

# Pre-teens learning about alcohol: drinking and family contexts

Findings  
Informing change

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Childhood experiences are crucial to forming future drinking habits. Much emphasis has been placed on understanding the impact of problem drinking within the family, yet much less is known about how children learn about alcohol in so-called 'ordinary families'.

## Key points

- Children in the study group (aged 7-12 years) demonstrated a fairly sophisticated knowledge of alcohol. Many were able to identify differing levels of adults' intoxication and differentiate between occasional and habitual drunkenness.
- Children from affluent areas were less involved in family celebrations where alcohol is consumed and much less likely to witness drunkenness in the home or the wider community, compared to those in deprived areas.
- The home emerged as an important source of learning about the everyday use of alcohol, with children anticipating modelling their future behaviour on their parents' drinking styles, rather than on negative teenage drinking styles.
- Discussion between parents and children about alcohol was limited. Many parents, particularly mothers, tried to act as a positive role model, and many permitted supervised small samples of alcohol, mainly on 'special occasions', to encourage children to drink responsibly.
- Parents often had limited belief in their ability to teach their children to drink responsibly, often feeling overwhelmed by the many external pressures that encourage youth drinking.
- Other issues assumed a higher priority for parents, particularly smoking and drug taking, which unlike alcohol were seen to be unequivocally bad for health.

## The research

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## Background

From an early age children come into contact with many sources of information about alcohol, though it is typically parents who exert the greatest influence. Improving understanding of the role of family in how drinking habits are learned is central to addressing problematic drinking patterns and cultures. The available evidence continues to focus largely on teens, rather than on children or families where there is problematic consumption. This study examines drinking behaviour in ordinary family settings and focuses on the key transition stages in ages 7 to 12 years, when children's negative views of alcohol consumption begin to be replaced by more positive ones.

### Children's understanding of alcohol

Across the study age range, children demonstrate an understanding of alcohol and its effects, and an ability to appraise different consumption styles. Many are able to identify differing levels of adults' intoxication and to differentiate between occasional and habitual drunkenness, indicating an understanding of addiction and problematic drinking, and of acceptable and unacceptable drinking behaviour.

**'It's (alcoholism) like you have it and then you can't stop. Kind of like with me and chocolate.'**  
(Interview, Daughter, Aged 10, Rural Affluent Community)

Older children revealed a more sophisticated knowledge, with girls understanding of drinking behaviour more differentiated than that of boys, particularly with regard to the social attributes of drinking.

**'Well it's good if you just want to go out with your friends and just have like a couple of glasses but it's not very good if you like go out and you're having millions and you really start to get really drunk.'**  
(Focus Group, Girls, 10-12 Years, Urban Affluent Community)

## The importance of family and home

The home emerged as an important source of learning about the everyday use of alcohol, with many children aware of parents' and adult family members' consumption styles, including intoxication. Children are also able to recount the specific drink preferences of their parents, and there is some indication that children at this age can already anticipate modelling future drinking patterns on adult family members' drinking behaviour, with marked gender differences in anticipated drinking styles.

**'If I was going to have one, it would probably just be a, if I'm going to be older, it would probably be a pint.'**  
(Focus Group, Boys, 10-12 Years, Rural Affluent Community)

Similarly, young children have a modifying impact on parental drinking behaviours, with many parents, particularly mothers, feeling the need to act as a positive role model and avoid their child seeing them intoxicated. In a small number of cases, children had a direct modifying impact, actively challenging family members on the subject, typically fathers, and in some instances extorting favours following episodes of intoxication. This was more typical in families living in deprived communities.

Discussions about alcohol between parents and children within the study age group are limited, with much learning being informal and largely observed. While few parents sought to educate through proactive discussion, they did support supervised trials of alcohol, mainly on 'special occasions', aiming to socialise children to alcohol, in the hope that the unattractive taste would deter unsupervised experimentation. Significantly, children often appeared to be relatively disinterested in trying alcohol, especially in the younger ages, and were indeed put off by taste.

### Learning in school

In contrast to learning in the home, school-based education appears to primarily convey facts about alcohol and the effects of consumption, especially with regard to health. Formal forms of education about alcohol were also perceived differently to learning in the home (e.g. less emotively and in more black and white terms).

**'We were taught it at school, and it can do really damage on your liver and it sort of tires you out and makes you parched, and it's hard to get through the system, and it's quite silly that people drink that much that it's hard to get through their**

system, because it damages their liver and it's horrible.'

(Interview, Daughter, Aged 12, Rural Affluent Community)

Alcohol education in early years was seen to be more limited when compared with other health and social issues, with some parents calling for greater coverage of alcohol-related issues in primary school:

'... why don't we do alcohol education for kids at this age? It seems ludicrous that we teach them about sex but we don't teach them about alcohol at the age of 10, and yet that can be potentially just as disruptive and damaging and have quite serious consequences.'

(Interview, Mother, Rural Affluent Community)

## Socio-economic differences

Differences in socio-economic groups emerged in the way children are socialised to alcohol, both within the home and in the wider community. Children from affluent areas appear more likely to be exposed to alcohol consumption during mealtimes, but they are also less involved in family celebrations where alcohol is consumed and much less likely to witness drunkenness in the home and the wider community, compared to their counterparts from deprived areas.

'I've never seen them drunk because if they're going out to have something to eat, if they're going out to have alcohol, we're never with them. Like me and Laura were at my Aunt Mary's for the weekend and mum and dad went to my godparent's house and they had a drink there but we were never with them.'

(Interview, Daughter, Aged 9, Urban Affluent Community)

'My dad sometimes, he drinks way too much at times but other times he's okay, he drinks too much and he starts to get bad breath and then he talks non-stop to me and he talks in to my nose and it smells horrible.'

(Focus Group, Girls, 7-9 Years, Urban Deprived Community)

As a result, alcohol consumption was more hidden in the affluent study communities, when compared to the deprived communities, where it was more integrated into home and family settings, and where heavier drinking was generally more accepted.

Despite these differences, parental expectations of their children's future drinking were often characterised by a

sense of helplessness and a limited belief in their ability to teach their children to drink responsibly. Discussions revealed acceptance of a perceived inevitability of future experimentation with heavy alcohol use in the face of other influences and pressures, and in spite of their influence as role models.

'I think it will come. I do know it will come. I do know that one of these days I'm going to get a chap at the door and, you'll need to come and pick [son aged 13] up, he's over a hedge somewhere. I know it's going to happen....'

(Interview, Mother, Rural Deprived Community)

There were a few exceptional cases, all in deprived communities, where heavy drinking was the norm and where parents expected to teach their children how to drink responsibly. The effectiveness of the parenting styles in these families was evident in the responsible attitude to alcohol displayed by older siblings.

## Comparisons with other substances

In direct comparison with other substances and potentially risky behaviours, alcohol assumed a much lower priority for parents with children in the study age-range. Many were more concerned about smoking and drug-taking, which were unequivocally seen as damaging to health and highly addictive. Fear of these risks appear to be based on the fact that alcohol consumption is more normal, than on rational concerns.

These differences in perception also help to explain the way parents deal with alcohol education in the home, with most taking a categorical stance on smoking or drug taking and a more ambiguous position on alcohol. For parents, the issue with smoking and taking drugs is about dissuading use, while with alcohol it is about encouraging their children to drink in a certain way. This difference would appear to explain an apparent reluctance among many parents to discuss alcohol consumption with their young children, preferring instead to delay dealing with the issue until their children begin to experiment with it independently.

'Well, my man had a problem when I started doing that with my older one and trying to explain it to him, he was, like, "Well, she's not getting any drink at all. She's not getting nothing until she's 18". He says, "I might bend when she's 16. I might bend when she's 16". I says, "You'll bend the now, because if we don't do it the now, she's going to go out the door with her pals and she's going to come in here pissed".'

(Focus Group, Mothers, Urban Deprived Community)

## Conclusion

The study identifies a diverse range of ways in which parents approach educating their children about alcohol, highlighting the many other factors that are seen to influence young people's interest in and willingness to experiment with alcohol as they mature. Importantly, the role played by energy drinks as a transitional product for young people seeking to emulate and ultimately adopt adult drinking patterns and behaviours is an emerging theme of particular interest and one worthy of more detailed investigation.

Children in the study age range (7-12 years) appear to be receptive to parental advice and influence. This suggests that this is a good time to provide information and discuss alcohol, particularly considering parental influence diminishes as children reach their teenage years.

In recognition of the diversity in parenting approaches and the underlying uncertainty that characterises parents' feelings about educating their children about alcohol, there is a need for better parental guidance in this area. Initiatives designed to support parents need to be particularly sensitive to the wider social values surrounding alcohol use in order to engage parents in ways that are constructive and meaningful.

Addressing the lack of understanding regarding the laws and regulations concerning when, how and in what contexts it is permissible to introduce children to alcohol would provide a useful way of engaging parents. Such information offers a neutral platform for providing parenting guidance and reassurance that parental action can make a real difference. The Government position that children should not be permitted to drink at all until the age of 15 is likely to be regarded as unrealistic, given the prevailing pro-drinking culture.

Parental initiatives also need to recognise that some parents, particularly those challenged by social and

economic deprivation, can feel overwhelmed by information and advice, and that advisory messages risk stigmatising parents as 'bad parents'. There may be value in providing alcohol advice through generic (as opposed to alcohol-specific) parenting initiatives, as well as through initiatives that focus on the impact of alcohol on the wider community and the importance of extended family and community groups as agents of change.

Irrespective of social circumstance, children are receiving mixed messages about alcohol in the home and school. There is a need to encourage greater involvement of parents in alcohol education within schools to help ensure messages are consistent. School-based intervention would also benefit from parallel campaigns targeting parents, highlighting their importance as role models and underlining key guidance messages.

## About the project

The study was conducted in four contrasting communities in Scotland – an urban affluent and an urban deprived community, and a rural affluent and a rural deprived community. A total of 136 participants were interviewed in-depth over two stages. The first stage involved conducting focus group interviews with parents of 7-12 year olds, together with eight friendship group interviews with children aged 7-9 and 10-12 years. The second stage involved 15 family case studies, incorporating perspectives from children in the study age group (aged 7-12 years), their parents and other family members, such as grandparents and older siblings, with a childcare role. The study focussed on exploring 'normal' drinking experiences, although a small number of parents did describe experiences of heavy drinking above recommended weekly limits. No parents identified themselves as having drinking problems, although some had in the past. The interviews were carried out between February and November 2009.

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## For further information

The full report, **Pre-teens learning about alcohol: drinking and family contexts** by Douglas Eadie, Susan MacAskill, Oona Brooks, Derek Heim, Alasdair Forsyth and Sam Punch, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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