



# Alcohol, tobacco and cannabis

Preventing teenage addiction

Tips for parents of  
11 to 16 year olds

Englisch

Die Stellen für **Suchtprävention**  
im  **Kanton Zürich**

# Dear parents

Puberty is a challenging time for your child and for you as a parent. Teenagers have to cope with many physical and emotional changes, find their own identity and make plans for their future. It is normal to experience some difficulties during this phase, especially considering the gradual separation process. How much freedom should you allow? Where do you draw boundaries? How much support do they need? What do you still need to know? What is no longer your business? Many issues will need to be revisited and renegotiated, including alcohol, tobacco and cannabis.

## First the good news

Part of growing up is separating yourself from your parents, and this includes being rebellious at times and «trying out» adulthood. Some teenagers do this by drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes or trying cannabis. It is completely understandable that this worries you, because consuming these addictive substances is not without risks, especially for teenagers. You are therefore right to be looking at the situation carefully and taking these issues seriously. However, although many parents tend to be very concerned, it is also important to keep in mind the following:

**«The vast majority of teenagers under 16 do not have a problem with addictive substances.»**

### Asking questions can be helpful

There are no ready-made solutions for how to protect your children from problems with addictive substances. However, we hope that the tips and suggestions in this booklet will help. The most important thing is to maintain a dialogue with your children and be clear about your own views. As you read through, you will find questions that will provide you with useful ideas and starting points. Depending on the current mood at home, you can also discuss them with teenagers.

# To prevent your child from developing a problem with alcohol, tobacco or cannabis

## Take the necessary time

Talking about things together is so important, but all too often we never have time for discussions. Everyone is busy – you with your work, your children with their school and leisure activities. You should therefore consciously reserve time and use it to listen to your children and maintain a dialogue with them.

## Talk about addictive substances

At some point most teenagers become interested in addictive substances, but few teenagers really know the facts. Superficial knowledge and incorrect information tend to get around. You should therefore find out about the risks of different substances (for example on the following pages) and talk about them with your son or daughter at an early stage.

## Your opinions count

Teenagers usually don't have a fixed opinion when it comes to taking addictive substances. Within any given group attitudes towards this often differ. Even if teenagers appear to be very dismissive of their parents, they still look to you for orientation. Don't underestimate the importance of your opinions.

**What was my son pleased about the most last week? What is my daughter interested in at the moment? Do I know all of her friends? Do I need to know them? Does my child know how I feel about smoking cannabis?**

## Take a stand

The older your children become, the less influence you will have over their behaviour. However, children need parents who take a stand on issues. As long as parents say nothing, teenagers generally assume that they agree. Therefore, tell your son or daughter if you don't agree with certain behaviour and also explain why. Tell them that you're concerned because tobacco, alcohol and cannabis can have harmful effects on health, especially for teenagers.



**Has my child seen me drunk? How did they react? How did I feel about it? Do I notice if beer or wine disappears from the cellar or if a few cigarettes are missing? How do I react if my child breaks rules? If I make a mistake, what reaction do I perceive to be helpful?**

### **Be understanding and consistent**

Children and teenagers sometimes break the rules and do things that they later regret. It is important they know that they can talk to you about these things without losing your love. This doesn't mean that you need to tolerate everything and it doesn't mean that your child doesn't have to bear the consequences. On the contrary, bearing the consequences for their behaviour can also be an opportunity for your

child to make up for what they have done or to put it behind them.

### **Make sure that teenagers are not given addictive substances**

Selling alcohol or tobacco to minors under the age of 16 or giving it to them for free is against the law except when parents give alcohol or cigarettes to their own children. Take action if you notice that the law is being broken. If alcohol or tobacco is sold or given to your child for free, you should address the issue and if necessary consider reporting it as a crime to the police.

### **Set an example**

Children observe how adults handle addictive substances. Analyse your own consumption and don't avoid talking about it. Set an example of moderate alcohol consumption. If you smoke, you should try not to smoke in front of your child and never in enclosed spaces or cars.

# If your child consumes alcohol, tobacco or cannabis

## Observe

Do you have the feeling that something isn't right? Observe your child, but remember puberty is often very confusing for teenagers. The following observations could be completely normal signs of puberty. However, they could also be indications that your child is consuming addictive substances. Talk about this with your child and discuss your observations.

## Remain calm

Is your child consuming alcohol, tobacco or cannabis? Understandably you are concerned about this. As a parent, it is reassuring to know that teenagers often try alcohol, tobacco and cannabis. Providing they are just trying it out, it is usually not a problem. How do you know if it is more than just trying it out? Talking to them will help you to assess the situation. Wait until their emotions have calmed down. There is little point trying to talk with them during an argument or when your son or daughter is under the influence of alcohol or cannabis. In such situations you can say: «I'm worried about you and I don't agree with what's going on, but now is not the right time for us to talk about it, we'll talk later.» Further tips for discussions can be found on the following pages.

## Share your observations and listen

Teenagers sometimes react defensively and become upset very quickly during puberty. This is not surprising. Their physical, emotional and social changes are confusing for them. Don't start a conversation with accusations and demands. Avoid making strong statements ending with exclamation marks. Tell your child what you have noticed. Ask them whether these observations are correct and what alcohol,

### You should take these warning signs seriously:

- Your child is suddenly doing poorly at school.
- Their sleeping patterns change.
- They have recently become very withdrawn and are avoiding you.
- They lose interest in their hobbies.
- They change or lose their friends.
- They have strong mood swings and are not interested in doing anything.
- They keep having money problems.

tobacco and cannabis mean to them. Ask why and how often they use these substances. Try to find out if they are aware of the risks. Always let your child know that you are concerned and that you care about them.

### **Take a clear stance**

Let your child know that you do not want them to consume alcohol, tobacco or cannabis regularly. Explain why, for example: «Look, I don't want you to drink alcohol because when people are under the influence of alcohol they often do things that they later regret.» Try to make it clear that you do not approve of certain behaviours and that you are not against your child as a person. If you come to the conclusion that they are just trying

it out, then don't overreact. However, make it clear that it can't go any further.

### **Be consistent**

Agree with your child what the consequences should be if they continue to drink, smoke or use cannabis. Bear in mind that severe punishment can provoke resistance. Your child could really turn against you then. It is best to discuss which consequences would best help them to follow the rules. Always keep your part of the agreement. Maintaining a consistent position will help your child to follow the rules.

### **How do I cope with feeling helpless?**

It's normal for you to feel helpless in certain situations. The older your child becomes, the more they will want to determine their own behaviour. «I know what's good for me!» To a certain point they are right. However, that should not prevent you from voicing your concerns and being there for them if they need support. «You're right, you're becoming more and more responsible for yourself. But I'm worried and I really want to discuss this with you.»

**When did I get (a little) drunk for the first time? How did my parents react? How do I react if my child uses cannabis? How does my partner react? Do we have the same attitude?**



**How do I react if my child is trying out cannabis? Why don't I want them to use it regularly? What helps me to stay calm? What can I tolerate and what is unacceptable? Do I trust my child? When do I not trust my child? Is that my fault or their fault? What needs to change so I can trust my child more?**

### **Trust is good, but is checking up better?**

How necessary is it to check up on your child? Should you search through your child's jacket? Search their room? These are questions that many parents ask themselves. Secretly checking up on them will undermine a relationship based on trust. Speak openly if you feel that your child is not keeping to the agreement. For example: «I find it difficult to believe you at the moment, but I don't want to start secretly searching through your things. What do you suggest we do so that I can trust you?»

### **Get help**

If you find yourself reaching your limits, don't hesitate to seek advice. That could be from friends, your doctor or a professional from the

field of addiction prevention, youth or addiction counselling. Addresses can be found on the back of this booklet. It can also be helpful to talk with your child together with someone from outside the family. If you're not making any progress on your own, getting help is an important step for you and for your child.

# Alcohol

## What you need to know

### Do teenagers often drink alcohol?

«Everyone does that!» Teenagers often use statements like this when arguing, but they're often incorrect. The following facts can be helpful when refuting their arguments:

- Regular alcohol consumption among teenagers has greatly declined in recent years.
- The majority of young people under the age of 13 have not consumed alcohol.

A study among **14 year olds** showed that 72% of the surveyed boys and girls in Switzerland had not consumed alcohol during the 30 days prior to the survey. 6% of the boys and 3% of the girls drank at least once a week. 90% of the boys and around 96% of the girls had never been drunk or had only been drunk once (HBSC, 2014).

A study among **15 year olds** showed that 54% of the surveyed boys and 59% of the girls had not consumed alcohol during the 30 days prior to the survey. 10% of the boys drank at least once a week, for the girls this figure was 6%. 84% of the boys and 87% of the girls had never been drunk or had only been drunk once (HBSC, 2014).

### What risks are teenagers taking?

Alcohol has a greater effect on teenagers than it does on adults. Teenagers usually have less body weight than adults and as a result they feel the effects of even small amounts of alcohol and become drunk more quickly. They are often unaware that alcohol has its full effect approximately one hour after consumption. An additional problem is that alcohol reduces inhibitions and increases aggressive and violent behaviour. Intoxicated teenagers therefore frequently behave in a manner that they later





**What are my alcohol drinking habits? When should my child try alcohol for the first time? How can I tell whether my child is already drinking regularly?**

regret. The risk of accidents also increases and teenagers are especially likely to have accidents when they have been drinking.

What's more, teenagers usually do not drink on a regular basis, but when they do it tends to involve large amounts. This increases the risk of alcohol poisoning. In extreme cases it can lead to death. As teenagers often drink strong alcohol mixed with sweet beverages, this makes it more difficult for them to judge how much alcohol they have consumed. It also increases the risk of alcohol poisoning.

In general, be aware that alcohol can severely disrupt a teenager's development. This occurs because important organs such as the brain or liver have not yet fully developed. Addiction can happen much more quickly than in adults, even within just a few months. In addition, the younger that someone starts to develop problems with alcohol consumption, the greater their risk of alcohol dependency in adulthood.

### **What the law says**

It is against the law to sell or give alcohol to teenagers for free under the age of 16. It is important to know that this is only a criminal offence for the persons selling or supplying the alcohol, it is not a criminal offence for the

teenagers. The exception to the rule is parents who give alcohol to their own children so they can try it. Note: you have the right to press criminal charges if you discover that someone is supplying alcohol to minors under the age of 16.

### **How to handle the issue of alcohol?**

Alcohol is socially acceptable and is part of many social occasions such as family parties, festive events etc. When consumed in moderation, it is viewed as something which is to be enjoyed. It is therefore necessary for teenagers to learn how to handle it properly. Due to the risks outlined above, for teenagers under the age of 16 it is recommended that alcohol should only be given to them in exceptional situations and with a parent or a legal guardian present and never more than one glass per occasion. This allows teenagers to experience the effects of alcohol in a safe environment. However, no one should be made to drink alcohol if they do not wish to and abstaining from alcohol is completely acceptable.

Do you have the feeling that your child is already drinking alcohol? If so, speak with them about it as suggested on [pages 5-7](#).

# Tobacco

## What you need to know

### How often do teenagers smoke tobacco?

Most teenagers do not smoke. 85% of boys and almost 88% of girls between the ages of 14 and 15 in Switzerland do not smoke. Among boys, 5% smoke daily and among girls it's around 4% (HBSC, 2014).

The age group of 15 to 19 year olds is at a greater risk. Among this group, 72% of boys and 74% of girls are non-smokers. Almost 13% of boys and 14% of girls smoke on a daily basis (Suchtmonitoring Schweiz, 2014).

### What are the risks?

Every cigarette is harmful. In addition to nicotine, you inhale tar, carbon monoxide and many other poisonous substances when smoking. Possible consequences include cardiovascular diseases, respiratory conditions and cancer. Smoking reduces life expectancy. People who begin smoking at the age of 14 can expect a 20-year reduction in their life expectancy compared to non-smokers.

Nicotine is highly addictive. The younger you begin smoking, the more difficult it is to quit. Teenagers often underestimate how addicted they are and believe that quitting is easy.

Smoking also has consequences in the short term. Each cigarette reduces athletic ability. It

**Why don't I want my child to smoke? Can I demand that if I smoke myself? When have I tried to quit? What are the reasons why my child is smoking?**

can trigger asthma attacks and recovering from colds takes longer. Other negative effects are bad breath, unhealthy skin, discoloured teeth and smoky smelling hair and clothing. It is also important to remember that smoking is harmful to others (passive smoking).

Girls often think that they can control their weight by smoking. However, weight is primarily influenced by nutrition and exercise. For the vast majority of people, smoking is far more dangerous than being overweight.

### What about hookah pipes, snus and e-cigarettes (vaping)?

Hookah pipes (waterpipes) which are used for smoking flavoured tobacco called shisha are even more harmful than cigarettes. The intake of harmful substances and nicotine is greater when smoking a water pipe than with regular

cigarettes. Snus (a moist form of smokeless tobacco placed under the upper lip), chewing tobacco and snuff are unhealthy and addictive. Selling and distributing snus is also illegal in Switzerland.

Using electronic cigarettes (vaping) and electronic hookahs is less harmful to health. However, when nicotine is vaporized it is just as addictive. The long-term effects are still unknown. There are some indications that vaping among teenagers can lead them to start smoking regular cigarettes.

### **What the law says**

It is illegal to sell or give tobacco in any form to minors under the age of 16. Parents are the only exception. Teenagers cannot be prosecuted for consuming tobacco, but the persons supplying it to them can be charged with a criminal offence. You have the right to report someone to the police for supplying tobacco to minors under the age of 16.

### **What you can do**

You should definitely take a negative stance towards smoking because even in small amounts smoking is harmful and an addiction to nicotine can hardly be prevented. Give your child the necessary support to not start smoking or to quit if they have already started – incentives or rewards can be helpful. If your child smokes, talk to them about it. The shorter the time your child has been smoking, the easier it will be to quit. Ask them why smoking suddenly appeals. Put forward the argument that quitting smoking will make them fitter and result in better skin and whiter teeth. Teenagers are often less

receptive to hearing about health risks. Their young bodies can compensate for a lot and most of the consequences of smoking are only noticeable later on in life. Money tends to be more important for teenagers. Make them aware of how quickly and strongly they will become addicted and how much money smokers spend over their lifetime as they don't manage to quit. Point out what they could have bought with this money, for example a trip around the world, a car and other things.

Sometimes you can get through to teenagers by discussing the manipulative strategies used by the tobacco industry. Adverts promise young people freedom and coolness, but in the long term smoking leads to addiction and illness. «Do you really want to support that?» is a good way to start off a conversation. Further ideas for discussions can be found on [page 5-7](#).

### **If you smoke yourself**

Try not to smoke in front of your child, at home or in the car. Talk to them openly about your tobacco consumption and perhaps also about your difficulties with quitting. You can tell your child that you're aware of the harmful effects of smoking, but that you're nevertheless unable to quit at the moment. Use your addiction as a good example of why you should never start smoking because quitting is so difficult.

# Cannabis

## What you need to know

### How often do teenagers smoke cannabis?

Only a minority of teenagers smoke cannabis. Most of them just try it out and don't take it any further. As with alcohol, it can be helpful for you as a parent to know the facts about how often teenagers use cannabis in order to refute such arguments as: «That's normal, everyone does it!». The results of a survey in Switzerland are as follows:

Among 14 year olds 79% of boys and 90% of girls have never tried cannabis. 4% of boys and 1% of girls said they had used cannabis at least three times within the last 30 days (HBSC, 2014).

Among 15 year olds 70% of boys and 81% of girls have never tried cannabis. 7% of boys and 5% of girls said they used cannabis at least three times within the last 30 days (HBSC, 2014).

### What is cannabis?

Cannabis is the botanical name for the hemp plant. It contains a psychoactive substance called tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Psychoactive substances influence the central nervous system. Today, the THC levels are much higher than they were 25 years ago due to developments in breeding and cultivation methods.

Hashish is made from hemp flower resin. The dried hemp flower buds and leaves are called marijuana or «grass», «weed» or «pot». Cannabis products smell aromatic and earthy. Cannabis is usually smoked and it is often mixed with tobacco and rolled like a cigarette to make a «joint». Occasionally it is mixed into baked products like cookies or brownies. Teenagers usually gain access to cannabis through their friends. A number of cannabis consumers grow hemp plants themselves.

### How does cannabis work?

If cannabis is smoked, the effects are noticeable within seconds. If it is eaten or mixed in a beverage, it takes longer to have an effect. The experienced effects depend on the quantity and the current physical and psychological state of the person using it. They can range from euphoria to a sense of relaxation or even lethargy. Some teenagers find certain effects

**What is my attitude to cannabis? Is it something that everyone should try out? Why? Why not?**



to be pleasant while others perceive them as unpleasant or even frightening.

Cannabis heightens or dampens existing moods and feelings. In addition, it alters and impairs perception, concentration, attention and short-term memory.

### **What are the risks?**

Cannabis is problematic for teenagers under the age of 16. Generally speaking, caution is advisable because at this age the development of the brain is not yet complete and cannabis influences brain activity. Cannabis impairs memory and reaction time. Regular consumption has a negative effect on concentration, attention span and the ability to learn. Long-term, intensive cannabis consumption can also lead to psychological addiction. This means that it becomes increasingly difficult to stop using cannabis.

High doses can cause panic attacks, a state of anxiety and hallucinations. For some people, even small doses can have this effect. In people with a certain predisposition, it can cause or increase depression or other serious psychological illnesses. For this reason, teenagers with psychological problems should not consume cannabis at all. After using cannabis there is also a higher risk of accidents.

As cannabis is usually mixed with tobacco, all of the harmful substances in tobacco also enter the body and in addition an addiction to nicotine sets in.

### **What the law says**

Cannabis is an illegal narcotic. Cultivation, dealing, possession and consumption of cannabis are all illegal. Minors who consume cannabis are prosecuted in the juvenile courts, their parents are informed and a fine must be paid. The court usually orders the offender to see an addiction counsellor or attend a course at an addiction prevention centre. There is zero tolerance with cannabis and driving.

### **What can you do?**

Take a negative stance. Do not allow your child to grow hemp plants. Talk about the effects and risks involved with cannabis. Talk to your child if you have the feeling they are using cannabis. Suggestions for this can be found on [page 5–7](#).

# As your child gets older

The end of compulsory education is a milestone for teenagers on their way to becoming adults. They can and must begin to take responsibility for their own actions. This also applies to consuming alcohol, tobacco or cannabis.

## 16–18: Help your child to take responsibility

From the age of 16, your son or daughter is legally permitted to purchase beer, wine and cigarettes. This is one of the reasons why drinking and smoking are more frequent from this age. What you can do:

- The transition to an apprenticeship or a new school is a huge challenge for teenagers. New tasks and a new social environment await them. Help make this transition easier for your son or daughter. Ask questions and show that you're interested, also with regard to alcohol, tobacco and cannabis. What is the attitude towards these substances in their new environment? How does your child feel about it?
- Talk with your son or daughter and tell them what they need to be aware of with addictive substances (see box on [P. 15](#)). It is very important that they do not go to school or work while under the influence of cannabis or alcohol. There is also zero tolerance when it comes to driving.

**Is my son allowed to smoke on the balcony? Do my daughter's friends smoke cannabis? Would I think this is a bad thing? How would I react if my son went to work under the influence of cannabis? Does my daughter drink when she goes out? How much? Do the same rules apply to me as for my son?**

- What do you want to allow at home? Is your son or daughter permitted to smoke on the balcony? Are they permitted to drink alcohol or use cannabis with their friends? Some parents do allow this. It enables them to see what's going on and they know that these substances are being used in a safe environment. For other parents this is unthinkable. What do you think is right? Talk about it with friends and acquaintances and above all talk with your son or daughter about it. Agree on the rules together.
- Maintain a dialogue. The older your children get, the less influence you will have on them. This does not mean that your opinions no longer count. Ask questions and find out how things are going at school, let them know your observations and feelings. Make sure you let your child know you are there for them if they are worried about something or if things get difficult and they need help.

- Get help yourself if you're worried that your child is consuming too much alcohol, tobacco or cannabis and if talking to them about it is not working. Addresses can be found on the back of this booklet.

### **From 18: Support and encourage your children to take responsibility**

Legally your children are responsible for themselves from the age of 18. If your son or daughter is still in education or vocational training and lives at home, it is very likely that they are not yet taking responsibility for every aspect of their lives. If this is the case, establish with your son or daughter which responsibilities are theirs and which areas they still need your support with. With regards to addictive substances, your influence will diminish considerably once they become 18. What you can do:

- At home: Review the rules together for alcohol, tobacco and cannabis. You should definitely agree new rules.
- Away from home: Only lend your car to your son or daughter if you're absolutely certain they will not be drinking or using cannabis.
- Maintain a dialogue. Talk with them, ask questions and show your interest. Refrain from making judgements, ask your son or daughter for their opinion.

### **Tips for teenagers when they go out**

- Look out for each other, take responsibility for each other.
- Before going out, make arrangements for getting back home. Make sure that NO ONE drives who has consumed alcohol or cannabis. Never get in a car if the driver is not completely sober.
- If someone is drunk or stoned, make sure that someone accompanies them home safely or they are picked up and taken home. Stay with them until they are «safe».
- Don't mix substances. Don't drink alcohol at the same time or shortly after consuming other addictive substances. The different effects can be dangerously intensified.
- If someone becomes unconscious, lay them on their side and call an ambulance. Without help alcohol poisoning can be fatal.
- If a friend gets into a fight, don't try to argue with them, instead make sure that they leave the place where the conflict is taking place.
- Carry condoms with you.

# Information and advice

## Teenage advisory services in the canton of Zurich

- Services for parents and teenagers. For addresses see: [jugendberatung.me](http://jugendberatung.me)
- [elternnotruf.ch](http://elternnotruf.ch): 24-hour telephone advice 0848 35 45 55

## If you're worried your child is becoming addicted

- Addresses in your region with suggestions for other support services: [suchtpraevention-zh.ch](http://suchtpraevention-zh.ch) > [Über uns](#) > [Regionale Stellen](#)
- Rauchstopplinie (quit smoking hotline): Tel. 0848 000 181, Mon–Fri: 11 am–7 pm. (8 cents/min. from a landline)

## Advice and support for teenagers

- Telephone support service for teenagers Tel. 147 (24 h)
- [feel-ok.ch](http://feel-ok.ch): Test and information for teenagers dealing with alcohol, tobacco and cannabis and many other topics. Contains an information section for parents.
- [tschau.ch](http://tschau.ch): Online support for teenagers.

## Other helpful websites

- [suchtschweiz.ch](http://suchtschweiz.ch): Background information on alcohol, tobacco and cannabis as well as other addictive substances. Parent newsletter.
- [safezone.ch](http://safezone.ch): Online advice for questions about addiction.

## Brochures to download or order

The addiction prevention centres also have leaflets for parents addressing the issues of media use and medication. All printed information is also available in multiple languages.

[suchtpraevention-zh.ch](http://suchtpraevention-zh.ch) > [Publikationen](#) > [Informationsmaterial](#) > [Familie](#)

This booklet is available in 14 languages.