

Fosterline Wales Factsheet

Alcohol

This information sheet provides information about alcohol, and alcohol consumption, and why this is relevant for foster carers. It contains information about the licensing laws in Wales that relate to children and young people, and the responsibilities of the foster carer and the fostering service to ensure that children and young people are given support and information about alcohol related issues.

Introduction

Alcohol plays a part in many family and social situations in the UK. For some people, alcohol is a relatively harmless part of social life. For some, alcohol causes harm to them, or may lead to them harming others. Harm could be a consequence of long term drinking patterns, or risky behaviour when drinking. For others, alcohol forms no part of their life for cultural, religious or personal reasons. Many fostered children and young people have been harmed by other people's drinking and may be at greater risk of misusing alcohol themselves. Foster carers need to be aware of their own drinking consumption and any underlying patterns, as well as how alcohol may affect those they foster.

Foster carers

A fostering service should have clear written guidance on the use of alcohol in foster homes and this should be fully discussed with all prospective and approved foster carers. This includes consumption of alcohol included in religious observance practices.

Those caring for children and young people have particular responsibility in this area, modelling sensible use of alcohol. Foster carers should understand that alcohol reduces concentration and impairs responses, which may lead to unprofessional conduct.

Foster carers need to be aware that looked after children and young people may have experienced trauma and abuse associated with alcohol consumption or have existing patterns of alcohol abuse themselves. It is, therefore, important that foster carers have full background information about each child they foster and that they are sensitive to the child/young person's views of adult drinking patterns and associated behaviour.

Carers should be aware of the consequences of their own drinking in terms of:

- The example they set to children and young people.

- Their vulnerability to allegations should they be seen by the child/young person placed with them to be intoxicated and therefore possibly 'not in control'.
- The risk of losing their driving licence through drinking and driving (e.g. the need to remain under the legal drink-drive limit if you might need to collect a child or young person).

Fostering is a stressful responsibility. Some people might choose to relieve this by drinking alcohol. If this is an area that causes concern for foster carers, they should speak with their supervising social worker.

Foster carers, as part of their safe caring strategy, should not store alcohol within reach of children and young people.

Children and young people

Young people often go through a phase of experimenting with alcohol – or drinking too much! Generally, foster carers should ensure that the young people they look after are informed about the effects of alcohol on behaviour and the dangers to health and wellbeing of excessive drinking. It is accepted that the more that young people know, the more likely they are to make good decisions about how to deal with alcohol.

Foster carers have a crucial role in promoting the health and wellbeing of any child or young person in their care. Any specific issues and behaviour relating to a child/young person and alcohol should be fully and honestly discussed between the foster carer, supervising social worker, child's social worker and child (if appropriate to their age and understanding). This information should be recorded in the child's care plan and the foster placement agreement. All parties should be clear about the strategies for managing particular issues and behaviour relating to alcohol, and how these are recorded and monitored.

What to do if a child or young person is intoxicated

Were you to suspect that a child/young person has had alcohol, depending on how much they think they have drunk, you may need to:

- Offer fluids such as water or squash.
- Monitor and check the child/young person on a regular basis – ten minutes, 30 minutes, hourly, etc. especially if they go to sleep.
- Contact health professionals for advice.
- Consider hospital treatment is needed.

Alcohol and health

The current NHS advice is that no-one under 18 should drink alcohol. However, if children **do** drink alcohol, they shouldn't do so until they're at least 15 years old. If 15 - 17 year olds drink alcohol, the NHS advises it should be rarely and never more than once a week. They should always be supervised by a parent or carer.

The current NHS Wales advice for adults is no more than 14 units a week for regular drinkers. This is roughly 1.5 bottles of wine or 5 pints of 5% lager. It should be spread out, rather than saved up for a heavy drinking session. This consumption is no longer described as a 'safe' level, but a 'low risk' level.

Drinking excessively interferes with a person's perception of reality and their ability to make good decisions. Impaired judgement can lead to accidents, drowning, fights, misjudging the riskiness of a situation, and unsafe sex. In extreme cases, excessive alcohol can lead to alcohol poisoning, which is potentially fatal.

Even if not drinking excessively on a particular occasion, regular drinking can present risks to the person's long term emotional and physical health, their social relationships and their ability to work or study.

Fostered children and young people are at risk of 'self-medicating' with alcohol to escape painful emotions and stress. In addition, foster carers can find themselves relying on a glass of alcohol to unwind and relax. It is important to recognise these patterns, to then seek appropriate help and support for the fostered children and for yourself (see Resources). Such self-care should contribute to learning healthy ways to relax and manage stress.

Some children have foetal alcohol syndrome as a result of alcohol in the mother's blood passing to the baby through the placenta. The baby cannot process alcohol, meaning it can damage cells in their brain and spinal cord, and disrupt their development. The damage to the baby's organs is irreversible and they may grow up with restricted growth, learning difficulties, displays of inappropriate or challenging behaviour and serious health issues. While the damage is irreversible, good care and specialist interventions can reduce the impact on the child's life. Fostering a child or young person with foetal alcohol syndrome can be challenging. There are links to more information and sources of support in Resources.

Alcohol and the law for under 18s

- It is illegal to give alcohol to under-fives, unless under medical supervision.
- Under 14s cannot go into areas of a pub where alcohol is being sold unless the pub has a children's certificate.
- 16 and 17 year olds can be bought cider or beer while having a meal if they are in a space that is set aside for meals.
- Under 18s cannot buy alcohol for themselves (apart from the above situation). It is also illegal to buy alcohol for them in a pub.

Alcohol, culture and religion

Different cultures and religions have different approaches to alcohol. Individual families within a culture or religion may have their own expectations and rules. It is important to look into these issues and discuss in advance with the child's social worker. Some religious rites involve alcohol (e.g. Christian mass or communion). This would be illegal for a child under the age of five. For fostered older children and young people, it would be necessary to clarify with the head of the religious body conducting the service, seek delegated authority and to record in the care and support plan, the nature of how take part in such rites.

Can I allow a fostered young person to drink alcohol occasionally?

The NHS advice is to avoid alcohol if you are under 18 because young bodies are less able to process alcohol, and young people's brains are still developing. Check your fostering agency's policy about small quantities of alcohol on special occasions.

Even if a foster carer does not allow a fostered young person to drink alcohol, they may find other ways to drink and find themselves in social situations where teenage drinking is expected. The topic of alcohol should be fully and honestly discussed between the foster carer, supervising social worker, child's social worker and the child or young person. Any support plan or decision should also be discussed and agreed in advance with anyone with parental responsibility. Decisions should be recorded in the care and support plan, foster home agreement, delegated authority and the foster placement agreement.

Can I drink alcohol while fostering?

Agencies have different policies about drinking alcohol as a foster carer, which should be set out in the agency's Fostering Handbook, and you will need to follow their policy.

The following suggestions are to help you if your agency's policy does not address all these matters.

You are responsible for the child or young person you look after, so at least one carer must **always** be able to respond to an emergency involving the child or young person. It is illegal to be drunk while responsible for a child whose age means they need adult supervision. Even if someone else is the responsible carer, it is never appropriate for a fostered child or young person to see the foster carer inebriated.

Check your agency's position on driving after drinking alcohol, but while under the legal limit.

Always think about how the fostered child or young person may feel if they know you are drinking alcohol. Some will have come from environments where drinking alcohol led to abuse.

Be a good role model, and think of ways to model having fun, healthy activities and socialising without drinking alcohol.

Reducing the risk of harm from alcohol

Foster carers can reduce the risk of harm from alcohol by supporting the development of fostered children and young people's knowledge and skills, so they are:

- confident about:
 - seeking information, advice and discussing issues such as alcohol or drug use
 - weighing up the pros and cons and then making decisions
- confident in themselves and their self-worth

- managing relaxation, socialising and stress in healthy ways
- used to adults modelling responsible attitudes to alcohol
- aware of dangers such as spiked drinks, accepting lifts from someone who has been drinking and vulnerability to risky sex or sexual exploitation.

Resources

meiccymru.org

Information and advice for under 25s - 080 880 23456

Guidance from NHS Wales:

Chief Medical Officer publishes guidance on children drinking alcohol

meddygonyblaenau.wales.nhs.uk/news/16415/

New guidelines on drinking alcohol gpone.wales.nhs.uk/news/40069/

Thinking about your drinking primarycareone.wales.nhs.uk/news/47255/

Report on parental alcohol misuse and its impact on their children

researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PN-0570/POST-PN-0570.pdf

Facts about alcohol, including the legal position, together with tools to help reduce alcohol consumption and advice on talking to young people about alcohol

drinkaware.co.uk/

Stories and advice for young people about alcohol and alcohol misuse

themix.org.uk/drink-and-drugs/drinking-alcohol

General support and advice:

Supportline has contact details for different agencies that can help adults and young people who are misusing alcohol

supportline.org.uk/problems/alcohol.php

Wales Drug and Alcohol helpline

dan247.org.uk/

Support and advice for people fostering a child with foetal alcohol syndrome:

fasdtrust.co.uk

nofas-uk.org/

Al-Anon Family Groups UK & Eire

al-anonuk.org.uk

Helps people whose lives are affected by someone else's drinking.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)
Helpline: 0845 7697555
alcoholicsanonymous.org.uk
Self-help groups for people with alcohol problems.

Talk to Frank
Tel: 0800 77 66 00
talktofrank.co.uk
Offers confidential drugs information and advice.

How The Fostering Network can help

The Fostering Network offers advice, information and support. Our expertise and knowledge are always up-to-date and available through our vital member helplines, publications, training and consultancy.

Advice

Fosterline Wales
Call us on 0800 316 7664 from 9.30am - 12.30pm Monday to Friday.
If you call outside this time, please leave a message and someone will call you back as soon as possible.

You can email us at:
fosterlinewales@fostering.net
The Fostering Network Wales
33 Cathedral Road
Cardiff CF11 9HB

Support and resources

Our website is an essential source of information, while our online community brings together foster carers for peer support and advice. You can login to share your experience and get advice from other foster carers. Our online community is a safe and secure area to discuss foster care matters.

thefosteringnetwork.org.uk

Training and consultancy

Wherever you are in your fostering career, as a foster carer, social worker or manager, The Fostering Network has a range of training designed to meet your development needs.

For more information contact our learning and development manager, Sarah Mobedji at sarah.mobedji@fostering.net

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children to make foster care the very best it can be.

Contact

To find out more about our work in Wales, please contact:
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