

Alcohol consumption and family life

Findings
Informing change

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This study examined how parents teach young children (aged 5 to 12) about alcohol. It explored parental attitudes towards alcohol, and family drinking practices, using a national survey and in-depth case studies.

Key points

- Parents are the most important influence on young children's attitudes to alcohol.
- Parents largely succeed in conveying the social pleasures and risks of drinking at home, and the need for moderation. Children also learn messages about moderation from witnessing parents/relatives drinking to excess.
- However, children are not taught to recognise the health consequences of drinking. Unlike social risks, health risks do not resonate with parents' experiences of drinking. This has implications for bodies that guide parents in how to talk to children about alcohol.
- Parental emphasis on learning to drink safely at home misses the opportunity to teach children about other drinking practices and environments, and the impact of drunken behaviour on others.
- The authors conclude that:
 - the Chief Medical Officer's 2009 recommendation that children under 15 should avoid alcohol appears unrealistic, since alcohol is an unremarkable part of many families' lives. It may run counter to sensible parental approaches to alcohol;
 - alcohol education in schools is one way to address the gaps in what children learn at home. However, the majority of children in this study had not learned about alcohol at school. The Department for Education might beneficially review alcohol education in primary schools to improve its effectiveness. To maximise impact, such education could involve parents and/or run in parallel with campaigns targeting parents.

The research

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Background

In 2009, the UK Government published *Guidance on the Consumption of Alcohol by Children and Young People*. In this report the Chief Medical Officer recommended that children under the age of 15 should avoid alcohol completely. While a significant body of research exists on teenagers' awareness of alcohol and drinking practices, much less is known about how parents teach younger children (aged 5 to 12) about alcohol and the extent to which young people's current/future drinking habits may have their roots in childhood experiences.

Using a national survey and in-depth case studies, this research addressed these gaps in knowledge by investigating parents' and carers' drinking practices and their attitudes towards the role of alcohol within the family, as well as their children's knowledge and understanding of alcohol. The study looked at 'norms' within families – the personal home rules and practices that individual families establish as a result of specific family structures, parents' own childhood memories of being brought up, and families' communication styles. It also considered society's wider norms around parenting and drinking cultures, as generated by the law, media and social networks, for example.

Parental attitudes to alcohol

Parents in the study perceived that there has been a significant shift in public drinking cultures and the nature of young people's drinking since their own childhood. The survey findings suggest that the dominant parental attitude – i.e. their perception of what ought to be the norm in society – is that children in general should not be introduced to alcohol at home until their mid-teens and ought not to be allowed to drink in public until they reach adulthood. However, the case-study research indicates that parents actually introduce their

own children to alcohol at home at an earlier age. This is because they draw on experiences from their own childhood, either repeating what they perceive as positive parenting strategies or intentionally parenting in a different way.

Parents want their children to appreciate the pleasures and benefits of alcohol, as well as the risks of excessive consumption, so that as adults of the future they will drink in moderation. This attitude towards alcohol is perceived to be best learnt at home, as part of 'growing up', rather than at school. In this sense, attitudes within the family about parenting in relation to alcohol do not appear to have changed as much as parents' perceptions of public drinking cultures.

Family rules and guidance

Most parents in the study did not have specific rules on drinking for their pre-teen children, because at this age they were not particularly interested in alcohol. Indeed, most parents considered it necessary to lay down rules regarding other more pressing matters (such as addiction to computer games), though they recognised that these messages are readily transferable to alcohol. Some of the case-study families adopted traditional parenting styles, establishing strict boundaries about general behaviour (e.g. bed-time). Others took a more flexible approach, inviting discussions and negotiating rules with their children. Differences in parenting styles between ex-partners who were co-parenting children following the break-up of a relationship were also evident. Many parents also recognised that their children's unique personalities meant that each might require an individualised strategy when it came to alcohol.

Despite these differences in parental approaches regarding alcohol, all those interviewed were keen to develop open and close relationships with their children. They also generally recognised the potential limits to parental authority, particularly when children become influenced by their peers in their teenage years. Parental attitudes towards their role reflected previous researchers' claims that over generations the emphasis of parenting has shifted from disciplining young people to enabling them to express themselves, and that a consequence of this greater closeness between the generations is an erosion of some of the 'natural' authority of adults.

Most parents argued that the best they could do was to equip their children with the right personal qualities and skills (such as self-confidence and self-respect) to make sensible individual choices about alcohol once beyond the family and home. In doing so, parents

acknowledged that their children will ultimately have to make their own choices about the role of alcohol in their lives. However, as some parents observed when complaining about other parents allowing their children to binge drink in public places, not all children have positive family support. As a result, some children are much less well equipped to make 'sensible choices' than others.

Unintentional exemplars of drinking activity

Parents generally disagreed that it was acceptable to be drunk when responsible for children, although in practice many allowed their offspring a few glimpses of drunkenness at occasions such as parties and family events. For many parents, letting their children see them drinking at home was regarded as an important way of showing alcohol consumption as a pleasurable and sociable activity within the family and a more effective method of teaching children about drinking within safe limits than laying down strict rules. This was because parents rationalised that children will always subvert any boundaries that are set.

At the same time, parents tried to exercise more control over their children's exposure to alcohol in public places (for example, by not taking them into pubs where food is not served). In this way they presented a picture of drinking at home as a safe and enjoyable practice, in contrast to public consumption. The one exception, however, was on holiday. Parents seemed unaware of the significance of exhibiting specific, but often very different drinking practices from their normal domestic patterns of consumption – for example, indulging themselves, staying up late and drinking to excess.

As part of everyday home and holiday consumption practices, many families initiated their children into tasting alcohol – usually instigated by parents, not children – and/or drinking rituals (knocking back water out of shot glasses, drinking alcohol-free cocktails, asking children to serve alcohol to visitors). However, they were careful to try to limit their children's exposure to the drinking practices of other parents through the indirect strategy of attempting to influence their children's choice of school friends (directly, or indirectly through selection of school), thus steering them away from families who might exhibit 'inappropriate' practices.

What children think about drinking

The findings from the interviews with young children bore a close resemblance to their parents' accounts

of how alcohol was introduced in the context of family life. All the children were aware that alcohol is only for grown-ups, and some also recognised the age restrictions on the sale of alcohol in supermarkets. However, they had a relatively limited grasp of the legal and cultural frameworks that shape alcohol consumption. The children's accounts showed strong evidence of the direct and indirect transmission of parental attitudes towards alcohol and patterns of drinking. There was also a clear link between alcohol and supermarket/family shopping, reflecting the significance of contemporary home-based patterns of drinking. While the children had a reasonable awareness of the social harms associated with alcohol, they had a relatively poor grasp of the potential health risks. However, they imagined that as adults of the future they would only drink in moderation. This ambition mirrors the model of sensible drinking that their parents aspire to teach them.

Conclusion

Parents who drink want their children to appreciate the benefits and pleasures of alcohol as well as the risks associated with drinking to excess. They hope to teach their own children to drink in moderation in adulthood. The case-study research with children found that they have absorbed this message, recognise that alcohol is an adult product, are aware of the social if not the health harms of drinking to excess, and anticipate that in their future lives they will only drink in moderation.

The Chief Medical Officer's 2009 recommendation that children under 15 should avoid alcohol completely appears to be unrealistic, given that drinking is a normal part of everyday life for many families. There is a danger that such advice may be at odds with sensible parental attitudes and approaches to alcohol.

However, young children are not being taught to recognise the potential health implications of alcohol consumption. This is because unlike the social risks of drinking, health risks (e.g. cancer of the mouth and throat, sexual and mental health problems, liver cirrhosis and heart disease) do not resonate with parents' own experiences of alcohol and are less easily raised in the context of everyday family life. This has implications for bodies that provide guidance to parents about how to talk to children about alcohol – for example, government departments, service providers and voluntary, charitable and independent organisations.

In focusing on the social risks associated with alcohol, the parental emphasis on learning to drink at home in a safe environment over-simplifies and misses the opportunity to teach children about the range of other

drinking practices and venues they may encounter during their lives. The stress on individual choice also does not educate children about the impact that their drinking and drunken behaviour may have on others, and consequently their wider social responsibilities as adult alcohol consumers of the future.

Alcohol education in schools is one way to address the gaps in what children are learning about alcohol and the different levels of education and support children receive at home. Yet the majority of children who participated in this study stated that they had not been taught about alcohol at school. It would be beneficial for the Department for Education to review the way in which alcohol education is currently delivered as part of the national curriculum within primary schools, in order to improve its effectiveness. As part of this, schools could involve parents so that the same key messages about alcohol can be reinforced both at home and in school. To maximise impact, any alcohol education in schools would need to be run in parallel with campaigns targeting parents.

About the project

This study adopted a multi-method research design. A representative survey was used to establish national patterns in relation to parents' and carers' attitudes and practices regarding the role of alcohol within the family. In addition, in-depth case studies involving interviews, participant observation and child-centred methods unpacked the specific processes through which drinking practices are taught and passed on within families.

For further information

The full report, **Alcohol consumption and family life** by Gill Valentine, Mark Jayne and Myles Gould, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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