



Teens: Peer pressure, alcohol and substance use

Poll report

Poll 34, November 2024



Report highlights

- Peer pressure is a leading concern for parents when it comes to the health and wellbeing of their teens, with four in five (80%) worrying about peer pressure in general
- Over half (57%) of parents are concerned about peer pressure and alcohol or substance use for their teens
- One in four parents have never discussed alcohol or substance use with their teenagers.

Peer pressure

Peer pressure is when someone is influenced by other people of the same age or social group (their peers) to act in a certain way. If a person is with friends who are doing something they typically would not do and the friends convince them to do it too, that is an example of peer pressure.

Concern among parents about peer pressure

Most Australian parents (80%) (Figure 1) report being concerned about peer pressure for one or more of their teenage children, with 57% of parents 'somewhat concerned' and 23% 'very concerned' for at least one child. Parents are concerned about peer pressure for 76% of female teens and 71% of male teens. The proportion of parents of children aged between 13 and 16 years who are concerned is similar (73–77%) while fewer parents of 17-year-olds are concerned (64%).

The proportion of parents across all demographic backgrounds including gender, age, and family structure reporting concern was consistently high. Parents in major cities (78%) had a similar level of concern about

peer pressure to those in the regional areas (74%), as did parents born outside of Australia (73%) compared to those born in Australia (79%).

Peer pressure and alcohol and other substance use

Concern about alcohol and substance use alongside peer pressure is common among parents, with 57% of parents saying they are concerned for their teen about peer pressure and either alcohol or substance use or both. More male (63%) than female (52%) parents report being concerned about these issues, as do parents in the major cities (60%) compared to those in regional and remote areas (44%).

Substance use

Substance use refers to the use of selected substances, including alcohol, tobacco products, illicit drugs, inhalants, and other substances that can be consumed, inhaled, injected, or otherwise absorbed into the body with possible dependence and other detrimental effects.

Parent concern and discussion with teens

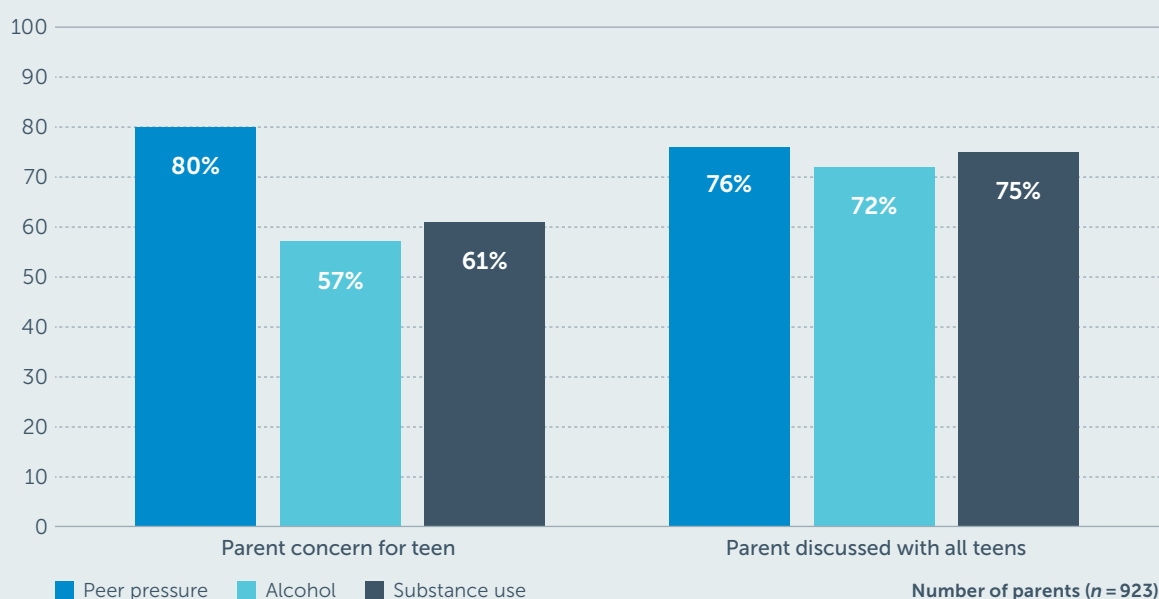


Figure 1.

Conversations between concerned parents and teens

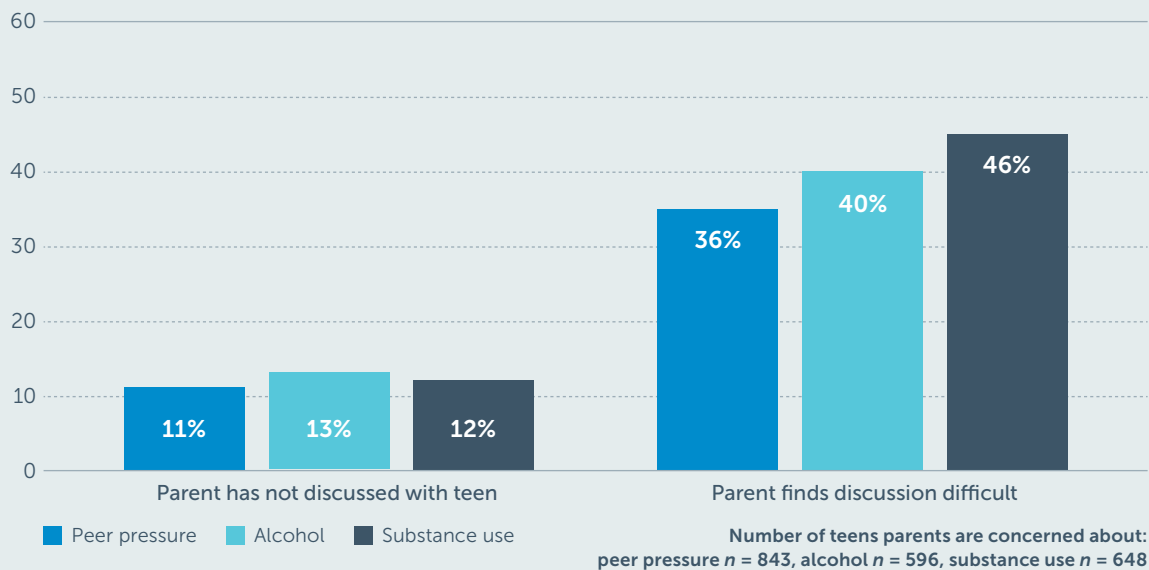


Figure 2.

Parent discussions with teens about peer pressure

Most parents have talked about peer pressure with their teenage children, with 80% having discussed the topic with one or more of their teenage children. Parents report having spoken with 82% of female children and 77% of male children about peer pressure. There was no difference when considering teens of different ages.

Parents have not discussed peer pressure with one in five teens (21%), saying that for one in six of these (17%) having a discussion was 'not relevant'. Of note, among those parents concerned about peer pressure, one third (36%) say they would find it difficult to talk about with their teen and one in five parents (11%) have not discussed the issue with them at all (Figure 2). When considering key demographic characteristics of parents, slightly more female (83%) than male (77%) respondents report having spoken about peer pressure with at least one of their teenage children. Parents in the highest Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) quintile (81–100%) were more likely to have discussed peer pressure with all their teens compared to those in the lowest quintile (0–20%), 83% versus 69% respectively. Younger parents were more likely than older parents to find the discussion difficult: 39% of those under 40 years, compared to 22% of those aged 50 years or more. More parents residing in urban areas report finding it difficult (32%), compared to parents in regional and remote areas (18%), as did single parents (38%), compared to partnered parents (25%).

Concern among parents about alcohol

Half of Australian parents (57%) report being concerned about alcohol for one or more of their teenage children. Parents report either being 'very concerned' (17%) or 'somewhat concerned' (40%) for one or more of their teenagers (Figure 1). Parents are equally concerned ('somewhat' or 'very concerned') for female teens (51%) and male teens (52%). About half of parents of teens of all ages are concerned, with the level ranging from a low of 43% for 14-year-olds to a high of 59% for 16-year-olds.

More parents under 30 years are concerned about alcohol (77%) for their child compared to parents 30 years and over (56%). More parents in major cities (56%) are concerned about alcohol than those in regional areas (45%).

Most parents (77%) have talked about alcohol with their teenage children (72% having spoken with all their children and 5% with some). One in four parents (23%) have not talked about alcohol with any of their teenage children. Most parents (87%) who are concerned about alcohol for their teenager have discussed it with them, but 40% say it is a difficult topic to talk about. Among the quarter (25%) who had not discussed alcohol with their teen, one in five (22%) say it was because they felt the issue was 'not relevant' to their child.

Female respondents (75%) were more likely than male respondents (67%) to have had a conversation with all their children about alcohol. More parents in regional areas (86%) have spoken with their teens compared to parents in major cities (69%). One in three male parents (34%) found it difficult to discuss, compared to one in five female parents (19%). Younger parents were also more likely than older parents to find it difficult to talk about: 35% of those aged under 40 years, compared to 17% of those aged 50 years or more. Parents found it equally difficult to discuss alcohol with male and female children.

Concern among parents about substance use

When asked if they were concerned about substance use for their teen, 61% of parents say they are concerned for at least one teen, with 40% of parents saying they are 'somewhat concerned' and 21% 'very concerned.' Three in four parents (75%) say they have discussed substance use with all their teens. Just over one in four parents (28%) say it is difficult to discuss substance use with at least one of their teens; this figure rises to 46% for those who say they are concerned about substance use for that child.

Implications

Peer relationships play an essential role in the development of children and young people.² These relationships are critical and provide support for age appropriate emotional and social development. Taking risks is a normal and healthy part of adolescence. It is how young people learn from their experiences and test boundaries, helping them form their own identities. It is important to note that peer influence also extends to risk-taking. A young person may take risks similar to their peers and is more likely to take risks if their peers do. Negative peer relationships can increase the likelihood of problematic risk-taking, such as drinking alcohol, trying illicit drugs and other antisocial behaviours. Healthy peer influences can be protective and empower young people to draw boundaries and make safe decisions.

This study found the vast majority of parents are concerned about peer pressure for their teenage children, suggesting they may recognise the potential for harm. Although most parents are talking about this important issue with their children, many find it difficult to discuss. Parents can support their teens by discussing strategies and tips with them to enable them to better navigate peer relationships. Parents should aim to develop strong, secure and supportive relationships with their children, practice alternate ways to say no, and prioritise open communication.³ They can also encourage their child to have a wide social network.

One in four parents have not discussed alcohol or substance use with their teen



Many parents are particularly concerned about alcohol and substance use for their teens and often find it difficult to discuss these topics. Parents play a vital role in reducing teen drinking, as it remains an important population health issue. Although alcohol consumption by young people has declined in recent decades, a recent population survey suggests 65% of secondary school students have ever consumed alcohol and among these, 81% have experienced at least one episode of risky drinking.^{4,5} Of concern, a third of current teen drinkers reported they intended to get drunk either most times or every time they drink alcohol (ref as above). Teenagers who drink at risky levels are more likely to experience harm and miss school and work.^{4,5} Longer term effects of drinking during teenage years are serious and include harm to the developing brain and an increased chance of problem drinking as an adult.

Parents should discuss approaches and possible harms related to drinking and substance use with their teenage children. As young people are influenced by those around them, it is important for parents to be positive role models and practice safer drinking practices. Programs should equip and empower parents with strategies to support their teens from an early age to navigate peer relationships and make safe decisions around alcohol and substance use.

Data source and methods



This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The survey was administered from 19–27, September 2023, to a randomly selected population stratified by age, sex and state of residence, nationally representative of Australian parents aged 18 and older. Among Online Research Unit panel members contacted and eligible to participate, the completion rate was 92%. Parents ($n = 923$) included in this study had one or more teenage children aged 13–17 years ($n = 1,160$) and answered questions on their level of concern about peer pressure, alcohol and substance use for their child. They also reported on whether they had discussed these issues with their child and how difficult they would or did find these conversations. All estimates in this report were weighted to reflect the distribution of the Australian population using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

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Suggested citation



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