- Drinking of alcoholic beverages

A toast to a healthy relationship with alcohol

In an attempt to demystify alcohol for my two boys, I've allowed them small sips in their younger years, among other things

The Straits Times · 4 Dec 2023 · C3 · Abel Ang stlife@sph.com.sg • Abel Ang is the chief executive of a medical technology company and an adjunct professor at Nanyang Business School.

Binge drinking among young people has been on the rise in recent years. About 15 in 100 young adults aged 18 to 29 do so.

The figures are from the Ministry of Health's (MOH) National Population Health Survey, which was released in December 2022.

Males aged 18 to 29 are about three times more likely to binge drink than females. This age group has the highest prevalence of binge drinking among all age groups studied.

Binge drinking happens when males have more than five alcoholic drinks in one sitting. For females, it is when they have more than four alcoholic drinks in the same sitting.

The trend towards over-consuming alcohol among young people comes in the wake of an overall increase in regular alcohol consumption in recent years. Four in 10 surveyed by MOH reported that they consumed alcohol at least once monthly.

With two boys entering the age bracket of 18 to 29, and a tendency towards binge drinking among young people during the festive period at the end of the year, I find the statistics alarming.

Binge drinking is a growing issue around the world.

In China, it happens with one in three people, a figure that is higher than in Singapore. The higher prevalence stems from a strong cultural practice of business drinking in China, especially of liquors with high alcoholic content.

One of the outcomes of binge drinking is the loss of inhibition and an increase in risky behaviour.

As an example of such undesirable behaviour, the National University of Singapore (NUS) reported that seven out of eight complaints of student sexual misconduct involved alcohol between July and December 2021.

The university promised tougher enforcement measures to "deter alcohol consumption on campus housing premises". Many of NUS' residence halls now specifically disallow the consumption of alcohol in the housing agreements signed by students.

Associate Professor Mythily Subramaniam at the Institute for Mental Health has also found a connection between binge drinking, alcohol use and mental health issues such as depression or bipolar disorder.

In her paper published in 2020, she states that "binge drinking was found to be associated with myriad mental health conditions, and a decline in quality of life was noted among binge drinkers".

Given the undesirable effects of heavy drinking, my wife and I have been working with our kids on their relationship with alcohol since they were young.

We have followed a few simple rules in exposing them to alcohol and it is summarised in the acronym TIP.

TALK TO THE KIDS ABOUT ALCOHOL

We have accepted that we cannot be with our kids all the time and would not be able to prevent them from experimenting with alcohol, if they were intent on doing so.

To better inoculate them against the temptation to binge drink, we have tried to demystify alcohol for them.

If we had an alcoholic drink during our meal, we would offer them a chance to taste the drinks in our glasses. This was a great opportunity to talk to them about how alcohol affects their body and brains.

These conversations helped them became aware of how their young brains were developing rapidly, and how over-consuming alcohol could stunt their neurodevelopment.

As the kids turned 12, we would offer them a small glass of whatever we were drinking so that they could also similarly socialise with the other adults at the dining table.

We learnt this from our European friends. They did this so that their children would not perceive alcohol as forbidden fruit.

My elder boy believes that it is important to give kids a taste of alcohol when their palates are younger, and they are more sensitive to bitter tastes. He believes that the memory of the bitterness of alcohol will serve as a lasting deterrent to them drinking heavily when they get older.

He shared that since he was allowed to taste alcohol from the time he was six, and he did not like the taste, the draw of binge drinking was not there when he entered polytechnic and met friends who drank heavily.

INFLUENTIAL ROLE MODEL

By talking to our kids about alcohol early on, we were able to have meaningful discussions with them about alcohol use over the years.

The relationship built in the discussions over the years creates a safe space for them to share stories of friends who binge drink.

We try not to judge what our kids share with us. Instead, we try to encourage them to form their own opinion of a reasonable level of alcohol consumption, and what responsible behaviour looks like after consuming alcohol.

As most parents know, teenagers tend not to do what their parents tell them, but instead ape their parents' behaviour.

To this end, we try to model healthy alcohol consumption behaviour for our kids. Alcohol is usually consumed socially with friends and family, and never to the point of inebriation, let alone binge drinking.

PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES TO TAKE

Since our kids entered their teenage years, we have been warning them that they would face pressure from peers to drink eventually.

This has been helpful for our boys because they were both in schools where there were students above 18, and access to alcohol via the older students was always a possibility.

We also encouraged our boys to never consume alcohol alone, and to drink only with people whom they trust.

My younger son said the advice not to drink alone was useful in helping him develop a healthier relationship with alcohol.

He has sometimes found himself thinking of having a drink alone, because he likes the taste of certain alcoholic beverages. But he holds himself back and waits until the family is there before he cracks open a can or bottle.

This precaution has helped my younger son avoid drinking alone, which he believes could have developed into a habit. He also generally avoids drinking with anyone outside the family.

As the kids grow older, we are unable to shield them from all bad influences and decisions, much as we would like to. Ultimately, it is about letting go, and letting them make their own decisions and mistakes.

While our boys are still in Singapore and living at home, we will continue to practise what has worked for us when it comes to alcohol, in the hope of building a natural resistance to heavy drinking.

At some point, they will leave the family home to work, study, or live by themselves, possibly overseas.

Ideally, by then, they will be able to enjoy a drink or two with their friends and know when to stop.