people to talk about how they feel and find positive ways to manage stress or other problems can make a real difference.

Understanding current and emerging drug trends

Knowing about drug trends can help support conversations at home. Alcohol and cannabis remain the most commonly used substances among young people.

Today's drug market is changing quickly. New substances and products are appearing, and many are marketed in ways that appeal to young people.

What is changing?

- some drugs are becoming stronger and more unpredictable
- drugs do not list ingredients, so people do not know what they are taking
- new or modified substances are appearing
- some products may look familiar or harmless (for example, they may look like sweets or medicines), but this does not mean they are safe
- what people buy is not always what they get and this can increase the risk of harm
- increasing availability of substances sold online or in shops that may be mislabelled, contaminated, or contain unexpected ingredients.

Examples in Ireland

Cannabis:

Cannabis has changed a lot in the past 30 years, Today, higher-strength cannabis is more common than in the past. It is used in joints as herbal cannabis and comes as edibles (such as jellies), vapes, liquids and other novel forms such as wax. Edible forms may appeal to young people who would not normally smoke cannabis.



HHC and other cannabinoids

A cannabis-like substance that is found in vapes and edibles. It is illegal since 2025 and products can vary in strength. It has been linked to anxiety, panic and other mental health effects. Shops and online vendors are selling 'cannabis-like' products. We cannot be sure of the contents of these products.



MDMA (ecstasy):

Commonly found as coloured pills as well as in powder/crystal form. Strength can vary widely and some products are high potency, increasing the risk of harm. Recent analysis has shown a trend in high strength MDMA in circulation.



Cocaine:

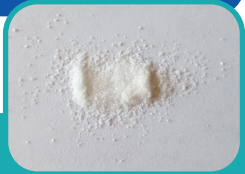
Cocaine has become more widely available in Ireland in recent years and is often associated with social settings such as parties, festivals, and nights out. It is usually sold as a white powder and is most commonly snorted. Cocaine may contain unexpected substances that increase the risk of harm.





Inhalants and nitrous oxide (“laughing gas”)

Inhalants are gases or vapours that are inhaled for a short-lived high. Some can be found in household products such as aerosol sprays (deodorants), glues and cleaning products. Using inhalants can cause serious health problems, including sudden death. Nitrous oxide (laughing gas, “noz”, canisters or balloons) is a commonly used inhalant. Breathing it directly from a canister can cause cold burns to the hands, face and lungs. Regular or heavy use can lead to vitamin B12 deficiency and nerve damage.



Ketamine:

Ketamine is usually found as a grainy white powder. It can make a person feel detached from reality and affect their ability to speak, move or respond to others. This can increase the risk of harm, particularly if someone is alone. It can also cause nausea and vomiting, increasing the risk of choking. Some young people may have frightening experiences or experiencing a worsening of mental health difficulties after using ketamine.

Many substances today are stronger, more unpredictable and contain contaminants.

Using more than one substance at the same time (known as polydrug use), such as alcohol with other drugs and medications, increases the risk of harm. Alcohol can interact with many prescription and over-the-counter medicines. Combining substances can have stronger and more dangerous effects than using one substance alone.

4. The 6 Steps to Protecting Your Child from Alcohol and Other Drugs

1 – Build a close relationship

A close, caring relationship with your child is one of the best ways to protect them from alcohol and other drug use. When young people feel loved, listened to and understood, they are more likely to share what's going on in their lives. This makes it easier for them to handle peer pressure and strong emotions without turning to alcohol or other drugs.

Building this kind of relationship comes from small, everyday things. Spend time together, show interest in what matters to them, and listen without rushing to judge or react.

Try to stay calm and supportive, even when things are difficult.

When your child feels respected and trusts you, they are more likely to ask for help when they need it.

2 - Set clear rules and expectations

Clear rules help young people feel safe and understand what is expected. Involve your child in conversations about rules and expectations so they understand the reasons behind them. They are more likely to stick to these rules when they feel heard and included.

Knowing the law can help you set clear and consistent expectations. It is illegal for anyone under 18 to buy alcohol or drink it in a public place. Most drugs are illegal in Ireland. This includes substances such as cannabis and cocaine. Being found with drugs, or supplying them to others, can lead to serious legal consequences.

Tell your child you do not want them to use alcohol while they are under 18 and do not want them to use drugs, and explain why.

Do:

- explain the reasons for your rules and boundaries clearly and calmly
- listen to your child's views and involve them in discussions where appropriate
- check that your child understands the rules and what is expected of them
- agree what will happen if rules are not followed (for example, if alcohol or drugs are used)
- reassure your child that you will help them in a crisis, even if a rule is broken
- share agreed rules and expectations with other key adults in your child's life (for example, co-parents, grandparents, or guardians) to keep things consistent
- where appropriate, let other parents know about your family rules when your child is socialising
- notice and acknowledge when your child follows the rules and expectations.

Let your child know their safety matters more than getting into trouble.

Why consistency matters

Young people find it easier to stick to rules when the important adults in their lives take a similar approach. A consistent message across households and settings helps reduce confusion and makes it easier for young people to say no in social situations.

This can sometimes be more challenging where parents are not living together, or where grandparents or other carers are involved in day-to-day care. In these situations, it is still helpful to share expectations and agree a shared approach where possible, focusing on what is best for the young person's safety and wellbeing.

The aim is to build as much agreement as possible between the adults who influence your child.

Keep consequences fair, consistent, and realistic.



For example:

If a young person is late home:

Their next curfew may be temporarily changed to an earlier time. This can be gradually returned to normal as they become more reliable and trust is rebuilt.

If they do not answer their phone when out:

For future outings, you might agree on changes like a shorter time out or agreed check-in times. This helps your child stay safe and in touch.

If they may have used alcohol and/or drugs:

Stay calm and focus on an open, non-judgemental conversation to understand what has happened. Avoid acting on suspicion alone. If you are concerned, seek advice from a GP, school, or youth support service.

Be clear about your expectations and agree on any changes for future outings to support their safety. This should be accompanied by a calm discussion about risks, expectations, and safety. If rules are broken, consequences and sanctions don't need to be severe: what matters is that they are followed through.

3 - Be a positive role model

You are a strong influence on your child, even as they become more independent.

Your attitudes and behaviour around alcohol and drugs shape how your child sees them. Young people are more likely to use alcohol and other drugs if it is seen as acceptable, parents provide it to them, or there are no clear rules.

Find ways to show your child how you want them to behave and think about alcohol and drugs.

For example:

- do healthy and fun activities together that do not involve substance use
- consider the way you talk about substances - for example, avoid saying things like “I’m so stressed, I need a drink”
- do not have alcohol as a focus at social occasions
- avoid using substances to cope with problems or as a reward.

Being mindful of your own alcohol or drug use can help you feel confident in the messages you are giving your child. If you are concerned about your own use or would like support, confidential help is available (*please see Section 6 - Further Information and Support page 30*).

Do not give alcohol to your child

It may feel like allowing small amounts at home will help them learn to drink in a safer way. However, research shows this approach does not protect them from harm and may lead to earlier and more harmful use of alcohol.

Most parents do not give alcohol to their children. About two-thirds of parents in Ireland choose not to introduce alcohol to young people under 18 years of age, even in small amounts.

It is also helpful to know that drinks labelled as “non-alcoholic” or “zero alcohol” can still contain small amounts of alcohol (up to 0.5%) and may make drinking seem more normal. These are not recommended for young people.



4 – Keep communication about alcohol and drugs open

Ongoing, calm conversations are one of the most effective ways to prevent substance use. Talking openly about alcohol and drugs help build trust and makes it more likely your child will come to you with questions or concerns. It also supports them to make informed and safer decisions.

You do not need to have one “big talk”. Small, regular conversations tend to work better.

Start early and use everyday moments

Younger children are more open to hearing messages and accepting rules. It’s also easier to talk to your child before they feel the pressure to drink alcohol or take drugs. Don’t worry if you haven’t done this yet, as it’s never too late to start the conversation.

Use natural opportunities such as:

- questions from your child
- your child is going to a party, disco, or social event
- TV programmes or news stories featuring alcohol and/or drugs.

A formal or “big” conversation can feel uncomfortable or forced.

Make it a two-way conversation

Listen as well as talk. Ask what they know, what they see among friends or classmates, and how they feel about alcohol and drugs. This helps you understand how best to support them.

Be realistic about the dangers

Let your child know about the risks. They may not listen if they think you are exaggerating the risks. Many young people try alcohol or drugs without serious harm, and acknowledging this can make your message more credible.

Be clear that even occasional use can affect judgement, safety, and wellbeing, and serious harm can still happen. Focusing on short-term risks that are relevant to your child's life, such as accidents and poor decision-making, can make conversations easier to relate to.

Use non-stigmatising language

Avoid labels or stigmatising terms such as “junkie”, as these can shut down communication and make it harder for young people to ask for help.

Give information appropriate to their age

Help your child understand how alcohol and drugs can affect them and help them find their own reasons to avoid substance use. Tell them they can talk to you if they are worried or unsure. Give simple, accurate information that becomes more detailed as your child gets older. You can talk about:

Age 8 to 11

- basic facts about alcohol and drugs and their effects on the body and the brain
- how it is OK to say no to your friends when you do not want to do something.

Age 12 to 15

- clear rules about alcohol and drug use and why they matter
- how peer pressure can happen and ways to say no
- how to recognise situations that may feel uncomfortable or unsafe
- thinking through how to manage situations where they may come across alcohol or drugs (e.g. discos, birthday parties, social media).

Age 16 to 18

- understanding they are likely to come across alcohol or drugs, while being clear about your rules and expectations
- how to recognise risky situations and feel confident leaving them
- planning ahead for staying safe, including how they will get home and who they can contact.

Talk about alcohol, drugs and consent

Explain that alcohol and drugs can affect judgement and decision-making.

Someone who is under the influence

- may take more risks such as having unprotected sex
- may find it harder to recognise unsafe situations
- may not be able to give consent to have sex.

Encourage your child to speak to you or a trusted adult if they are ever worried about a situation involving alcohol, drugs, or consent.

Helping them understand what they might be exposed to

It's safest not to use alcohol or drugs.

However, it can help young people to understand:

- different substances have different strengths, effects and risks
- one standard drink (e.g. half a pint of beer or single measure of spirits) can be enough to cause effects
- people can react differently to the same substance
- mixing substances increases risk
- some substances may be mislabelled or not what they seem
- even small amounts can have a strong effect.

When your child disagrees

Listen to your child's views, but stay clear and consistent with your expectations. You can prepare responses such as:

Everyone else is going:

I know you feel left out. But it is my responsibility to keep you safe. I'm not happy about you being there with no adult where people may be drinking and may be taking drugs.

I can look after myself, I'm not stupid:

I know you're not stupid. That's why I'm letting you go. But if you want that, you need to stay in contact with me so I know that you're safe.

Everyone else will be bringing cans:

I understand that some people will be drinking and I know you feel left out, but you can still have a good time without alcohol. I'm not going to give you alcohol while you're underage. Drinking is not healthy for you. You can enjoy yourself and still make safe decisions.

You don't understand – it's not a big deal:

I do understand why you feel that way, and I know it can seem like fun. But alcohol and drugs can affect your judgement and lead to people getting hurt or doing things they regret. I care about you and I'm not going to put you in that position. You can have fun without them.

You don't understand, I'm the only one who hasn't tried it yet and I feel like an NPC (loser):

I get why you feel that way, no one likes feeling left out. But not everyone is doing it, even if it seems that way. You don't have to do something you're not comfortable with just to fit in. I care about you, and I want you to stay safe. This is what we have decided are the rules for our house. Nobody in our house has permission to take drugs. Your friends may see me as a strict parent and that is OK.

You haven't a clue – everyone takes drugs at these events, its normal these days:

I hear what you're saying—it might feel like that in your group. But the majority of people your age are not taking drugs. Even if some people are, that doesn't mean it's safe. Alcohol and drugs can affect people in different ways. What matters to me is helping you stay safe and make decisions you won't regret.

You don't understand, it's cheaper to take drugs than to go drinking:

I understand why cost might seem like a factor. But with drugs, you don't really know what you're getting or how strong it is, which makes the risks much higher. My priority is your safety. I don't want you using alcohol or drugs. We can look at other ways for you to go out and enjoy yourself without putting yourself at risk.

5 - Help your child stay safe in social situations

There are things you can do to help them stay safe when they go out socialising, especially where alcohol or drugs may be present.

Do:

- know where your child is going and who they are with
- talk with other parents or caregivers
- offer them a lift to and from places if you need to
- agree a safe way for them to get home
- talk about what they can say or do if they feel under pressure to drink alcohol or use drugs
- help them organise activities that do not involve alcohol or drugs
- keep alcohol and medicines out of reach of children – lock them away if you can
- arrange a time to check in if they will be out all day or late at night - this can be a call, text or voicenote
- talk to your child about safer socialising and safety planning.



There are things that your child can do to help their own safety.

Do:

- ensure your phone is charged before you go out and keep it on
- stay with friends they trust and look out for each other
- stay hydrated and eat regularly
- stay out of the water if anyone has used alcohol or drugs
- call an adult or an ambulance if they or someone else needs help.

Don't

- leave a party or club alone – or let a friend leave alone
- take drinks or substances from strangers
- mix alcohol with drugs (even prescription or over the counter drugs)
- leave drinks unattended or accept drinks you did not see being opened or prepared.

6 - Stay involved and connected

Find ways to stay involved and connected in your child's life. If you keep a close bond, they are more likely to come to you for help and listen to your advice. Being an active presence in their lives takes time and commitment from parents, especially with older young people.

Do:

- fun things together - let them pick the activity
- ask them open questions about their life and listen without judgement
- get to know their friends
- find out who they are with when they go out
- agree where they are going and when they will be home
- check how much money they have and how they spend it
- look for opportunities to have family meals together at home.

Research shows that young people who spend a lot of unsupervised time with friends are more likely to use alcohol and drugs. Staying involved doesn't mean checking up on them all the time—it's about keeping communication open, agreeing clear plans, and showing interest in their lives.

Young people sometimes turn to alcohol or drugs to cope with stress, boredom, or difficult emotions.

Help them find healthy ways to deal with stress or difficult situations by encouraging:

- physical activity or hobbies
- good sleep and routines
- time to relax and switch off
- positive friendships.

5. Recognising and Responding to Alcohol and Other Drug Use

Alcohol and drug use can range from no use, to trying something once, to more regular use, to having problems. Most young people who are curious and experiment with alcohol or drugs will come home safely, but it can still be worrying for parents. Knowing how to respond in different situations can help you stay calm and support your child effectively.

I don't think my child is using alcohol or drugs

Continue to:

- keep communication open and regular
- be clear about your expectations
- talk about risks in a balanced and realistic way
- get to know your child's friends and social activities.

Building trust early makes it more likely your child will come to you if something changes.

I suspect my child is using alcohol or drugs

You might notice changes in mood, behaviour, sleep, friendships or increased spending of money. These do not always mean substance use, so try to avoid jumping to conclusions.

It can help to:

- look for patterns over time rather than one-off incidents
- stay calm and start a conversation about what you've noticed
- ask open questions and listen without judgement
- let them know you are concerned about their wellbeing
- give them space if they are not ready to talk straight away, and let them know they can talk to you any time.

If something doesn't feel right, trust your instincts, but keep an open mind. Starting a calm conversation early can help prevent situations from becoming more serious.

I think my child has recently used alcohol or drugs and is currently under the influence of a substance

Your first priority is safety.

Do:

- stay with them
- keep them in a quiet, safe place
- ask them if they have taken alcohol or other drugs
- check they are breathing normally and can respond to you
- place them on their side, if they are sleepy or sick
- ask how they feel and watch for worrying signs such as fast heart rate, pains in arms or legs, overheating, or chest pain
- try to find out what they have taken - they or their friends may tell you. Look for paraphernalia such as deodorant cans or vapes.

Don't:

- try to reason or discipline them in the moment
- give food, alcohol, medication or more substances
- assume they will "sleep it off" if you are unsure of severity.

When to seek urgent help:

Call 999 or 112 immediately if your child:

- cannot be woken or is unconscious
- is very confused, collapses, or has a seizure
- has slow, irregular or difficult breathing
- may have overdosed
- is extremely agitated or behaving in a way that cannot be safely managed.

If in doubt, it is always safer to get medical help.

Afterwards:

When your child is feeling better, it can help to take a little time to calm yourself before starting a conversation. Choose a quiet moment when you won't be interrupted. Try to stay calm and avoid blame, even if you are upset or worried.

If possible, talk with the other parent or a trusted adult first so you can approach the situation in a calm and consistent way together. It's best when young people get the same message from the adults around them.

Start by explaining what you noticed and why it concerns you. Ask open questions and give them space to talk. Listening is often more helpful than saying a lot. You can remind them of the agreed rules, but reassure them that your main focus is their wellbeing. Let them know you are there to support them and help them stay safe.

If the conversation becomes tense or emotional, it's okay to pause and come back to it later when things have settled.

I think my child is using alcohol or drugs regularly or having problems

If use is ongoing or starting to affect their wellbeing, it's important to take further steps.

You can:

- be clear about your concerns and your expectations around alcohol and drug use
- let them know you are there to support them, but that you are also responsible for keeping them safe
- keep a closer eye on routines, plans, and who they spend time with
- encourage positive activities, routines, and friendships
- support them to think about how their use is affecting their health, safety, and goals
- reduce access to disposable money if it is being spent on alcohol or drugs.

Keeping your relationship strong, even when there are concerns, makes it more likely your child will accept support and talk to you.

Try to understand what may be contributing, such as stress, friendships, or mental health. Ongoing use is often linked to other challenges.

It's important not to ignore ongoing concerns or hope they will resolve on their own. Early action can help prevent more serious problems developing.

You do not need to manage this alone. Seek advice from a GP, school, or youth support service. Getting support early can make a big difference. There are useful links in the next section.

6. Further Information and Support

If you have concerns or questions about alcohol or drug use, there is support available.

HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline

A confidential helpline for anyone with a question or concern related to drug and alcohol use.

You can contact the helpline for advice if you are:

- unsure what you are seeing or worried about changes in behaviour
- looking for information about a specific substance
- concerned your child may be using alcohol or drugs
- trying to decide what to do next.

You will be offered support, information, and guidance on possible next steps. You can also be referred to local services if needed.

Call: 1800 459 459 Monday to Friday 9.30am-5.30pm

Email: helpline@hse.ie anytime

Drugs and Alcohol Services Map

www.drugsandalcohol.ie/services_map

The Health Research Board's interactive map helps people find local treatment, counselling, and family support services for alcohol, drugs, gambling, and gaming-related issues across Ireland

HSE websites

- www.drugs.ie for information on drugs
- www.hse.ie/alcohol for information on alcohol

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