



Seth J. Gillihan Ph.D.
[Think, Act, Be](#)

Should Parents Let Kids Drink?

Research shows the downsides of early alcohol consumption.

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Source: Magda Ehlers/Pexels

When I was in high school, I never drank [alcohol](#). My parents didn't drink, and I was taught that alcohol was not only unhealthy but immoral. When I got to college, I made up for lost time, falling into a common pattern of college student alcohol use. I drank heavily Friday and Saturday (and often Thursday) nights, sometimes to the point of blacking out large chunks of the previous evening.

Now that I'm a parent, I think about my young kids' future relationships with alcohol. The obvious lesson from my own experience seems to be that exposing kids to responsible alcohol consumption

from a young age is a good idea, because it might protect them against excessive drinking later on. I'm not alone in this assumption; many parents believe that letting their teens drink alcohol—and even hosting their kids' drinking parties—will lower their risk for developing a drinking problem.

But a recent [conversation on the *Think Act Be* podcast](#) with alcohol researcher Dr. Robert Leeman changed my mind. "There's a notion among some parents that 'my kids and their friends are going to drink anyway—why not just have the party at my house?'" said Leeman. "That way they'll be safer." But the data tell a different story. "That's really not a good idea, for a number of reasons," he said.

Don't Condone Drinking by Your Underage Children

"One simple way to help your kids avoid problems with alcohol is to greatly minimize their exposure to alcohol," said Leeman. While he acknowledged that that recommendation might sound like "master-of-the-obvious," it does fly in the face of what many people believe.

When you provide your underaged children with access to alcohol, "you're condoning with your actions that alcohol use early in life is okay," Leeman said. "But the data over and over again point to the conclusion that early alcohol use is problematic. It's one of the most consistent findings that there is."

For example, [a large study](#) looked at the age when youths first consumed a full serving of alcohol (e.g., 12 ounces of a standard beer) and then followed their drinking behavior over time. Teens who had their first drink at a younger age were at significantly higher risk for binge drinking and for consuming more alcohol in the past year. These results were maintained even when the researchers statistically controlled for potentially confounding factors, like variables related to their family or peers. Other studies ([like this one](#)) support these findings.

This recommendation may be even more compelling in light of evidence that early alcohol use leads to changes in how the brain is wired. For example, [this study](#) found that individuals who started drinking at a younger age had changes in parts of the brain involved in [attention](#), which were linked to worse performance on attentional tasks.

Also problematic, according to Leeman, is that parents who give their underage children alcohol often unwittingly facilitate “the early initiation of not just *any* use, but *heavy* use.” His succinct recommendation to discourage alcohol problems in your kids echoes that of the meta-analysis above: “Don’t expose them to alcohol.”

Minimize Alcohol Consumption Around Your Kids

What about your kids seeing you responsibly enjoy a glass of wine with dinner or a beer with the game? “The data say it would be better if you don’t do that around your children,” said Leeman. “But if you do, try to keep it moderate—few and far between.”

Talk Openly and Nonjudgmentally About Alcohol

On the other hand, you don’t want to be so critical of alcohol that it takes on the allure of “forbidden fruit,” said Leeman. Calling alcohol “a tool of the devil,” for example, could backfire and make it more enticing.

“Have an honest, nonjudgmental, fact-based conversation with your child about alcohol,” advises Leeman. “And put away the wagging finger—the nonjudgmental part is really important.” If we’re overly emotional or reactionary, we’ll probably end up [cutting](#) off any real communication. “Once you start to get judgmental,” said Leeman, “people just move into defensive mode and shut down.”

Stories Versus Data

If you’re surprised by the statistics about exposure to alcohol and subsequent problems, you’re not alone. Stories like mine can lead us to believe (as I did) that it’s safer to expose kids to alcohol at a younger age.

“Our brains evolved to share stories, rather than data,” said Leeman. “One of the stories on a college campus is about students who never drank in high school and came to college and went gangbusters, getting alcohol poisoning in the first weekend or two. The implication is that some exposure before college is better. But that’s not actually the case.”

He also noted that there are exceptions to the general trends in the data. There are people like me who weren’t exposed to alcohol at home but developed problems with drinking, and there are those who were exposed to alcohol early on but then decided not to drink at all. There are few guarantees as parents. The best we can do is to use what the data are telling us to tip the odds in our kids’ favor.

Remember That You Can Still Have an Impact

Most parents discover that their influence over their kids diminishes more quickly than they expected. But Leeman suggests we might have more of an impact than we realize, citing [research by Dr. Robert Turrisi and colleagues](#). They’ve used a brief intervention for parents that offers guidance in how to talk about alcohol with their college-bound kids. The children of parents who got the intervention were significantly less likely to have problems with drinking during their first college semester.

“It’s easy to be defeatist,” Leeman said, “because you see your impact on your child decrease over time. But you still have a great impact—even when your child is in college, and even if they go to college out of state.” While friends play a big role, “you still have an impact as well,” said Leeman. “So try to use it wisely.”

The full conversation with Dr. Robert Leeman is available here: [How to Develop a Healthier Relationship With Alcohol.](#)

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About the Author



[Seth J. Gillihan, Ph.D.](#) is a licensed psychologist and author specializing in mindfulness-centered cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

Online: [The Think Act Be Online School](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#)