# What do we know about what young kids know about alcohol?

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### An Australian first study is looking into a child’s early experiences and knowledge of alcohol

*With two hands wrapped around the glass to help support the weight on my little arms, I carried the full glass back to my parents*. *Pulling the wine cask to the edge of the bench was difficult, but the evening ritual had given me lots of practice.*

A vivid memory and one of my first with alcohol, but does it have anything to do with the drinker I have become?

Many Australians would be able to recall similarly vivid memories of alcohol from a very young age – sipping the froth off your dad’s beer or your own glass of champagne at a special family occasion. International research has made the case that early experiences with alcohol such as this and the things we see in relation to alcohol at a very early age, even before we have our first sip, can affect how we engage with alcohol when we get older. But in a culture saturated with alcohol to the extent that it is here in Australia, do the findings from international studies still apply?

### How early is early? What do young children know about alcohol?

From international evidence we can quite conclusively say by the age of three children are not naive with respect to alcohol. These children have a basic understanding of who drinks and in which circumstances; studies show children believe men drink more than women and are more likely to consume at a party than when playing outdoors1. Between three to six years, children become familiar with the emotional changes that are likely to occur when adults drink alcohol and can accurately identify both the content and name of alcoholic beverages1,2.

At four years old children know that only adults drink alcohol while children drink non-alcoholic beverages1 and from five years old children can identify how a drunk person may act3. As children begin to get older this knowledge becomes more nuanced and by 11 or 12 years of age children can articulate an understanding of the depressant effects of alcohol on the brain4. This knowledge developing, in part, over years of observing adults’ behaviour.

While it is clear children are well acquainted with alcohol, the question remains to what extent should we be worried about whether a three-year-old knows what a bottle of beer looks like, or if they have a sip of wine at the dinner table? Based on international studies, maybe a little. Children’s alcohol-related knowledge assessed as young as three years old has predicted early onset of alcohol use some nine years later5. The impact of knowledge also continues to be a marker of future consumption patterns throughout late childhood – more positive beliefs about the effects of alcohol at around six to eight years old have been shown to predict earlier onset of drunkenness and binge drinking6,7. If the potential impacts of what you know about alcohol at a young age are as formative to the drinker you become, as they seem from this international evidence, the imperative to look at what young Australian kids know, given our love of the beverage8, becomes even more necessary.

### Australian Research

Researchers at the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research (CAPR) are doing just this; for the first time in Australia we are looking at children between four and six years old to learn about their early experiences with, and knowledge of, alcohol. These children may seem young, but at this age they can verbally communicate their knowledge which is primarily learned from parents and their social environment (rather than, for example, peers), and, importantly, this research will provide opportunities for informing prevention and intervention efforts. For example, providing parents with a dialogue to communicate with the children from a young age about the effects of alcohol and providing evidence demonstrating the need to minimise children’s exposure. Conducting this research with very young children in Australia is crucial to understanding what young children know about alcohol, and consequently reducing uptake and associated harms from alcohol consumption if or when these children become drinkers in the future. Stand by for our findings to come soon.

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### Metadata