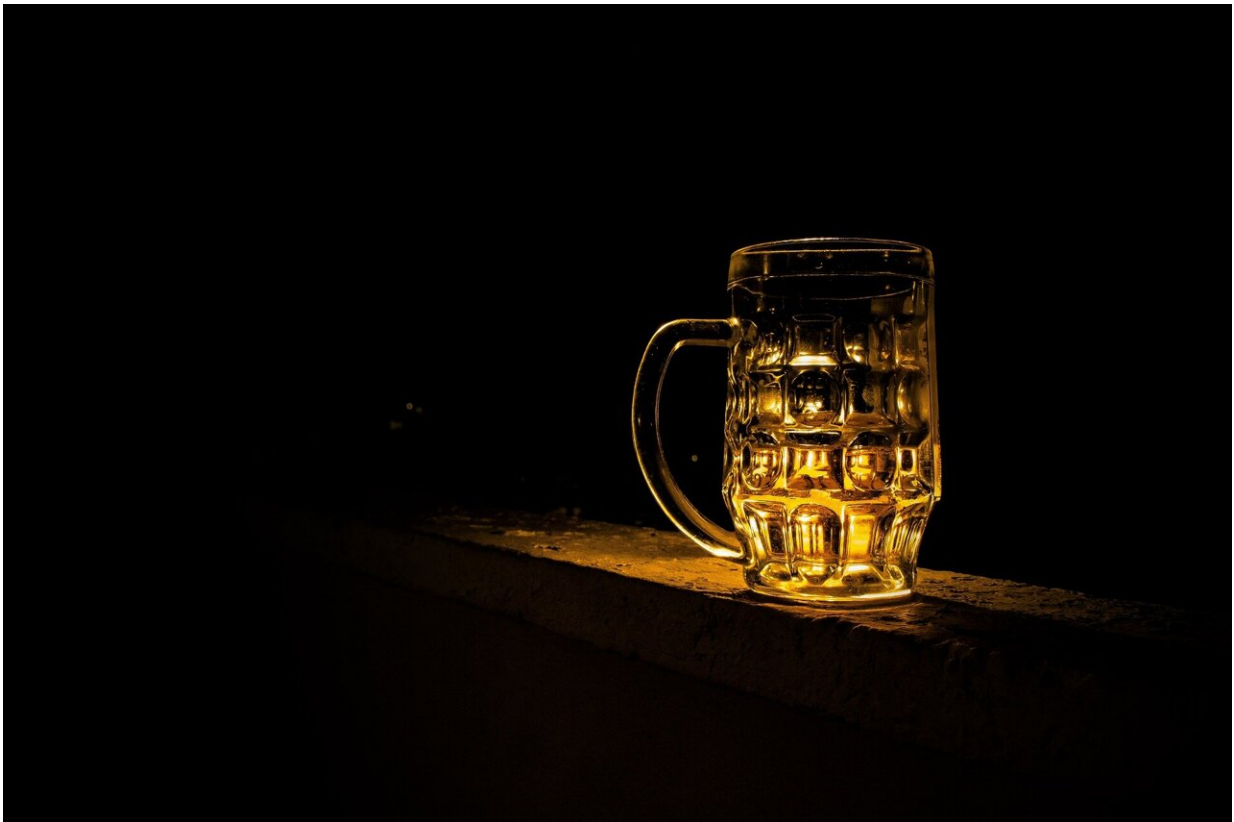


# Alcohol consumption among teenagers: Parents need to set rules and not just talk about it

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When it comes to talking about alcohol consumption with their teenage

children, many parents don't know where to start. The official drinking age across Canada ranges from 18 to 19 years.

Although alcohol consumption among young people has fallen, [more than 80% of them start drinking alcohol before the age of 17](#), according to data from Québec.

Many countries have introduced laws to prohibit the consumption and sale of alcohol to minors to avoid the harmful effects of alcohol on their developing brains. However, these laws are not enough to reduce consumption. The role of parents could also be decisive.

So what should parents say, and do, to help?

As researchers in psychology and criminology, [we carried out a study](#) based on a survey of 1,154 Belgian teenagers, published in 2024. We examined their perceptions of [parental monitoring](#), laws and their acceptability, and their alcohol consumption. Parents were not consulted.

In Belgium, young people can drink certain types of alcohol, such as beer and wine, starting at age 16. This minimum age is one of the lowest in the western world.

## **The importance of parental monitoring during adolescence**

The [scientific literature](#) clearly shows that parental monitoring helps to reduce alcohol consumption by adolescents.

This involves parental solicitation, i.e., asking questions to find out how youth spend their free time and with whom they associate. Parental monitoring also includes the rules that parents set for their children, both

in general and with regard to alcohol consumption.

Rules specific to alcohol are not limited to prohibiting consumption. For example, some young people are allowed to drink with their families on weekends, while others are also allowed to drink with their friends or during the week. In terms of general rules, some teenagers must obtain permission to go out in the evening during the week and inform their parents of where they are going and who they are meeting.

When they are teenagers, young people question established rules. Because of this, it's important to make sure parental rules are consistent with the laws of society. Our study shows that when general family rules, and those more specific to alcohol, are stricter, young people perceive their illegal drinking as less acceptable. When these young people drink, they drink less alcohol than those from families with less strict rules.

## **Better to act than to talk**

To reduce alcohol consumption among young people, it is better to rely on parental rules rather than daily discussions.

Our study shows that parental solicitation is not an effective way of preventing alcohol consumption. These results support [several other studies](#) showing that communication between parents and their children is not enough to prevent abuse. For example, some parents simply ask their youngsters about their activities and friendships so that they are aware of their outings, without setting any rules or expectations regarding their alcohol consumption.

Although it is vital to take action and establish clear rules about alcohol consumption, it is also worthwhile for parents to use a democratic parenting style. They should explain why they are not allowing their child to drink alcohol under the legal drinking age, as well as the reasons

behind the rules established in their family. Parents could stress the importance of respecting the law, their [personal values](#) or explain the negative impact of alcohol consumption on brain development. The discussion should be open.

## **Changes in parental monitoring**

Our study suggests that in Belgium, when young people are over 16 and the law allows them to consume fermented alcohol (e.g., beer and wine), parental rules relating to this consumption become stricter than they were at a younger age.

We believe that parents try to set clear guidelines to protect teenagers, whose brains are particularly sensitive to pleasures and rewards.

It is interesting to note that general parental rules (e.g., asking permission before going out on a weekday evening) are becoming less strict as time goes by. Parents therefore seem to respect young people's growing need for independence by modifying the rules they set: some become more flexible, others remain stricter.

## **Certain family habits increase the risk of alcohol consumption among young people**

While certain parental practices, such as general and specific rules on [alcohol consumption](#), may encourage young people to drink less, other parental behaviors may encourage it.

Contrary to certain beliefs, parents who allow their children to taste alcohol before the age of 13 increase [their risk of experiencing problems related to alcohol consumption](#) later in adolescence. In concrete terms, our study suggests that underage young people who drink alcohol in the

presence of adults in their family, regardless of the quantity, are at greater risk of drinking alcohol during adolescence.

Parental rules that are perceived by young people as clear and well defined, whether general or specific to alcohol, can help prevent teenage drinking. What's more, these rules should be applied within the [family home](#) and in the presence of family members, as well as in a [social context](#), in the presence of peers of the same age.

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