# Is it okay to drink in front of your children?

Being especially deliberate with your alcohol choices when your children are 15 to 17, because that is when family influence appears to bite hardest.

**Caution.** If your children are already adults, your example may still matter. Parental influence re-emerges when adult children start families of their own particularly for daughters. The habits you modelled years ago can resurface when children are deciding what kind of household they want to run.' Research

BY SERGEY ALEXEEV

It is a Friday evening and you pour a glass of wine while your teenager sits at the kitchen bench scrolling their phone. They barely look up. But they notice more than you think. A new study found the drinking habits parents model at home carry over to their children.

The influence is strongest during a specific window when children are aged 15 to 17. This is the stage when teens begin navigating social situations with alcohol and start deciding what "normal" drinking looks like.

It does not mean you have to give up alcohol altogether. But there are behaviours you can tweak to improve the chance your children will have a healthy relationship with alcohol as they grow up. The effect runs mostly along same-sex lines. Mothers influence daughters most clearly, and fathers influence sons. There is no detectable father-to-daughter effect. There is some crossover from mothers to sons, particularly during adolescence and again in the late twenties and thirties.



When adult children become parents themselves, they appear to revisit the drinking habits they grew up with. Daughters draw on their mothers' examples; sons who become fathers begin to follow paternal patterns they had not previously adopted.

### Genetics vs household norms

The evidence points more toward household norms than genetics. When I compared birth parents with non-birth parents, a broad category that includes step, adoptive, foster and other non-biological caregivers – the mother-to-daughter link held firm regardless of biological connection.

That suggests daughters are learning behaviour, not inheriting a fixed trait. For sons, the picture is more mixed, but the overall message is the same; what children observe matters.

None of this means a single glass of wine in front of your teen will do damage. The study measures repeated patterns of drinking over years, not one-off moments. What appears to matter is the background signal; how often alcohol appears, how much, and what role it seems to play in everyday life. Is it the centre piece of every celebration? The first response to a bad day? Or something that shows up occasionally, without fanfare?

### How teens' ideas about alcohol are shaped

These findings fit with broader evidence on how parents shape children's drinking. Australian longitudinal research has also found parental supply of alcohol to teenagers, even with good intentions, is linked to heavier drinking and more alcohol-related problems down the track, rather than teaching children to drink responsibly.

### So what can parents actually do?

The practical goal is not perfection. It is harm minimisation, shaping household norms so that alcohol is less central, less emotionally loaded and less available.

Keeping your own drinking moderate and low-key. Guidelines recommend no more than ten standard drinks a week for adults, and not drinking at all is the safest option for under-18s

Not supplying alcohol to teenagers, even with good intentions. Research suggests parental supply is linked to heavier drinking and more alcohol-related problems later on

Setting clear rules and having calm, consistent conversations about alcohol. Teens drank least when strict rules were paired with good-quality, regular communication.

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