



## TEA-BREAK GUIDE



### Drinking alcohol while looking after children – an increasing concern

There are increasing concerns that a growing number of babies and children are at risk of serious harm because of the way some parents and carers consume alcohol at home.

Sadly, the Coronavirus pandemic may have had an impact on this concern. The number of babies in England to have suffered serious injury through abuse or neglect during the COVID-19 pandemic is up by a fifth on the same period last year. There are fears that the pandemic may have increased domestic alcohol consumption, and this may continue in the long term. There are a number of factors that may have contributed to this including:

- Restrictions on licensed premises and social mixing
- Easy access to alcohol within the home and reduced cost when buying from shops
- Both parents drinking at home, opposed to one parent potentially going out to drink socially
- Lockdown preventing support from grandparents, friends, babysitter etc.
- Impact of lockdown on parents' mental health, for instance the stress of home schooling, financial worries of not working etc
- Being out of work or travelling to work routine

### Impact of parental alcohol misuse

Most parents who drink alcohol do so in moderation, which doesn't present an increased risk of harm to their children, however there is a risk of serious harm to some children because of the way some parents consume alcohol at home. Misuse of alcohol may make it more difficult to provide safe and loving care and this can lead to abuse or neglect.

### Parents drinking alcohol and co-sleeping

Specifically, there has been a growing concern over preventable sudden unexpected infant deaths; cases of babies being endangered by not being put down to sleep safely, instead sharing a bed or sofa with a parent or other carer who has been drinking.

Children are being placed in danger and even losing their lives because adults – who, in many cases, do not consider themselves excessive drinkers - are not exercising normal levels of care and attention while drinking or recovering from the after-effects of over-indulgence in alcohol.

Alcohol can affect your decision-making and cause drowsiness, especially when it comes to the baby's sleep environment.

It is granted that excessive drinking whilst caring for an infant is irresponsible. However, alcohol consumption, even a small amount of units, could impair judgement. This may be particularly relevant if the baby is bed-sharing (planned or more dangerously unplanned).

If the baby sleeps in their own cot, bedding may not be used appropriately or the baby may not be checked as it would normally be if parents are under the influence of alcohol. The baby may get into an unsafe position and this may not be noticed.

If parents are sharing a sleep space with the baby, they may not be aware of where the baby is sleeping and whether any bedding is covering the baby, leading to fatal overheating or whether the baby has rolled into any bedding, causing suffocation or entanglement. The parents themselves may not be aware that they have rolled onto the baby.

Accidental suffocation deaths can happen when alcohol is involved.

## Neglect<sup>1</sup>

Parents who misuse alcohol may have difficulty:

- staying organised and giving their children effective and consistent support
- keeping their home and family clean
- recognising and responding appropriately to their own and their children's physical needs
- paying for food, clothing and essential bills (for example if their income is being spent on alcohol)
- Some parents who drink excessively may lose consciousness, leaving no other responsible adult present to care for their child and ensure their safety.

## Emotional abuse<sup>1</sup>

Parents who drink excessively can become emotionally unavailable to their children. Parents with alcohol problems can be:

- less responsive to their babies
- less willing to engage in meaningful play
- less able to respond in ways which encourage further interaction

Parents who misuse alcohol can behave in a way that's irrational, unpredictable or withdrawn, which may frighten their children.

## Physical abuse<sup>1</sup>

Parents who misuse alcohol may have difficulty controlling their own emotions. Harmful and excessive drinking can contribute to child physical abuse.

## Practical advice when you need to help

What to look out for when visiting the family home:

- Presence of alcohol bottles on worktops, tables or in recycling
- Appearance or behavioural changes of parents or whether other professionals have noticed any changes
- Be aware of children and what they might be telling us (behind the eyes)
- Financial difficulties
- Slurred or rapid speech
- Forgetfulness, poor concentration or clumsiness
- Smell of alcohol on person or in home.

## The Legal Bit

- Under the Licensing Act 1902, it is illegal to be drunk in charge of a child in a public place. The crime can be punished by a fine or up to a month in prison
- The fact the law specifies about being drunk in public doesn't mean it's OK to do it at home. If a parent is so drunk they can't look after their children properly, they could be charged with neglect.

## Useful links

### NHS Alcohol Support

Advice, support and resources for dealing with alcohol problems.

[www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-support](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-support)

### Alcohol Change UK

Works to improve people's lives through reducing the harm caused by alcohol.

[alcoholchange.org.uk](http://alcoholchange.org.uk)

**Al-Anon UK** – Groups for the families & friends of alcoholics who share their experience, strength, & hope in order to solve their common problems. [www.al-anonuk.org.uk](http://www.al-anonuk.org.uk)

**STAR** - One number for all treatment services in Northamptonshire - 0808 169 8512

**S2S** - Drug and alcohol treatment services in Northamptonshire – 01604 211304

**Bridge** - A substance misuse programme which offers clients the chance to take part in sporting and other activities - 01604 621259 <http://bridge-northants.org.uk>

**Family Support Link** - For families and carers affected by drugs and alcohol in Northamptonshire – 01933 227078 [fslcontact@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:fslcontact@yahoo.co.uk)

**NDAS** – Northamptonshire Domestic Abuse Service  
Supporting people affected by domestic abuse – 0300 012 2154 [www.ndas.co/](http://www.ndas.co/)

**NGage** - Confidential drug and alcohol service for those under 19 and their families/carers – 01604 633848 [northamptonshire@aquarius.org.uk](mailto:northamptonshire@aquarius.org.uk)

**Aquarius** - Free confidential support for anyone with - or affected by someone else's - alcohol, drugs or gambling problems.  
[aquarius.org.uk](http://aquarius.org.uk)

<sup>1</sup><https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/>