



How South Africa Can Stop Hurting its Children by Reducing Heavy Drinking

A GUIDE FOR CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

Produced by Hold My Hand in partnership with Rethink Your Drink

Guide for Children and teenagers

We get it. Alcohol is often part of the vibe. You're with friends, the music is good and having a drink can feel like it takes the edge off or makes things more fun. But that feeling doesn't last. What starts as something small, like a headache, can quickly grow into something much worse – regret, fights, accidents, and even losing someone you care about.

This guide isn't here to police you. It's here to give you the full picture. To help you understand how alcohol affects your brain, your body, your relationships and your future. And to show how heavy drinking is harming South Africa's children and teenagers right now, in ways we often don't talk about.

The truth is, this harm is avoidable. But we need everyone to care. That means government must take action. The alcohol industry must stop targeting young people. Parents and teachers must be honest. Communities must create safer spaces. And all of us need to have real conversations that put children and teens first.

Let's start with some facts that might surprise you.

Some basic facts

Alcohol is a **psychoactive drug**. That means it changes the way your brain works, your emotions, your ability to think clearly, how you make decisions, and how you judge what's risky.

Because alcohol is a drug, it affects the brain most when the brain is still developing. There are two major times in life when this development speeds up: during early childhood and again during your teenage years, right up until about age 25.

That's right! If you're a teenager or a young adult, your brain is growing fast. You're becoming more open-minded and learning quickly. But your brain is also more sensitive to chemicals and drugs, like alcohol, which can cause damage you don't always feel right away.

Wait a minute...

If the legal drinking age is 18, why is alcohol still risky until 25?

You've nailed it. Turning 18 might mean you're legally allowed to drink, but that doesn't mean it's safe for your brain or your body.
Legal doesn't always mean healthy.

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"Alcohol caused a lot of harm in my life. I started drinking young because I didn't know how to deal with life's challenges."

Reabetsoe, Phomolong

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"I told myself I'd never be like my dad, but by 16 I was drinking too. It felt like an escape, but it slowly became a trap."

Zama, Happy Valley



So, how much can I drink before it becomes a problem?

Here's the hard truth. Global health experts agree that **no amount of alcohol is truly safe**, especially for young people. Even one drink increases your future risk of cancer.

If you do drink, having just one drink a few times a week is far less risky than binge drinking.

Binge drinking means having **five or more units of alcohol in one session**.

That's when things can go wrong quickly – when people get hurt, pass out, or do something they regret. And even if nothing dramatic happens, your brain still takes damage every time you overdrink.

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"I dropped out of school in Grade 11 because I was partying too much and couldn't focus. I put myself in dangerous situations."

Reabetsoe, Phomolong

How much alcohol is in your drink?

In South Africa, **one unit of pure alcohol is 15 millilitres** (or 12 grams). You can work out how many units are in a drink by checking the label for "ABV" – that stands for "alcohol by volume."

Example:

A 330 ml bottle of **Savanna Dry** (6% ABV):
 $(6 \div 100) \times 330 \div 15 = 1.32 \text{ units}$

So, if you drink more than **three Savannas in one night**, it's already considered **heavy drinking**.

BTW a beer contains between 4-10% ABV – sometimes even higher.

Quick comebacks: What to say When You Want to Say "No"

- * "I'm good, I've got things to do tomorrow."
- * "Not today. I'm taking a break."
- * "I've seen what alcohol can do. It's not for me."
- * "I'm trying to focus on my health."



What are the effects of drinking on children and teenagers?

When a pregnant mom drinks

Drinking during pregnancy – even just a few weeks in – can harm the baby's brain and development. This can lead to **Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)**, a lifelong condition that affects how a child thinks, learns and behaves.

South Africa has the **highest rate of FASD in the world**. In some areas, one in three children is affected.

When parents drink heavily

When parents or caregivers drink too much, it can make home feel unsafe. There's shouting, neglect, and sometimes violence. Kids feel the impact.

Children in these homes are more likely to:

- * Feel anxious or scared
- * Struggle at school
- * Start drinking or using drugs
- * Have low self-esteem
- * Be emotionally and physically neglected
- * Face injury, abuse and don't get enough food

When things get violent

Alcohol is often involved in violence – especially at home.

- * Women with drunk partners are 5x more likely to be hurt
- * Family murders often linked to drinking
- * Children who witness violence often carry trauma into adulthood
- * It can lead to anxiety, depression, dropping out of school, or even self-harm

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"I was emotionally broken. I drank to block things out. I didn't care about anything anymore."

Reabetsoe



Injuries and harm caused by alcohol

Alcohol plays a part in many tragic situations:

- * **1 in 5 pedestrian deaths** involves a child under 15 – often killed walking to or from school
- * **4 in 10 drownings** involve alcohol
- * Children of heavy drinkers are more likely to harm themselves
- * Teens are more likely to be attacked, raped or killed – and alcohol is often part of the story
- * Girls are more likely to be abducted, sexually assaulted or trafficked and boys are more likely to be the victims of murder and seriously assaulted



Heavy Drinker



Non-Drinker

Teenagers at risk

Teens are especially vulnerable as alcohol leads to greater impulsivity - 'let's do it now and not worry about later!'. If you put 3 boys and 5 girls in a room, at least one boy and one girl will likely binge drink.

Alcohol affects teens by:

- * **Shrinking grey matter (thinking + memory)**
- * **Damaging white matter (brain connections)**
- * **Increasing risk-taking**
- * **Raising the chance of depression, violence, HIV, diabetes and school dropout**



What can we do about it?

The South African government has a plan to reduce alcohol harm. It's called the **Liquor Amendment Bill (LAB)**. It follows advice from global health experts known as the Five Best Buys.

Here's what LAB could do:

- * Close taverns earlier, like at **midnight**
- * Ban alcohol sales near **schools, churches and sports grounds**
- * Stop the industry from selling **massive, cheap bottles**
- * Ban most alcohol advertising, especially on social media
- * Raise the **minimum price of alcohol to make it more expensive.**
- * Provide **rehab and support services** for young people

What Minimum Unit Pricing Means

A Quick Example

Let's say the government sets a minimum price of R10 per unit of alcohol.

We know one 330ml bottle of Savanna has 1.32 units of alcohol.

So:
 $1.32 \text{ units} \times R10 = R13.20$

That means a bottle of Savanna can't be sold for less than R13.20 – no super cheap deals that encourage binge drinking.

If someone tries to sell it for R10? That's below the legal minimum. They'd be breaking the law.

This rule is especially important in poorer areas where alcohol is often sold for very low prices. It helps prevent harm by stopping the flood of cheap, strong booze.

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If these changes were in place when I was younger, I think a lot of the pain I went through could've been avoided."

– Reabetsoe

The LAB has been stuck since 2016.
It's time to get it moving again – and to make it stronger.



Real talk: What helped us turn things around

"What helped me was journaling and writing poetry. It helped me process the pain I was carrying." – *Zama*

"What helped me grow was starting to pray, helping others, and sharing my story." – *Reabetsoe*



Self-Reflection: Make sense of alcohol in your life

These questions are for you. Be honest. No pressure.

1. What role does alcohol play in your life?
2. When do you feel most tempted to drink?
3. How do you feel about your relationship with alcohol?
4. What would your life look like without it?
5. Are your reasons truly your own, or are they shaped by others?
6. What would help you feel in control of your choices?

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"You are not broken – you are hurting. Don't try to numb the pain with alcohol. Speak up. Ask for help. You are worth saving."

– *Zama*

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"Love yourself, treat yourself kindly, and know that your life is precious. Don't let anything bad defeat you."

– *Reabetsoe*





Let's rethink alcohol.

Let's protect our future.

Let's build a South Africa where young people can thrive.

contact us



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