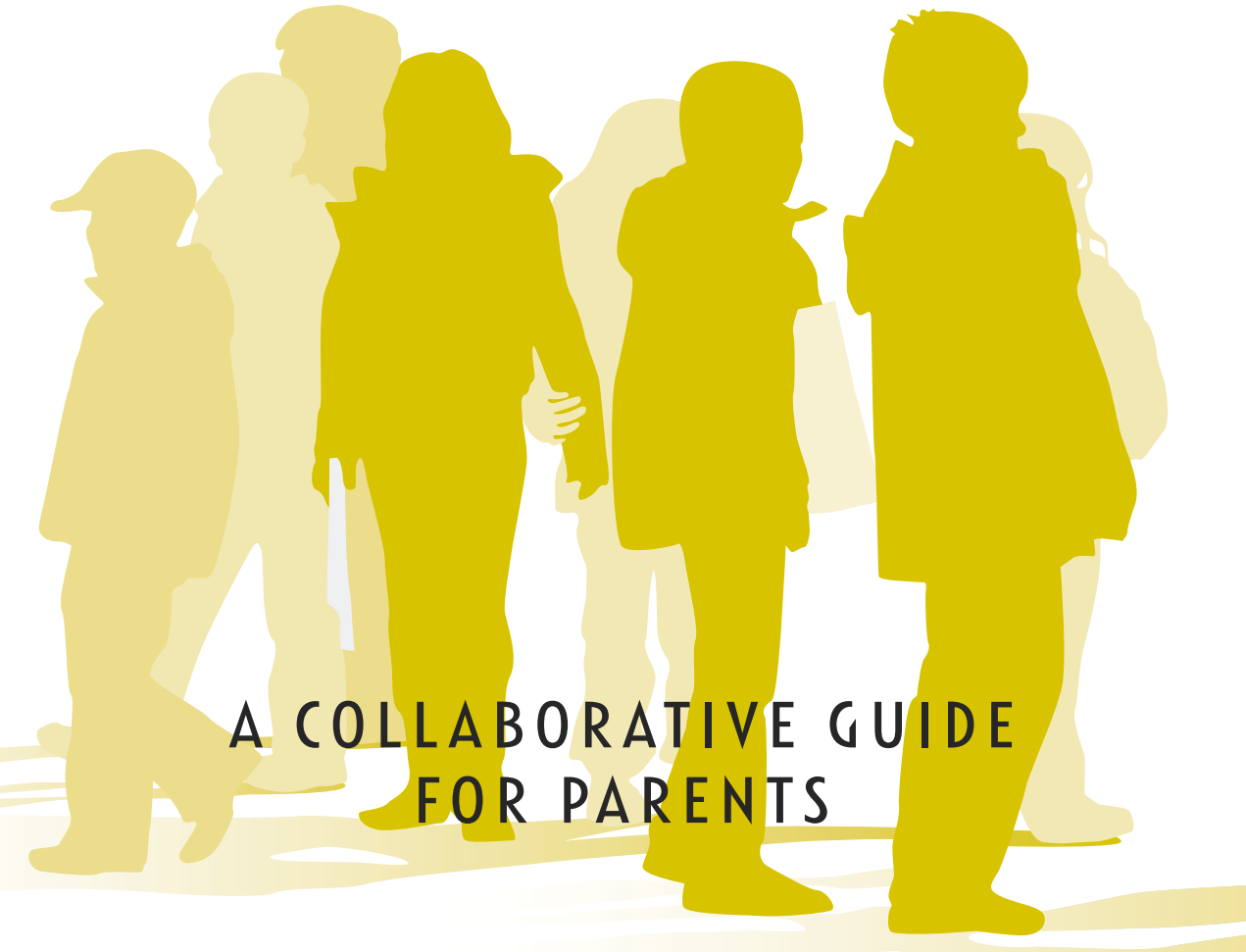
SHARING EXPERIENCES AND SUGGESTIONS AROUND ALCOHOL & SUBSTANCE ABUSE



A COLLABORATIVE GUIDE FOR PARENTS

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a stage in a person's life between childhood and adulthood. It is when a young person must move from dependency to independence, autonomy, and maturity. The young person – while still being part of a family unit – moves to become part of a peer group and eventually to standing alone as an adult.[1] This is part of the normal human developmental process. However, it is also a journey that brings much-discussed challenges, among which are the risks of alcohol and substance abuse.

Best practice has found that drug education programmes should give priority to behavioural, rather than knowledge or attitudinal, outcomes and that adding community elements, and specific family oriented programmes, can enhance the effectiveness of such programmes.[2] With this in mind, this booklet aims to provide assistance to parents by outlining the views of experts in the field of adolescent development, and by sharing the lessons learned by parents, teachers, and teenagers from the various schools participating in this initiative. The booklet does not pretend to have all the answers; indeed, if a perfect solution were known, we would all be using it!

It is worth remembering that the vast majority of teenagers will develop into fine healthy independent adults. As the journey that is adolescence progresses, there will inevitably be bumps along the road. The cautionary notes made in this booklet are designed to reduce the severity of these bumps, and to minimise the chances of these bumps having a lasting impact on either your son's or daughter's ability to live an independent life, or on your long term relationship with him/her.

2. The Dangers

2.1 Alcohol

Ideally, as teenagers develop, their confidence and competence increase in parallel. However, when drink is taken, a teenager's confidence may temporarily be boosted ahead of his/her competence.[3] This mismatch, whereby the teen's confidence gets ahead of his/her competence, can often result in a feeling of indestructibility. When this occurs, it generally results in a teenager being more likely to take part in risky behaviour. This is why one of the most important things that you can do as a parent is to support your teenager to **delay your child's drinking alcohol for as long as possible**. If you do this, it is generally accepted that the risks of harmful drinking in later life are greatly diminished.[4]

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1 K. Geldard & D. Geldard, *Counselling Adolescents*, 2nd ed., (London: Sage Publications 2006) p 3.

2 Pauline Clerkin, *Development of Parents' Resource Manual Booklet to equip parents to provide early and appropriate responses to young people's substance use*. Dublin 2008, p 15 – 16.

3 Dr. Bobby Smyth, Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, *Preventing Drug & Alcohol Problems in Teenagers – What Parents Can Do*. Lecture, Lucena Clinic 6th Oct. 2009.

4 *Straight Talk – A Guide For Parents on Teenage Drinking*, Health Promotion Unit, H.S.E.

It is a reality that secondary school teenagers will encounter multiple opportunities to drink alcohol. We are all aware of the impact alcohol consumption has had on Irish society. Here are some points to note.[5]

- Early alcohol consumption is associated with an increased likelihood of developing alcohol abuse or dependence later in life - research shows that people who drink before they turn 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependency than those who start drinking at the age of 21.
- A national study involving 2,500 patients in six major hospitals across the country found that over one in four (28%) of all injury attendances in the A&E departments were alcohol related.
- In a survey conducted in 40 Galway secondary schools, 35% of teenagers claimed that alcohol was a contributory factor in reported first sexual intercourse, and drugs in 9% of cases.[6]
- Between 1990 and 2006 there were a total of 7,078 people killed on the roads, of which 2,462 were alcohol related.
- Alcohol has been identified as a contributory factor in a large number of public order offences.
- In a national survey, almost half (44%) of all respondents had experienced harm by their own, or someone else's, use of alcohol.
- Other studies show that 1 in 10 young people who have drunk alcohol have ended up in trouble with the police.[7]
- Early onset of drinking was linked to increased risk of heavy drinking in middle age.[8]
- About 20% of 12-14 year olds boys are current drinkers.
- 50% of 15-16 year old girls and boys have had a drink in the past month.
- Teenage drinkers are 11 times more likely to suffer unintentional injury.[9]

5 *Straight Talk – A Guide For Parents on Teenage Drinking*, Health Promotion Unit, H.S.E.
6 Emer Mac, *Sex, Drugs and Alcohol: A Study of Teenage Behaviour in Galway City & County Secondary Schools* (1994).
7 *You, Your Child and Alcohol*, Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland.
8 John W. Santrock, *Adolescence*, 10th ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005) p 457.
9 Professor Joe Barry, Medical Adviser to the National Drugs Strategy Team.

2.2 Cannabis

2.2.1 Alcohol As Gateway

The vast majority of those who take drugs already drink alcohol.[10] Usually, it is either alcohol or tobacco that is the first drug with which teenagers engage. Unfortunately, for the teenager, they are often a gateway to marijuana and then to so called harder drugs.[11] In other words, young people who try one substance are more likely to move along the sequence to the next substance,[12] compared to those who have not tried any substance. Therefore, alcohol may be regarded as being central to the drugs problem and may also, with reference to teenagers, be regarded as a gateway to other self-harming behaviour.

2.2.2 Attitudes Towards Cannabis

A considerable number of teenagers fail to recognize the dangers in smoking cannabis. Indeed, talking to 18 year olds, it is quite amazing to find – among some teenagers - a culture that seems to accept the smoking of cannabis as a very normal activity and to regard it as a relatively safe drug.[13] Therefore, it is essential that it is to educate teenagers concerning the dangers of this drug.

The medical journal, *The Lancet,*[14] highlights the following effects associated with the use of cannabis;

- Anxiety and panic attacks, impaired attention, memory, and psychomotor performance while under the influence of cannabis.
- Possible increase risk of accident if a person drives a motor vehicle while under the influence of cannabis, especially if cannabis is used with alcohol.
- Increased risk of psychotic symptoms among those who are vulnerable because of personal or family history of psychosis.
- A cannabis dependence syndrome characterized by an inability to abstain from or to control cannabis use.
- Subtle impairments of attention and memory that persist while the user remains under the influence may or may not be reversible after prolonged use.
- Impaired educational attainment in adolescents and underachievement in adults in occupations requiring high-level cognitive skills.
- Adolescents with a history of poor school performance, who initiate cannabis use in the early teens, are at increased risk of using other illicit drugs.
- People with asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, schizophrenia, and alcohol and other drug dependence, can have their symptoms exacerbated by cannabis use.
- By the age of thirteen 7% of teens have smoked hash and by sixteen this rises to 20%.

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10 Dr. Bobby Smyth, Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, Lucena Clinic 6th Oct. 2009.
11 Daniel Romer, *Reducing Adolescent Risk*, (London: Sage Publications, 2003) p 58.
12 Jeffrey Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 3rd ed., (London: Prentice Hall, 2009) p 424.
13 *Know The Facts About Drugs*, Health Promotion Unit, H.S.E.
14 The Lancet, *Adverse Effects of Cannabis*, 1998.

Further evidence is highlighted in various editions of the *British Medical Journal*, which found the following: [15, 16]

- Weekly or more frequent cannabis use in teenagers resulted in an approximately twofold increase in risk for later depression and anxiety.
- A tenth of the cannabis users surveyed in the sample (by age 15) had developed schizophrenia disorder by age 26.
- The youngest cannabis users may be most at risk because their cannabis use becomes longstanding.
- The strongest evidence that cannabis use may be a risk factor for later psychosis comes from a Swedish cohort study, which found that heavy cannabis use at age 18 increased the risk of later schizophrenia six-fold.
- A physical dependence is the physical need for a drug that is accompanied by unpleasant withdrawal symptoms when the drug is discontinued.
- If there is not a physical addiction there may be a psychological addiction. Psychological dependence is the strong desire and craving to repeat the use of a drug for various emotional reasons; such as providing a feeling of well being, or the drug's ability to reduce stress.[17]

2.3 Head Shops

Recently there has been a lot of publicity around the availability of so-called *legal highs* in retail shops located around the country. These shops are referred to as "Head Shops". As the products available are constantly changing it is very difficult trying to keep up with new developments and substances. Current details, including pictures of the up to date substances, can be found on **www.drugs.ie**.

The following points are worth noting.

- Some products are used as alternatives to ecstasy, cannabis, and cocaine.
- People who use the substances may do so because they have no connections that would allow them to obtain these substances through the usual sources.
- Some products available are cheaper than those available on the streets.
- Some products also give a greater *high* than the equivalent street product.
- In the future these Head Shops may be banned or some of the products they supply may be made illegal. However, parents still need to be alert to other products replacing those that may be banned, or these banned products being driven underground. Indeed, if some of the products are outlawed, other substances may replace them. Moreover, some of the products may still be available on the internet. Therefore, it might be useful to be vigilant to packages arriving at your home addressed to your teenager, or to one of their friends, or addressed to a name you do not recognise.

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15 The British Medical Journal, *Cannabis Use and Mental Health in Young People*.
16 The British Medical Journal, *Cannabis Use In Adolescence And The Risk For Adult Psychosis*. 2002.
17 John W. Santrock, *Adolescence*, 10th ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005) p 447.

- Finally, the focus of parents should be on prevention rather than trying to keep up with the constantly changing details of the substances available.

2.4 Solvent Abuse

One other area of substance abuse is the use of everyday solvents. This problem should not be seen as being confined to any one socio-economic group, as it affects all groups in society. Some points to note are as follows:

- There have been 30 deaths, mostly teenagers, from inhalation of volatile substances between 1998 and 2005.[18]
- The majority of users are teenage boys and girls who are still in school.
- Girls are marginally more likely to use them than boys.
- Common substances used are: glues, paint thinner, nail varnish remover, lighter fuels, and aerosol/deodorants.[19]
- Risks include death from inhalation of vomit or from an irregular heartbeat.
- Solvents can cause acute kidney, liver, and brain damage.
- These risks are more associated with individual susceptibility rather than the amount inhaled.[20]
- Signs of solvent abuse include:[21]
    - Strong smells of aerosols or petrol.
    - An unusual amount of used aerosols or plastic bags.
    - A user appearing drunk for a short time.
    - Evidence of glue on clothing, hands, or face.
    - Glue sniffers rash – similar to acne – around the mouth.

18 www.irishmedicalnews.com
19 www.additionireland.com
20 www.irishhealth.com
21 www.drugs.ie

3. The Peer Group

3.1 A Healthy & Normal Peer Group

One of the characteristics of the transition from childhood to adolescence is a decrease in the reliance an individual has on parents, with a corresponding increase in the influence of peers. The timing of this transition can vary from child to child but it usually corresponds with the onset of puberty. This changing dynamic in relations between a child and parents and that of his/her peers is a normal part of growing up. Indeed, it can be viewed as a necessary step to becoming an independent adult.

However, many teens often feel a need to conform to the group activity and to being accepted. Sometimes, these can be positive forces: for example, when participation in a peer group teaches teens to see beyond themselves and to look out for others. Teenage peer groups can also be respectful of the decisions made by others. To quote a group of 6th years that have been through this experience recently, *"My mates drink – but I don't. They respect me for it – there is no peer pressure,"*[22] and *"My friends don't drink – so I don't."*[23] However, unfortunately, the peer dynamic can also result in being a teen's first encounter with alcohol. When questioned further these teenagers some said that they had encountered peer pressure to try drink in 2nd year, while it was 3rd year for others. But they found that this peer pressure later dissipated in 4th year or 5th year. This would seem to indicate that if teenagers avoid drink in 2nd and 3rd year, the chances of delaying drinking until the latter teenage years increase significantly.

3.2 Dysfunctional Peer Group Influences

Occasionally, the importance of peers moves outside the normal range, exerting influences and pressures that can be detrimental to the individual. Research shows that such dysfunctional peer influences generally come into play once the parent/child relationship is not as it should be. This may get worse when parents fail to recognise such a breakdown in the child/parent relationship, even when it is quite obvious to everyone else in their social circle.

This dynamic occurs within every year group in every secondary school in the country. Normally, there are a few teenagers who will fall into this category. These teens usually stand out from the crowd, and come to the attention of the school and their parents when schoolwork, discipline and behaviour - both inside and outside school - become an issue. Given that patterns of drinking of each member of this peer group are strongly influenced by the other members,[24] it is this group of teenagers that is normally the first to drink alcohol and the first to experiment with cannabis. Ironically, the parents of these teenagers sometimes delude themselves when they take comfort from the fact that they are "only drinking" and not taking drugs.[25] It is quite common in such circumstances to hear parents say that their child has got in with a bad

22 *A Quote from Student I – 6th Year*.
23 *A Quote from Student II – 6th Year*.
24 K. Seifert and R. Hoffmung, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 5th ed., (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000) p 453.
25 Dr. Bobby Smyth, Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, Lucena Clinic 6th Oct. 2009.

crowd. While such a statement may be true, there is also a suggestion that the blame lies entirely with that teen's friends. Indeed, if a teen in such circumstances is hanging around with peers who have similar characteristics, all the parents of all the teens are more than likely to make such a statement. Yet, they can't all be right! It might therefore be more appropriate to question why their teenager has chosen to associate himself or herself with peers who have similar interests. Indeed, sometimes parents in this situation focus their attention on hoping their teenager's peers will change, or are convinced that it is the parents of these peers who need to solve the problem. However, it is obvious that this attitude and approach are not productive as they shift responsibility for the issues to be addressed: this response to the problem focuses on the need for others to change rather than on parents focusing on *their* child or *their* approach. Here again, it is worth noting the insights of teenagers who have travelled this road. *"I blame peer pressure, and my parents then think it's my mates' fault"*[26] and " *The gang blame peer pressure – when they actually want to drink themselves."*[27]

All human behaviour - be it positive of negative – has a purpose. We partake in positive behaviour to obtain positive feelings for ourselves. Similarly we engage in negative behaviour to gain – consciously or unconsciously – a positive feeling. This latter point is difficult for some adolescents to grasp, as they are sometimes unable to identify why they behave in a particular manner. It therefore needs to be asked what these teens are getting – psychologically speaking – from their involvement with this peer group. Is he/she obtaining a sense of belonging from the peer group to compensate or replace that feeling which should be obtained from home? Since the balance between family pressure and peer pressure will be coloured by the qualities of the family system,[28] it is therefore necessary to ask *why* a teen has formed a peer bond outside the normal range. Addressing this question of *why* is a necessary prerequisite if the tips outlined elsewhere in this booklet are to be of any help.

It is true to say that such unhealthy peer groups only involve a few teenagers in each year group. However, it is still necessary for all parents of all teens to work towards a situation whereby the peer influence does not become stronger than that of the home. Therefore, the points made throughout this booklet are relevant to all adolescents regardless of the peer group to which they belong.

26 *A Quote from Student III – 6th Year.*
27 *A Quote from Student IV – 6th Year.*
28 K. Geldard & D. Geldard, *Counselling Adolescents*, 2nd ed., (London: Sage Publications 2006) p 35.

4. The Parent & Family Relationships

The strength of the relationship is ultimately the only real control you have over your child. [29]

The most important factor in delaying teenagers from drinking is positive parenting; based on good communication, negotiation, and setting firm limits.[30] Since the pathway to alcohol and substance abuse can begin with high levels of conflict in the home,[31] it is argued that the most powerful way to protect your child is through the power of your relationship with him/her. Research shows that children may be protected from the negative effects of drinking if they have strong bonds with the family,[32] and that the optimum conditions for adolescents exist in families where there is good communication and the ability to resolve conflict.[33] These bonds not only include their relationships with their parent/s but also how they fit into the wider family system, including siblings.[34] It is worth repeating that research has continuously found that children who feel connected to their families are more likely to avoid the dangers of drugs.[35]

It goes without saying that the parent/child relationship begins at a very early age. However, as your teenager's personality evolves and matures, there is a need for those relationships to change. Activities that both parent and child engage in at the age of 7/8 may no longer be enough to sustain the relationship as puberty approaches. During adolescence, it may now be necessary to engage in new activities that allow you, as parent, to continue to remain an important part of his/her life. These activities can be based around new activities he/she may be interested in, or activities involving the whole family, or activities associated with developing skills for an independent life - such as giving them the responsibility to cook, to do grocery shopping, washing and ironing, gardening, or decorating his/her room. However, doing activities [only] together is not productive unless communication is taking place. Going for a walk together without a conversation taking place can actually be both frustrating and negative for both parties. Therefore, while doing activities together is always useful, it needs to be accompanied and complemented by a two-way conversation.

Sharing a conversation about what is going on in your child's life and your own life can be the most effective method of maintaining that vital bond with your teenager. Remember, when asking about your child's activities, friends, and whereabouts – make sure your child knows it's because you care about them, not because you distrust them.[36] Having meals together – without the teenager wearing headphones or watching the T.V. - is always a useful way to

29 William Glasser, *For Parents & Teenagers- Dissolving the Barrier Between You and Your Teen*, p 9.
30 *Straight Talk – A Guide For Parents on Teenage Drinking*, Health Promotion Unit, H.S.E.
31 Jeffrey Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 3rd ed., (London: Prentice Hall, 2009) p 434.
32 *You, Your Child and Alcohol*, Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland.
33 K. Geldard & D. Geldard, *Counselling Adolescents*, 2nd ed., (London: Sage Publications 2006) p 27.
34 *A Quote from a Parent I with one son and four daughters*.
35 *Don't Lose The Head*, The North Dublin City & County Regional Drugs Task Force, 2008.
36 *You, Your Child and Alcohol*, Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland.

have regular communication between family members. Several parents[37] have remarked that in their experience, they felt their teenager needed them more as a parent in their adolescent years than when they were 7/8 years of age. To quote a 6th year, "*I took cannabis because it acted as an anaesthetic and numbed the pain.*"[38] [Her relationship with one of her parents was not as it should have been].

One issue that can unintentionally reduce the opportunity for quality family time is having T.Vs and computers in bedrooms or away from family rooms. In addition, a teenage den style set up can provide a sanctuary for your teenager to get away from the family and, when used by your child and their peers, strengthen bonds within the peer group at the expense of family bonds. Furthermore, this situation can be made worse when such dens are detached from the house. As always, it is all a matter of balance.

One of the most important outcomes of feeling loved and belonging to a family unit and, most importantly, knowing and recognising these feelings, is that it increases a teenager's self esteem and self-acceptance. This idea of accepting him/herself for who he/she is, as opposed to striving to be somebody he/she is not, is not only fundamental to his/her own long term happiness, but also the key to resisting the temptations of drink and drugs and the negative consequences of peer pressure. In compiling this booklet, a group of ten mixed-gender 5th year students was surveyed. Two of the group, Michael and John, did not drink. Michael is not "slagged", while John is. When asked why this was the case, they all responded by saying that *"Michael doesn't care what people think of him and is confident enough to still be involved in what is going on, while John is slagged because he just sits there and says nothing."*[39]

4.1 Authoritative Parenting

The experts document various parenting styles that can influence a teenager's journey through adolescence. It is generally agreed that the most effective parenting style is that of *authoritative parenting*[40] (as opposed to authoritarian). This is a positive parenting style that encourages children to be independent but still places limits and controls on their actions. This style is associated with long term goals of helping teenagers grow into confident individuals, who are separate and independent but also appropriately connected to their family, and are able to form their own intimate relationships in the future.

Authoritative parents develop clear and fair behavioural guidelines without being restrictive and punitive. They always have, and use, the final call in any decision. They expect high standards of behaviour from their children while giving their children some freedom to help them develop their own independence. These parents show an abundance of parental involvement, interest, and active participation in their teenagers' lives and have households with routine traditions and schedules to help develop a sense of security and belonging. Authoritative parents do not allow what is going on in their own lives become more important than their teenagers' lives and, most importantly, do not allow their teenagers perceive that this may be the case.

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37 *A Quote from Parents I, II, III.*
38 *A Quote from Student V – 6th Year.*
39 *A Quote from Student VI – 5th Year.*
40 John W. Santrock, *Educational Psychology*, 2nd ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004) p 74.

Authoritative parents are emotionally open and responsive to their children while maintaining control of their own emotions. They teach their teenagers the consequences of their actions and do not shield their teenagers from those consequences. Authoritative parents don't lecture; instead, they nurture a two-way dialogue with their teens. When such dialogue takes place it is important that it is about everyday matters, and doesn't just happen when problems arise. It is characterised by listening to teenagers' opinions about issues, understanding their point of view (without necessarily agreeing), and helping them explore various ways to understand different views people may have. This helps their children feel that they are listened to and understood, and that their views matter. Authoritative parents use these conversations to strengthen bonds with their teens and their teens' sense of belonging within the home. Since it is important that the peer influence does not become stronger than that of the home, such dialogue can only help to shift the balance in the parents' favour. To quote one parent "*listen to your child – if you don't, someone else will.*"[41]

In conclusion, studies have linked greater parental control and monitoring with lower drug use among teens. In contrast, low parental involvement was linked to higher drug use. Teens whose parents set limits such as where adolescents went after school, and what they were exposed to on T.V./internet, were more likely to not to use drugs. In a study of 400 adolescents, parent involvement and adolescents' positive regard for their parents were related to less smoking and less drinking among teenagers.[42]

4.2 Best Friend Parenting

As well as positive parenting styles being well documented, there is also research evidence of styles or approaches to parenting that have proved not to be successful or effective. One such style is that of parents trying to be their child's best friend. The reasons for adopting such an approach to parenting are numerous. For example, this approach may occur because parents see themselves as enlightened crusaders for their teens, or are desperate to be considered cool by their own teenager. Yet, sometimes these parents find that when they actually have to try to impose boundaries, that their child's reaction is such that the parents then opt to give in, in order to avoid confrontation. Consequently, these parents – while highly involved with their children - often place few limits or restrictions on their teen's behaviours.

The motivation is to develop a positive relationship, but the efforts to do so are misguided. Often, well meaning, but misguided, parents, such as these, engage in inappropriate compromises or compensation decisions. For example, some such parents buy their teenagers drink. They do this to comfort themselves with the fact that they have some control over the situation and that – at least - their teenager is not drinking in a park. However, if children are allowed to drink at home, it greatly increases the permission they give themselves to drink outside the home.[43] Indeed, in compiling this booklet several teenagers said their parents adopted this approach. Yet, *all* of these teenagers admitted to drinking behind their parents' backs at social outings and in the park. Ironically, these parents have often let their children do what they want, allowing them to get their way, because they believe that a combination of involvement and lack of restraints will produce creative and confident children.

41 *A Quote from Parent IV*.
42 John W. Santrock, *Adolescence*, 10th ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005) p 458.
43 *Dr. Bobby Smyth, Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist*, Lucena Clinic 6th October 2009.

Sometimes parents may try to be the "cool parent" to their child's friends. They hope this will help the relationship with their own child. Unfortunately, such a tactic serves only to allow the parent to feel that he/she is doing something to strengthen their relationship with their teen rather than try to behave more appropriately, which is the harder and more difficult thing to do. Also, parents opt for this best friend parenting style for the simple reason that it is the easiest thing to do!
When teenagers of these parents cross the line, the parents often feel that to confront or object to their child's behaviour may in some way indicate that their relationship will be less loving, or in some way damage that love. Consequently, when a number of minor disciplinary issues arise, these parents usually prefer to adopt an approach whereby - when the details of an incident emerge - they reason and perceive these details in such a way that it allows them to see no problem with their own child's behaviour. Blame is always shifted elsewhere and the central problem is evaded. Within a school context, such incidents can be as simple as parents giving teenagers a note to excuse them not doing homework or for being late for school when, arguably, they have no excuse. When parents adopt such an approach for the majority of recurring incidences, a cycle of prolonged indiscipline begins.

What is also notable about such situations is that when an incident does arise within school, parents tend to make up their minds *only* having heard the teen's version. To compound such a situation, the teenager learns that no matter what they do, they will be supported by the home and, as a result, the same recurring disciplinary issues occur over a number of years.[44] One other characteristic that also prevails is when a teenager is proven to have been involved, with others, in a disciplinary matter. Here, some parents feel it is unfair for their child to accept responsibility until all others involved also do so. Such an approach allows the teenager to learn that they do not have to accept responsibility for their actions, if others do not also do so. Finally, it is worth quoting a parent who made the following comment about best friend parenting: "*when I realised that trying to be my daughter's best friend was fulfilling a need in me and was not what she needed from her mother, I subsequently did not make the same mistakes with my two younger sons.*" [45]

4.3 Should We Serve Drink At Home?

One issue that is often debated is that of serving alcohol to a teenager at the dinner table. Some parents believe that introducing their child to drink in such a manner can teach them to respect drink. Parents normally cite the experience of the familial culture on the continent when teenagers are given drink at an early age and grow up to enjoy a drink for its own sake rather than simply to get drunk. It is pointed out that the lack of an Irish style drink culture in these countries proves that such an approach works. However, it is argued that there is no scientific evidence to support this assumption.[46]

Indeed, there is a school of thought that argues that it is the lack of a drinking culture on the continent that allows teenagers to be safely exposed to drink, rather than the other way round.

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44 David Shafferand Katherine Kipp, *Developmental Psychology, Childhood and Adolescence*, 7th ed. (California: Thomson-Wadsworth, 2007) p 602.
45 *A Quote from Parent V.*
46 Dr. Bobby Smyth, Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, Lucena Clinic 6th Oct. 2009.

It is pointed out that, because Irish society's overall attitude to drink is so destructive, it is not safe to copy the approach in other countries. Moreover, in compiling this booklet, several teenagers said that their parents had adopted this approach. But *all* of these teenagers also admitted to drinking behind their parents' backs at social outings, and in the park.

4.4 Parents' Own Drinking

One other parenting factor that can have an influence on a teen's attitude to drink is parents' attitudes to their own drinking. Patterns of drinking are strongly influenced by the lifestyle of family members,[47] and parents can influence alcohol use through their own attitudes, values, and behaviour [towards drink].[48] To quote those who have first hand experience, "*My parents drink a lot and that makes it O.K.,*"[49] and *"My Dad drinks 10 pints on a Saturday night – so he can hardly lecture me."*[50] If teenagers see a parent drinking frequently to excess they are likely to see such behaviour as examples of the norm. Indeed, parents can unconsciously send a message that excessive drinking is how every family is and how everyone lives. This may give teenagers the false impression that drinking to excess on a regular basis is not out of the ordinary. For example, a parent may have a hangover after a night's drinking and this hangover may be the source of slagging or jokes at the breakfast table.

Teenagers may witness drunken behaviours, such as rage, hostility, falling down, stumbling, slurring words and other such activities and view those as part of normal, everyday life. The latter can be a regular feature of some children's lives and be a source of some considerable distress as concern for family members and their safety can be an issue. Watching someone they love drinking too much on a regular basis brings heartache and pain. The drinker can become unreliable become an undependable partner or father/mother. Children are often afraid of the frequent arguments and fights, and are often confused about the changes in their parent's personality. There are an estimated 61,000 to 104,000 children in Ireland under the age of 15 living with parents who have problems with alcohol whether alcohol-dependent/alcoholics, regular heavy drinkers or occasional binge drinkers.[51] The lives of these children is largely unknown in the public arena but the numbers equate to the sum total of 150 full primary schools. A 2009 survey on alcohol dependency suggests that men have more than a 20% lifetime risk of developing alcohol-use disorders, while women's risk is 8 to 10%.[52] Much of that risk is inherited.[53] A family history of alcohol problems increases the risk of developing alcohol problems four fold.[54] A person can control whether or not they develop an alcohol dependency by being careful about the quantity and frequency of their drinking so mention of the high risk of dependency in certain families is important information for young teens.

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47 K. Seifert Hoffmung, *Child and Adolescent Development*, 5th ed., (Houghton Mifflin, 2000) p 453.
48 John Conger & N. Galambos, *Adolescence and Youth*, 5th ed., (New York: Longman, 1997) p 320.
49 *A Quote from Student VII – 6th Year*.
50 *A Quote from Student VIII – 6th Year*.
51 www. alcoholireland.ie (from *Alcohol Problems In The Family*, European Commission - Euro Care – WHO - COFACE, 1998 p 13.)
52 M. Russell, *Prevalence of Alcoholism Among Children of Alcoholics*, (NY: Guilford,1994) p237-45.
53 *The Lancet*, Volume 373, Issue 9662, Pages 495, 7th February 2009.
54 M. Russell, *Prevalence of Alcoholism Among Children of Alcoholics*, p237-245.

5. Initiating The Conversation

Sometimes parents feel they are no longer an important influence in their teenagers' lives, and that their children's decisions about alcohol use are beyond their control. However, this is not always the case. While parents are not the only influence on teenagers' lives, what parents do, what they believe, and what they say to their children has an important influence on young people's decisions.[55]

Therefore, the timing of this conversation is important. It is argued that you should not wait until there is a problem to talk.[56] Since teenagers are less likely than younger children to ask for information, parents need to take the initiative and talk with teenagers about drinking. Parents[57] have pointed out that difficulties around this subject begin to emerge at the middle of, or end of, First Year for some teenagers, or in Second Year for others, or Third Year for others. The timing seems to depend on the level of both physical and/or psychological maturity. In addition, other parents[58] point out that in Transition Year a collective/group dynamic seems to come into play that acts as a draw for individuals to express their maturity and growing sense of adulthood. It is therefore argued that it may be too late by the age of 14/15 to have this all-important conversation, and that it might be appropriate to enter into this conversation to coincide with the onset of puberty. It is argued that while your child is still malleable, you should make the first move.

This conversation should not be a lecture but rather a two way process of exchange of views. Therefore, the first step might to be elicit their views on, or perceptions of the subject of drink. It might be preferable to ask open-ended questions, not questions that can be answered using a yes or no. For example, *why do you think people drink? What do you think the dangers are?* It is recommended that you respect their views if you want the same in return. It is important not to interrupt or be judgmental, even if you don't agree with their position.[59] The conversation might also include some of the issues raised in this booklet, such as the dangers outlined. Some parents have used opportunities that arise when watching television programmes, such as a soap opera, and use the story line to ask of their teenager what they would do in a similar situation if they were offered drink or drugs. However, it is argued that it is important not to try to scare teenagers away from drugs by giving them information about the harmful side effects, as it alone is not effective.[60] Indeed, "fearful communication" seems to elicit defensive reactions ("*it won't happen to me*") and is generally ineffective in preventing adolescents from experimenting with substances.[61] Moreover, studies have shown that simply providing information about the dangers of drink and drugs may actually increase a predisposition to drug use in some circumstances.[62]

During this conversation it might also be useful to explore what your child thinks of him or her self. Explain that everybody has limitations, that we are all good at some things and bad at

55 *Teenagers and Alcohol: A Guide for Parents*, Australian Government – Department of Health.
56 *You, Your Child and Alcohol*, Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland.
57 *A Quote from Parents VI, VII, VIII*.
58 *A Quote from Parents IX, X, XI*.
59 *You, Your Child and Alcohol*, Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland.
60 Linda Nielsen, *Adolescence*, 3rd ed., (California: Thomsom/Wadsworth, 1996) p 556.
61 S.J. Patterson , *Journal of Drug Education*, 1994, p 177-191.
62 G.J. Botvin, *Prevention & Societal Impact of Drug & Alcohol Abuse*, (Washington D.C. 1999).

others, and that we all have to learn our own limitations and manage these. It is important to explain that we have to accept who and what we are, and that sometimes people foolishly use drink to try and change things.

During this conversation it might also be useful to begin the process of explaining your expectations to your child. In doing so, it is important for them to feel that you want them to become independent and have the appropriate freedoms that they need to develop. It is important to emphasize that these freedoms need to be balanced with your *right and need* to know your child is safe. It is important for teenagers to know what is expected of them.[63]

Another issue that might be useful to discuss is what strategies that they can use to avoid being pressurised into drinking. Reassure them it is *Okay* to avoid situations where there might be drinking. For example, a lot of teenagers don't want to drink but fear that saying no will make them unpopular. Therefore, they want their parents to deny them permission.[64] This gives them an excuse to turn down an offer of drink and to blame their parent when he/she is offered a drink. Give them permission to say, "*My parents will kill me*". Another useful approach is to teach them not to slag others who don't drink, or not to pressurise others into drinking.

One method that sometimes works with teenagers is to make the points in such a way that they have a responsibility to prevent others from doing the wrong thing. For example, ask them to make sure nobody in their peer group makes fun of others who don't drink.[65] This has a number of effects. It heightens their concept of what is right and wrong, and it gives them the feeling that not only do you trust them not to drink, but that you also think they have the maturity to prevent others from doing so. This approach taps into their growing sense of maturity and adulthood and enhances self-esteem. Remember, teenagers who have a strong self-image are better able to say "no" and withstand peer pressure.[66]

Over the years, schools have witnessed teenagers who, when drunk, think they are invincible. This feeling of being invulnerable often results in their engaging in reckless activities. For example, there are recorded incidents of teenagers who believed that it would be great fun to jump off a roof or out of a moving car, or to engage in some physical activity they would not do if sober. It is very important to impress upon your children that if they are "under the influence", they must never, ever, jump off a tree, wall, or roof, etc. Injuries sustained in this matter are very common in accident and emergency departments.

During this conversation your child may say that you are the only parent who is so strict. If they think you are too strict, don't rubbish this, it is their right to have opinions, just as it is your right to define the rules. Here, it is useful to point out that different parents have different values and rules. Remind them that no two families will have exactly the same viewpoint, and that the rules others choose to set for their own children are not your business, unless they end up directly affecting your child.

Other points worth noting are as follows:

- Remember, that no two siblings perceive the same parents in the same way. What may have worked for one child may not work for another. It is also interesting to note the comment

63 *Teenagers and Alcohol: A Guide for Parents*, Australian Government – Department of Health.
64 *A Quote from Parent XII with four teenage boys*.
65 *Teenagers and Alcohol: A Guide for Parents*, Australian Government – Department of Health.
66 Jeffrey Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 3rd ed., (London: Prentice Hall, 2009) p 434.

of a 5th year student, *"Because my older brother got away with drinking at my age, it was unfair to stop me."* [67] This highlights the difficulties that can arise with younger siblings when a precedent is set with older siblings. Also, if you have older children please don't make comparisons – it drives all teenagers mad.

- If someone in the family has a problem with alcohol, don't hide it from your child; allow the topic to become part of the conversation, when appropriate.
- It is also worth making the point that if a teenager's parents never drink, it is no guarantee that a teenager will not abuse alcohol.

6. Talking To Other Parents

It is vital to talk to other parents. You will find that you are not the only one worrying about the same issues. You will find that you are not the only one trying to hold the line on the same rules. You will find that it will be easier to work together on the same issues than to try to do so in isolation. You might also discover that the amount of pocket money you were told is given to your child's friend is not, in fact, true. You might find that the curfew time your child's friend has is earlier than you were told. You might also find that the house was not actually supervised when you were told it was, etc. This networking is that bit easier for those parents and teenagers who have moved together from the same Primary School to the same Secondary School. If, however, your child is new to his/her secondary school, it might be necessary for new parents to make a special effort to introduce themselves to other parents. Remember, "*it is important not to believe everything your child says!*" [68]

7. Setting Boundaries

It is important that rules are not simply imposed but negotiated and talked through. When people have a significant say in decisions that affect them deeply, they are more likely to take ownership of those decisions. Therefore, they are more likely to make the decisions work, and less likely to sabotage them.[69] Indeed, it has been found that high levels of threats produce a "boomerang" effect; as the threats increase, adolescent attitudes towards alcohol and drug use become more, rather than less, favourable.[70] So, set realistic rules and boundaries, and stick to them.

It is also useful to discuss why you need the rules. This can help your child see that you care about his/ her well-being and it will also help them understand the issues from your perspective. When you have this discussion, it is useful not to interrupt but to let them express their own opinions. Remember, research shows that parents who talk to their children about drugs, and know what their children are doing, and who they are with, can reduce the chances of their children using drugs.[71] Here are some areas that might be useful when setting these boundaries.

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67 *A Quote from Student IX – 6th Year*.
68 *A Quote from Parents XIII*.
69 Bernard Mayer, *The Dynamics Of Conflict Resolution*, p 191.
70 D.D. Schoenbachler, D. Ayers & G. Gordon, *Adolescent Response to Anti-Drug Public Service Announcements*, p 9-21.

7.1 General Boundaries

1. Set rules around the use of the T.V. and the computer. The over use of a computer, be it for the Internet or the use of games, is one activity that can cause a teenager to become detached from the family. If your son or daughter gets agitated when he/she is told to stop using the computer, he/she may be developing a problem. Indeed, if this agitation/restlessness continues[72] until he/she is allowed to resume computer use, this problem may urgently need to be addressed. Also, if possible, have the computer in a family room with the screen facing outwards.

2. Try and avoid a situation developing where your teenager gets into the habit of locking their bedroom door.

3. Know your child's friends' names and their parents' names.

4. Talk to the parents of your child's friends and agree boundaries together. This united front can avoid "*you're the only Mum/Dad that won't let me...*"

5. They must always tell you where they are/have been, and whom they were with, and they must always phone if they are going to be late. Agree times to return home.

6. If they have given you reason not to trust them, you might have to insist that they ring you from the land line of the house they are in.

7. Agree that you will always check with the other parents if they are at a house party or a sleep over or if they say they are getting a lift from a friend's parent. It is worth noting that in certain circumstances parents,[73] who are hosting other children in their home, often comment to other parents and to the school that they are surprised that only two of the four parents of the children present telephoned to check where they where.

8. Set spending limits, when necessary, they must account for money spent.[74] Teenagers cannot buy drink without money. This money has to come from somewhere. It may also be necessary to check - in a non-intrusive way – that the clothes or shoes they claim were bought were actually purchased.

9. Agree when it is not appropriate to go out. You don't have to say yes! Should they be allowed to go out every time they want to?

10. "*I was introduced to drink by a friend who had a free house, and whose parents left drink around the place. They did not check if any was missing.*"[75] This point, made by other teenagers, needs to be taken on board when there is an unsupervised house and when drink is left lying around. Indeed, in compiling this booklet, a group of ten 5th

71 *Don't Lose The Head*, The North Dublin City & County Regional Drugs Task Force, 2008.
72 *Internet Addiction: The Emergence of a New Clinical Disorder*. Cyber Psychology and Behaviour, University of Pittsburgh. Vol. 1 No. 3., p 237-244.
73 *A Quote from Parent XIV*.
74 *Straight Talk – A Guide For Parents on Teenage Drinking*, Health Promotion Unit, H.S.E.

year students were surveyed. Six of the ten said *"my first exposure to drink was because my parents left drink lying around and they did not check if any was missing."*[76]

11. If your child's peer group normally consists of teenagers of the same gender, it is interesting to note that a lot of adolescents[77] drink to gain the confidence to talk to teens of the opposite sex. To counteract this, a parent[78] has suggested that it is useful to try and organise activities involving teenagers of the opposite sex. These activities may be the usual ones, e.g. cinema, bowling etc. Inviting the boys and girls to mix in a healthy environment can only reduce the need for drink to be taken when future encounters occur. One interesting comment from a male 5th year student was *"I drink because it gives me the confidence to dance – normally I can't dance."*[79]

12. One difficulty that can arise is when your child cannot be contacted because, according to them, his/her mobile was mislaid, or the battery was flat. It can happen legitimately once or twice. However, if this becomes a continuous problem, here are a few suggestions for addressing the issue: (i) A rule being set[80] whereby they must charge their phones a few hours in advance of going out. If they do not, you may consider not letting them go out. This may, in future, ensure they always charge their phones before going out. (ii) Some parents opt to ring *all* their child's friends persistently, until it becomes easier for the teenagers to return their calls rather than put up with the embarrassment of your ringing their friends.[81] (iii) If the phone is not charged before going out, they must take your phone with them. (iv) Finally, it may be necessary to deny them permission to go out on the next occasion if, on a previous occasion, they did not answer the phone to you.[82] Remember, let your teenager know the consequences beforehand.

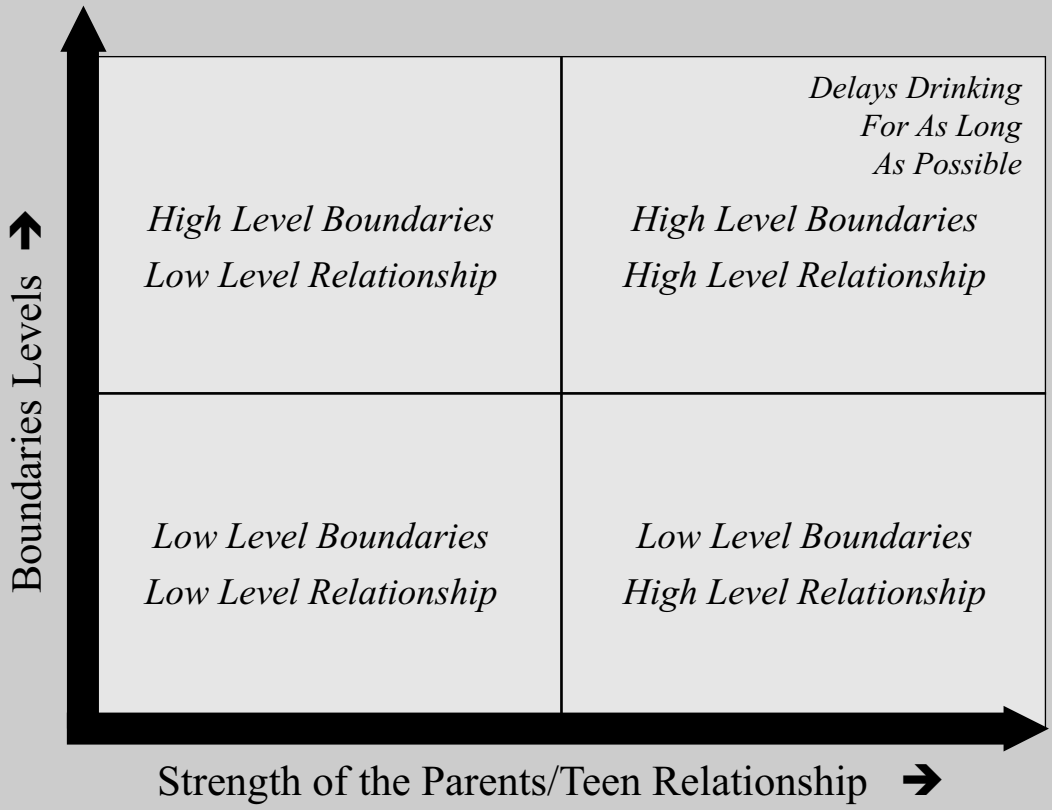
13. Do not accept the word of another teenager about the whereabouts of your child, especially on the phone. Always check with that teenager's parent.[83] If you cannot obtain the telephone number of other parents, it might be useful for the entire group of parents within a year group in a school to agree to share telephone numbers through the class/year parents' representative.

14. Sometimes, parents may come across a friend of their child drunk, or misbehaving in a worrying way outside the school environment. This parent may feel it is the right thing to telephone and pass on the information to the other parent. In this situation, there is sometimes a reluctance to make this call for fear of a negative reaction by the parent receiving the call or that their may be a negative impact on their own teenager. It might be useful for the entire group of parents within a year group in a school to

75 *A Quote from Student X – 6th Year.*
76 *A Quote from Student XI – 5th Year.*
77 *A Quote from Student XII – 6th Year.*
78 *A Quote from Parent XV with five teenage boys.*
79 *A Quote from Student XIII – 5th Year.*
80 *A Quote from Parent XVI.*
81 *A Quote from Parent XVII.*
82 *A Quote from Parent XVIII.*
83 *A Quote from Parent XIX.*

agree that any such telephone call will be received in a positive light, i.e. that the motive is to help through giving the information, rather than the information being seen as a criticism of the teenager or of the parents themselves. It might be useful for each parent to tell *their* teenager that this is what *you* want other parents to do. In addition, it might also be useful for parents to agree collectively that no one will tell the teenager who passed on the information.

Remember, implementing these boundaries as puberty begins, has a much greater chance of success than trying to impose these boundaries *after* an incident has occurred. It is also important to remember that enforcing boundaries, as the only means of delaying your teenager drinking, is unlikely to work without nurturing a strong parent/teen relationship. Also, when considering the issue of boundaries here is a useful quote from one parent, "*there is no son or daughter who has never lied to their parent/s at some point.*"[84]



84 *A Quote from Parent XX.*

7.2 The Local Disco

1. At some point, you will eventually be asked whether your child can go to the local disco. Do not answer immediately.[85] Do not be pressurised by "*John's/ Jane's parents have said yes.*" Always check with the other parents.
2. Ensure your children always have a lift home from you or another parent. A system of rotation between parents may be useful, and always agree a time for arriving home and, if possible, agree this time with other parents.
3. If you are collecting your teenager, agree a time for them to meet at a designated location outside the venue. If they are continuously late for this time, it might be necessary to enter the establishment to retrieve your child. Parents have advised that this approach always ensures that, in future, they stick to times agreed.[86]
4. If you are collecting your teenager and their friends, it might happen that one of the friends does not turn up on time or has drink taken. All parents should agree that the driver should ring those teenagers' parents. Teenagers should be told by *their* parents that this is the rule. It might be useful for the entire group of parents within a year group in a school to agree such an approach. To quote one 5th year "*I drink when I know Amy's Mum is collecting us, she won't rat on me- she's cool.*"[87]
5. If you are the parent not on the roster for a lift home, it should always be a rule that your child checks in with you when he/she arrives home. It is always worth the inconvenience of staying up late to ensure this rule is adhered to. It is too easy for teenagers to hide the fact that they have taken drink by simply popping their head into their parents' bedroom to say they are home. As one 5th year teenager put it *"I tend to drink when I know I can arrive home and just shout upstairs and I know they won't check."*[88] Another commented *"I would not drink if I knew they were sitting up waiting for me."* [89]
6. A lot of teenagers have their first experience of drink in the hours before their visit to the local disco - normally in a secluded place near the venue. In fact, these venues usually continue to be the place of choice to continue the habit of drinking.
7. It is also worth noting that one of the main sources for obtaining drink is what is known as "*fishing*".[90] This is when teenagers find an older person to enter an off licence to purchase drink on their behalf.
8. The provision of taxi money to teenagers can sometimes cause problems. For example, a group of four friends may all be provided with taxi money by their parents. Given that only one of the teens may need to pay for the taxi, this leaves a lot of excess

85 *A Quote from Parent XXI.*
86 *A Quote from Parent XXII.*
87 *A Quote from Student XV – 5th Year.*
88 *A Quote from Student XVI – 5th Year.*
89 *A Quote from Student XVII – 5th Year.*
90 *A Quote from Student XIV – 6th Year.*

cash to go "*fishing*". This issue is avoided if a parent *always* collects them. Indeed, some older individuals who own cars may offer to provide drink for younger teenagers and give them a lift home. Minimising the money your teenager has can reduce the chances of this happening.

9. After a period of time, the novelty of the local disco wears off and teenagers seek out alternative venues. Knowing that a parent is happy for the teenager to go to the local disco, it is not unknown for teenagers to be dropped off at the local disco and, when the parent driver has left, these teenagers then make their way to an alternative venue such as an unsupervised house or open area, and return to the disco in time to be collected.[91]

10. Be aware that the production of false I.D.s is a very lucrative business amongst teenagers. This is particularly handy for teenagers who at the age of 15 or 16 can make themselves look eighteen years old. Indeed, some teenagers don't have to obtain false I.D.s as "*we get real I.D.s from friends who are 18 or 19 years old*".[92]

11. Discuss the dangers of drinking shorts, mixing drinks, alco-pops, and drinks being spiked.[93] According to some 5th year students, most had their first experience of drink by tasting alco-pops or spirits or cider. It is interesting to note that according to 5th year students girls, when they first drank alcohol, they drank alco-pops because *"they are easy to drink, and taste nice."*[94] In addition, as boys mature, they are "*slagged if they drink alco-pops – because they are girly drinks and lads should drink beer."*[95] Moreover, "*some of the lads tend to drink cider instead of beer if money is an issue, because cider is cheaper."*[96]

12. Sometimes, girls may choose to wear clothes that you would not not always approve of to a disco. Instead, they leave the house wearing clothes you approve of, and later change somewhere else before entering the disco.[97]

13. Remind your children that they can ring you at any time to be collected if they find themselves in a situation that makes them feel unsafe or uncomfortable. This means that when they are out, you're on standby. Alternatively, they can text you to ask you to ring them and tell them they are needed at home. This allows them to blame you and save face in front of their peers.

Remember that enforcing boundaries as the only means of delaying your teenager drinking, is unlikely to work without nurturing a strong parent/teen relationship.

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91 *A Quote from Parent XXIII.*
92 *A Quote from Student XVIII – 5th Year.*
93 *Teenagers and Alcohol: A Guide for Parents*, Australian Government – Department of Health.
94 *A Quote from Student XIX – 5th Year.*
95 *A Quote from Student XX – 5th Year.*
96 *A Quote from Student XXI – 5th Year.*
97 *A Quote from Parent XXIV.*

7.3 House Parties

1. If you are hosting a party for teenagers, and the rule for your child is that they do not drink, you need to be vigilant that guests do not bring drink to the party. Insisting that all guests be introduced to you as they arrive can help this. You should be alert to ruck sacks[98] being brought into your home. In addition, constant vigilance is needed to ensure that drink is not distributed in your home.
2. At some point, you may decide to allow your teenager to drink. The future consequences of this decision should be thought through. A time will come when your teenager - who you now allow to drink – will want to have a party or some friends over to the house. You will now be faced with a decision with regard to other parents' children. Can you host a house party where your teenager is the only one who drinks? If you are providing drink, you are not only morally, but also legally, obliged to inform other parents, as you may be open to legal action. **You can only supply alcohol to children [under 18] in a private residence if you have the explicit consent of that child's parent or guardian.**[99] You must ascertain the views of other parents with regard to *their child.* When it comes to parents' rights, treat other parents as you would wish to be treated by them. Parents should not be afraid to let other parents know their views. A united voice will greatly assist this, even if it is only 2/3 parents. If you are the parent who is on the receiving end of criticism regarding providing drink, it is incumbent upon you to respect the views of others even if you disagree. To quote a 6th year, "*I went to parties where the parent of the teenager holding the party had given their teenager permission to drink – but they turned a blind eye to my drinking.*"[100]
3. If your child is attending a house party in another home, it might also be useful to check if there will be drink available.
4. Tell other parents when the party starts, and finishes. There have been incidents when teenagers were at two parties in one night, in different homes, with different rules, and their parents thought they were in the one venue all the time.
5. If necessary, you may have to have your child ring you on the land line from the house, or you may have to ring the land line to check.
6. Check that there is actually a party taking place. There have been circumstances when teenagers have told parents they are at a party when they are elsewhere – knowing that their parents would not approve.
7. When your child gets to the age that either they or their friends start driving, it is important to lay down extra boundaries as circumstances change. These should include not getting into a car with a driver who has been drinking or has been taking drugs. Indeed, has your child an obligation to prevent a friend from driving when under the influence of any substance?

98 *A Quote from Parent XXV.*
99 *Intoxicating Liquor Act 1998 – As amended 2003.*
100 *A Quote from Student XXII – 6th Year.*

8. Another issue arises in 5th/6th year. During that period, there can be an 18th birthday party – including friends from other schools - almost every weekend. As well as posing a problem with academics, it also provides too many opportunities to drink excessively over a continuous period of time. It might be useful for the entire group of parents to agree to merge 18th birthday parties to reduce the number of opportunities to drink. It may also be useful to avoid parties during Christmas Exams/Mocks/State exams by holding parties in advance of these periods, or postponing parties until the exam periods finish.
9. It is also worth remembering that older siblings having a house party where drink is available provides opportunities for younger siblings to obtain drink.[101]
10. According to some teenagers, they normally only drink when there *"is a social event on, like a disco or house party."*[102] Given this fact, there is a need for extra vigilance at the following times -
    - The night the Junior Certificate results are released.
    - The weekend at the start of the October mid-term & Halloween night itself.
    - The days the Christmas exams finish and the Christmas holidays begin.
    - House parties over Christmas.
    - The weekend the spring mid-term starts/ends and when mock exams finish.
    - When the Easter holidays start and finish.
    - The weekend the summer holidays begin and end, as well as events such as concerts and outdoor music festivals.
11. The aftermath of big sporting events such as soccer, basketball, rugby, hockey or G.A.A. matches can cause particular problems. After such sporting events, win or lose, emotions are high. Excessive drinking heightens passions and excitement. As a result, teenagers can feel invincible and engage in activities in which they would not normally participate. Often, a pack mentality takes over, and can result in activities that may cause criminal damage, or result in serious injury. Teenagers need to be reminded of the long-term consequences of getting a criminal conviction. Having a criminal record can result in difficulties with future job and visa applications. Furthermore, there are a considerable number of third level courses that now require Garda vetting.
12. Parents[103] have suggested that it is difficult to arrange family based alternatives to divert attention from possible negative activities. As a result, parents find if they collectively arrange alternative activities together, it becomes easier to persuade teenagers to participate in these healthier activities.

Once again, implementing these boundaries from the start has a much greater chance of success than trying to impose these boundaries *after* your teenager has become used to a sense of freedom or, indeed, after an incident has occurred. It is also worth repeating that enforcing boundaries as the only means of delaying your teenager drinking is unlikely to work without nurturing a strong parent/teen relationship.

101 *A Quote from Student XXIII – 6th Year.*
102 *A Quote from Student XXIV – 5th Year.*
103 *A Quote from Parent XXVI.*

7.4 Clearly Defined Expectations

Once an agreement is made you need to make sure it is kept, and to impose consequences if it is not. Reach an agreement on consequences for breaking rules. Make sure it's something fair and appropriate and something on which you are prepared to follow through. It is also important to monitor, and affirm adherence to, clearly defined expectations.[104] Reward your children when they keep to the set of boundaries. It may be useful to renegotiate the rules when circumstances change; for example, because of age/maturity. Remember that while parents continually need to provide the adolescent with opportunities for change, they also need to continue to exert a level of parental control, remembering that the adolescent is not yet an adult.[105]

When imposing sanctions or, more appropriately, withdrawing privileges, discuss with your child the one rule that is non-negotiable: your right to know they are always safe at all times. They may respond by saying they are old enough to look after themselves. This misses the point. You should accept they are mature enough to look after themselves and that this is why you give them the freedom to go out. Let them know this. However, you need to shift the conversation to your concern about the dangers out there and your need for them to *let you know* they are safe. It might be worth pointing out that if an adult in the house has indicated that they will be home by a certain time, and they do not return by that time, you will still be worried and would expect a phone call. In other words, this rule applies to all who live in the house regardless of age.

It is important that your child perceives no difference between Mum's and Dad's interpretation and implementation of these boundaries, and the consequences for over stepping these boundaries.[106] With this in mind, it might be useful to use the words *"we expect you to ..."* rather than *"I expect you to ..."* when having a conversation about expectations.

Also, when there are older siblings in the house it is important to ensure the older sibling is aware of what you expect from their younger brother/sister, and that the older sibling does not unintentionally, or intentionally, undermine the implementation of the boundaries. In the words of those who have been there, "*My older brother/sister gets me drink."*[107]

Over the years, we have witnessed some parents approaching the setting of boundaries as if it were a business contract. Indeed, some parents have even entered into signed contracts with their children about these issues. We have never seen this approach work. So, it is important to strike a proper balance that develops out of rights and responsibilities that are part of a strong emotional bond, rather than because of threats and decrees.

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104 Dr. Bobby Smyth, Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, Lucena Clinic 6th Oct. 2009.
105 K. Geldard & D. Geldard, *Counselling Adolescents*, 2nd ed., (London: Sage Publications 2006) p 27.
106 Dr. Bobby Smyth, Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, Lucena Clinic 6th Oct. 2009.
107 *A Quote from Student XXV – 6th Year.*

7.5 Holding The Line

At times, it might seem easier to back down, or give in to your child, when boundaries are broken. However, to do so is to gain short-term peace but always with negative long-term consequences. Remember that their adolescence will last a number of years and that you are in this for the long haul, and that there will be many occasions when important decisions will have to be made. Sticking to your position, regardless of how unpopular it is, is well worth it in the long run. It is very hard, if not impossible, to put the genie back into the bottle. To quote one parent, "*being afraid to confront or stand your ground is a recipe for disaster.*"[108]

8. When the Conversation Gets Difficult

At some point, your child may go against the rules you have set or, indeed, may come home drunk. In fact, it may be necessary to prepare yourself for the day when your child will eventually try alcohol. So, if some day, your child does arrive home having taken drink or drugs, it is suggested that you stay calm,[109] and don't get drawn into an argument while they are under the influence.[110] Check that they are physically okay and, since alcohol can camouflage other drugs,[111] it is important to ask them if they have taken any other substances. In short, focus on the medical safety issues on the night, and postpone the disciplinary issues until the next day.

While you may not have yet found that your child has arrived home drunk, your parental instinct may tell you something is not quite right. You may notice some of the following:

- Becoming irritable and argumentative.
- A change in the normal circle of friends.
- A disimprovement in personal appearance.
- Lack of energy.
- Increased signs of depression or anxiety or mood swings.
- An inclination to be away from the family.
- Loss of interest in hobbies.
- Dilated pupils, bloodshot eyes, circles under eyes.
- Change in weight, up or down.
- Loss of appetite or constantly hungry (known as the "munchies").
- Your child may come home chewing gum or mints, or smelling of excessive after-shave/perfume.[112] To quote the experts, "*When I have been drinking it is easy to hide it from my parents when I come home.*"[113]

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108 *A Quote from Parent XXVII.*
109 *Teenagers and Alcohol: A Guide for Parents*, Australian Government – Department of Health.
110 *Straight Talk – A Guide For Parents on Teenage Drinking*, Health Promotion Unit, H.S.E.
111 *Teenagers and Alcohol: A Guide for Parents*, Australian Government – Department of Health.
112 *Straight Talk – A Guide For Parents on Teenage Drinking*, Health Promotion Unit, H.S.E.
113 *A Quote from Student XXVI – 6th Year.*

- You may come across paraphernalia associated with making cannabis joints including: a pouch of, or traces of, loose tobacco, torn pieces of cardboard from cigarette boxes, or filter paper packets.[114]
- You may find burn holes in his/her clothes.
- Money may disappear.
- Drink in the house may disappear or be watered down.
- Your child may go out for the evening with a rucksack.
- He/she may be spending too much time in his/her room or become very secretive.
- If substance abuse mainly occurs at the weekend, you may notice a change in mood mid-week.
- If there is a prolonged period away from home/peers, e.g. on a holiday during which there is not access to any substances, there may be a noticeable change (positive or negative) in his/her mood.[115]

There is no definite way to distinguish some of the above symptoms from some of the normal, adolescent, characteristic behaviours. However, the more of the above symptoms you notice, and the longer they persist, the greater the possibility is that something may be wrong.

When faced with any of these situations, many parents react by trying to take control. They may become very strict, and battle with their teenagers to ensure they toe the line. This approach is problematic: teenagers with very strict parents may rebel even more strongly, escalating the conflict, or they may go "underground" with their problems. Alternatively, parents may avoid their teenagers' problems and back down from every conflict, effectively giving up trying to influence their teenagers.

If such a situation arises, it is useful to look at how conflict arises, or how it can continue with one or both parties becoming entrenched in their positions. It is important to have the patience to measure your responses in order to avoid fuelling the moment into becoming a two-way conflict. Indeed, it is very important to avoid an escalation whereby your words are a bait to your child's, or his/her responses act as a bait to you.

In such situations it very useful – but also very difficult – to use "*empathy*".[116] Empathy can be defined as:

> ...a continuing process whereby [one person] lays aside his/her own way of experiencing and perceiving reality, preferring to sense and respond to the experiences and perceptions of the [other person]. [117]

It is important to point out that using empathy does not mean that you are agreeing with your child's views. Expressing empathy allows your child to feel the power of being understood by another person and to feel that his/her perception is valid (but not necessarily correct).

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114 *Understanding Substances & Substance Abuse*, Department of Education & Science. p 47.
115 *A Quote from Parent XXVIII.*
116 R. J. Bovine & D. K. Crawford, *Behaviour Management and Conflict Resolution in Schools*,p 43.
117 D. Mearns & B. Thorne, *Person-Centred Counselling In Action*, p 39.

After all, their views are real to them and, therefore, provide an important perspective that needs to be taken into account when you are communicating with your teenager.

In order for you to understand their perception of the facts that influences their position,[118] it is also very useful to employ what is known as *active listening*. This is defined as the "listener decoding verbal messages, identifying the precise emotions being expressed, and then restating the emotional content of the message to the speaker, using similar words used by the speaker."[119] This approach may help you to understand why they have taken drink.

As previously stated, all human behaviour - be it positive or negative – has a purpose. We partake in positive behaviour to obtain positive feelings for ourselves. Similarly, we often engage in negative behaviour; ironically, to gain – consciously or unconsciously – a positive feeling. This latter point is difficult to grasp for some teenagers, as they are sometimes unable to identify why they behave in a particular manner. It therefore needs to be asked, what teenagers are getting – psychologically speaking – from their behaviour? Are they trying to feel grown up? Are they curious about drink? Are they trying to feel independent or confident? Are they trying to fit in with their peers and be accepted? Are they trying to rebel? Are they trying to cope with some unhappiness, or with rejection, or with low self-esteem? If your child is not able to verbalise these feelings, you might even suggest these motives or ask him/her how drinking makes him/her feel. Withdrawal of privileges, and other disciplinary action, may be necessary when your teenager crosses the boundaries. However, adopting such an approach alone may only serve as a temporary solution, unless the issue of *why* your teenager is behaving in such a way is addressed.

Once this holistic understanding has taken place, it is now necessary to communicate it back to the your child. This is referred to as "playing it back".[120] Mirroring words, paraphrasing, reframing, and reflecting emotions and effective use of gestures, eye contact, and demeanour all play an essential part in helping your child feel they are understood.

> The basis of any relationship is communication. Without communication, there is no connection and, hence, no relationship. The skills of effective and productive communication assure that exchanges within relationships have the greatest chance for positive outcomes.[121]

However, it needs to be stated that giving your child the opportunity to express his/her views and respecting his/her right to have views is not the same as agreeing with him/her. Showing empathy, and allowing your child to feel you listen to him/her, is more likely to get him/her to cooperate with the boundaries set. Indeed, the use of empathy should not be seen as an alternative to withdrawing privileges or any other action that needs to be taken. It is recommended that this concept of empathy should be used in addition to, and not instead of, any disciplinary action you may take. Remember, while they are still teenagers you still need to exercise appropriate power and influence.[122] Sometimes parents surrender too much power too soon.

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118 *Managing Difficult Interactions*, (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2008) p 24.
119 Christopher Moore, *The Mediation Process, Practical Strategies For Resolving Conflict*, p 128.
120 K.B. Everard, Geoffrey Morris, and Ian Wilson, *Effective School Management*, 4th ed., p 108.
121 R. J. Bovine & D. K. Crawford, *Behaviour Management and Conflict Resolution in Schools*,p 44.
122 William W. Wilmot and Joyce L. Hocker, *Interpersonal Conflict*, 6th ed., p 119.

If your child does arrive home under the influence, or you come across warning signs, you should not ignore this or hope it will pass. To quote a 6th year "*Deep down they know I drink- but they do not challenge me, to avoid a row.*"[123] When such situations arise, it is time to restate the boundaries you have set, and remind them of the consequence of breaking the rules and implementing those consequences. Not following through on the consequence in such situations will always make things worse in the future. It is easy to be worn down and give in; it will only get worse if you choose to do so. It is always necessary to follow through on the previously stated consequence. If not, it is useful to ask, am I relaxing the rules to make things easier on myself and avoiding conflict to make myself feel better? Remember, there is no one action that can provide a quick fix to this problem. Parents need to accept that it is an ongoing and continuous process.

9. Working With The School

All families have their ups and downs. There may be periods of difficulties with relationships between husband and wife, between parent and child, or between siblings. Indeed, there may also be the trauma of redundancy, illness, or bereavement that may impact on the atmosphere in the home. Some teenagers who experience such family difficulties can continue on and cope without these difficulties impacting on their school lives. However, other teenagers can, and do, encounter situations whereby difficulties in the home have such an emotional impact that they hinder their emotional and academic progress within the school and, as a result, increase the chances of their getting involved in alcohol and substance abuse.

In such situations, the provision of information to the Year Head/Tutor/Guidance Counsellor is vital if the school is to help your child. Such a request will always be treated in the strictest of confidence, and the information only used to adapt the school's responses to cater for your child's situation. Without such information, the school may inadvertently treat your child's possible *acting out* or *acting inwards* as purely a disciplinary matter and, without knowing, add to his/her difficulties. Over the years, experience shows that when parents withhold vital information – mainly through an unfounded sense of embarrassment – they prolong their child's difficulties and prevent the school from providing assistance and advice as well as acting in the teenager's best interests. If you choose not to tell the school, please seek help privately. Seeking help will never make things worse. Not doing so may actually exacerbate the situation.

123 *A Quote from Student XXVII – 6th Year.*

10. Summary

The following is a summary of key action points from this document.

- Establish a loving, trusting relationship with your child.
- Make it easy for your teenager to talk honestly with you.
- Talk with you teenager about alcohol facts, reasons not to drink, and ways to avoid drinking.
- Keep tabs on your teenager's activities, and join with other parents in making common agreements that delay drinking for as long as possible.
- Develop family rules around the consequences of teen drinking.
- Set a good example regarding your own alcohol use and your own attitudes and responses to teenage drinking.
- Encourage your child to develop healthy relationships and fun alternative to drinking.
- Know whether your child is at risk from a drinking problem; if so, take steps to lessen that risk.
- Know the warning signs of a teenage drinking/drug problem and act promptly to get help for your child.
- You as a parent know your teenager better than anyone else. When you notice a significant change in behaviour don't wait, act. Believe in your own power to help your child avoid alcohol use and, if necessary, seek help.

11. Conclusion

Some parents may feel that the suggestions made in this booklet are an attempt by the school to preach a certain parenting style, or to remove the rights of parents to decide what is best for their child. However, this is not the case and we ask that the suggestions made be taken in the spirit in which they are intended; that is, to be helpful and to provide assistance, and to pass on our experience of thousands of teenagers who have passed through the secondary school system.

We do not pretend to have all the answers. Indeed, this booklet does not contain the perfect solution to the problem of alcohol and substance abuse. In fact, some people may dismiss the suggestions made because they actually don't provide a perfect or easy solution. Human nature dictates that when we encounter a problem we seek out one act or event or set of words that will fix the problem. Because there is none, we should remember that this is a *continuous process* that lasts over a period of time and that to seek out a quick fix only serves to cause frustration. It is worth pointing out again that if a perfect solution were known, we would all be using it!

Finally, it is worth restating that the vast majority of teenagers will develop into fine, healthy, independent adults. As the journey that is adolescence progresses, there will inevitably be bumps along the road. The cautionary notes made in this booklet are designed to reduce the severity of those bumps, and to minimise the chances of those bumps having a lasting impact on either your child's ability to live an independent life or on your long term relationship with them.

Acknowledgements & Bibliography

- Student I – 6th Year
- Student II – 6th Year
- Student III – 6th Year
- Student VI – 6th Year
- Student V – 6th Year
- Student VI – 5th Year
- Student VII – 6th Year
- Student VIII – 6th Year
- Student IX – 6th Year
- Student X – 6th Year
- Student XI – 5th Year
- Student XII – 6th Year
- Student XIII – 5th Year
- Student XIV – 5th Year
- Student XV – 5th Year
- Student XVI – 5th Year
- Student XVII – 6th Year
- Student XVIII – 5th Year
- Student XIX – 5th Year
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Coolmine Community School, Clonsilla
Hartstown Community School
Mount Sackville Secondary School, Chapelizod
The King's Hospital, Palmerstown
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St. Patrick's Cathedral Grammar School
Loreto College, St. Stephen's Green
St. Mary's College, C.S.Sp., Rathmines
St. Louis High School, Rathmines
Stratford College, Rathgar
The High School, Rathgar
Terenure College
Our Lady's School, Templeogue
Templeogue College, C.S.Sp.
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St. Kevin's College, Crumlin
St. Colmcille's C.S., Knocklyon
Firhouse Community College
Old Bawn Community School, Tallaght
Coláiste Chilliain, Clondalkin
Coláiste Bríde, Pres. Secondary School, Clondalkin
Lucan Community, School
St. Joseph's College, Presentation Convent, Lucan
Loreto High School, Beaufort
De La Salle College, Churchtown
Mount Anville, School
St. Kilian's Deutsche, Schule, Clonskeagh
Jesus & Mary College, Goatstown
St. Conleth's College, Ballsbridge
John Scottus School, Donnybrook
Muckross Park College, Donnybrook
Sandford Park School, Ranelagh
Alexandra College, Milltown
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Coláiste Eoin, Stillorgan
Coláiste Íosagáin, Stillorgan
Blackrock College, C.S.Sp.
Rockford Manor School, Blackrock
Oatlands College, Mount Merrion
St. Raphaela's Secondary School, Stillorgan
Wesley College, Dublin
Loreto College, Foxrock
Rathdown School, Glenageary
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St. Gerard's School, Bray
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Presentation Secondary School

Co. Clare
Mary Immaculate Secondary School, Lisdoonvarna

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Co. Donegal
Coláiste Cholmcille, Ballyshannon
Scoil Mhuire, Convent of Mercy, Buncrana

Co. Galway
Jesus & Mary Secondary School, Salthill

Co. Kerry
Pobalscoil Inbhear Scéine, Kenmare

Co. Kildare
St. Farnan's Post Primary School, Prosporous

Co. Longford
Mercy Secondary School, Ballymahon

Co. Mayo
Scoil Muire & Padraig, Swinford

Co. Tipperary
Loreto Secondary School, Clonmel

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