

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose - Australia's leading parenting educator



Get the buzz on energy drinks for kids

Parental guidance for kids is essential about this issue. Parents shouldn't leave it up to schools to educate kids or governments to legislate against energy drinks.

School-aged children are increasingly using caffeinated drinks on a regular basis. A recent Australian study found that 27% of boys aged 8-12 years had consumed these energy drinks in a two week period prior to being surveyed. Teachers in the United Kingdom are reporting a similar trend, so it's a significant issue in both parts of the world.

Walk by any supermarket after school and you'll see kids in school uniforms clutching cans of energy drink. Downing an energy drink is fast becoming the cool thing to do.

There's nothing new in making fizzy, sugary, caffeinated drinks available for kids. A certain soft drink company with global brand status has been doing this for years. But the range of caffeinated, high energy drinks that have been brought to market over the last five or six years make soft drinks look tame in comparison. The new breed of drinks attracting children's attention, not to mention their pocket-money, are loaded with caffeine, sugar and protein at levels intended for high performance athletes.

Energy drinks are designed for an adult market. They're only sold to children in Australia due to a loophole in the law. Many parents wouldn't allow their children to drink coffee at home due to its caffeine content yet kids can walk into a shop and purchase any one of a dozen highly caffeinated drinks.

So what's wrong with caffeinated drinks? Caffeine is a stimulant that speeds up parts of the body and the brain. It increases heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature. In high doses it causes changes to heart rhythm and hand tremors, which is exactly what happened to five Year 7 students from Quaker Hill, in Sydney's west who reportedly suffered side effects including dizziness and nausea after consuming the drinks on the way to school recently.

Caffeinated drinks give kids an instant high, making them feel awake and alert but doctors are concerned about links between high consumption of caffeine and insomnia. Once in the system, caffeine stays around for hours, which causes sleeplessness and sleep disruption.

There are plenty of other adverse side effects for kids including, bed-wetting, difficulty concentrating and anxiety. There is consensus among health professionals and the sports science community that energy drinks should not be consumed by children and early teens.

There have been calls from health professionals in many western countries for governments to ban the sale of energy drinks to children and young people. The jury is still out regarding banning energy drinks however there's certainly a role for parents to play regarding limiting children's consumption.

Parental guidance for kids is essential about this issue. Parents shouldn't leave it up to schools to educate kids or governments to legislate against energy drinks. Parents need to talk to their children and young people about the impact that energy drinks have on their bodies, letting them know why they are on the no go list. And they should make sure that highly caffeinated drinks don't make their way into their shopping trolley and into the refrigerator at home.

Putting aside the adverse side effects that these drinks have on children's health, including addiction, we don't want to send a message to children and young people that drugs and artificial chemicals are necessary for them to perform at their best.

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