

# Speaking out about wellbeing

Policy brief, January 2011

## Children and young people speak out about alcohol and drugs

*"Get drugs and alcohol off this world so kids can have a good life." boy 10*

### What do children and young people say about alcohol and drug use?

In 2009 the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA undertook research<sup>1</sup> to investigate children and young people's views on what was important to their wellbeing. Alcohol and drug use was a serious concern for young people, who said it affected their family life, fun and enjoyment of activities and their feeling of safety.

*"[What stops you having fun] drugs because it makes you paranoid, yeah and binge drinking." girl 14*

*"I don't like negative vibes at parties, fights and all that, I don't enjoy it. Even with drink at the beach there tends to be boys brawling and stuff like that." girl 16*

*"You don't want drugs in the community, those people are scary." girl 16*

Young people said they believed that a lack of activities and facilities for youth was one reason for alcohol and drug use.

*"Most of the people who, like, drink beer and smoke dope and stuff, they don't have anything to do. The reason they are doing that is because they don't know of anything else to do. They don't know how to have other fun." boy 15*

*"They haven't got anything to do with their lives but ruin it." boy 16*

The prevalence of alcohol and drug use in family conflict and child maltreatment is increasingly an issue of concern. Young people in the Commissioner's research said alcohol contributed to family conflict.

*"Sometimes my dad goes a little bit overboard. It's only when he's drinking a lot and he starts yelling at me and I feel really bad." girl 15*

Aboriginal children and young people were more likely to have experienced family conflict related to alcohol use.

### How does alcohol and drug use affect children and young people?

#### Young people's alcohol and drug use

A survey of Australian school students found that more than 80 per cent of young people aged between 12 and 17 years had never consumed an illicit drug.<sup>2</sup> The same survey reported that of those in this age group who had, there were significant decreases in their consumption in the last month.



Commissioner for Children and Young People  
Western Australia



Alcohol use is much more prevalent among young people. And while in recent years there has been a small increase in the number of Western Australian school students aged between 12 and 17 years who have never consumed alcohol (from 12.3 per cent in 2005 to 15.9 per cent in 2008), 84 per cent had consumed alcohol at some time. Of the 26 per cent who had consumed alcohol in the last week, almost one third drank at levels that put them at risk of harm.

Of particular concern is the increasingly earlier age at which young people are starting to drink alcohol. Consuming alcohol and/or drugs at an early age is associated with greater problems later in life, including physical and mental health problems<sup>3</sup>, poor educational attainment and chronic offending behaviour.<sup>4</sup>

The most common causes of harm to young people in Australia from drinking alcohol are road injury, suicide and violent assault. Alcohol is responsible for 13 per cent of all deaths of young people aged between 14 and 17 years.<sup>5</sup> One Australian teenager dies and more than 60 are hospitalised every week due to alcohol-related causes.<sup>6</sup>

Increasingly, evidence is showing that alcohol affects brain development during adolescence and early adulthood. This can lead to problems with learning and mental health later in life.<sup>7</sup>

### **Alcohol and drug use in the family**

Excessive alcohol and drug use in the family has a significant impact on children and young people, who can be exposed to abuse, neglect and violence. Research estimates that *'13.2 per cent or 451,621 children [under the age of 12 years] are at risk of exposure to binge drinking in the household by at least one adult; 2.3 per cent or 78,691 live in a household containing at least one daily cannabis user.'*<sup>8</sup> Parental drug and alcohol abuse is a major reason for 70 per cent of the care and protection orders for children in Western Australia.<sup>9</sup>

### **What needs to be done to address alcohol and drug-related harm to children and young people?**

Strategies to reduce illicit drug use need to capitalise on the gains made in this area in recent years. However, alcohol consumption remains the most significant source of harm to children and young people. The Australian National Health and Medical Research Council has produced guidelines<sup>10</sup> to help reduce the health risks associated with drinking alcohol. It recommends that *'For children and young people under the age of 18 years, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.'*

Family, peers, school and the media all influence the way young people consume alcohol. Efforts to reduce alcohol consumption by young people must be addressed in the broader context of the drinking culture of the entire community.

This requires an integrated approach and the consideration of a range of issues that influence excessive alcohol consumption. Reducing alcohol use by young people cannot be achieved by governments and young people alone; it is also the responsibility of families and the wider community.

*Government can do a lot more to combat alcohol abuse and must be willing to take on vested interests such as the liquor industry. Families and communities must also accept responsibility to stop children being hurt by alcohol abuse.<sup>11</sup>*

Some young people who participated in the Commissioner's research acknowledged that alcohol was, at times, part of having fun. A group of 16 year-olds said that:

*"Alcohol may be involved but that's what everyone likes."*



Providing more opportunities for children and young people to participate in alcohol and drug-free recreational activities and environments, parental monitoring and supervision, and reducing the availability of alcohol in the community can make a significant difference in lessening the alcohol-related harm to young people.

Parental alcohol and drug use is often associated with a range of other issues, such as mental health problems, unemployment, housing and poverty, and these issues cannot be treated in isolation. A research project<sup>12</sup> that asked young people about their experiences with parents who use alcohol and drugs found that services generally failed to meet the needs of these young people and their families. It concluded that services must become more family-focused and holistic to provide opportunities for young people to talk about their family situation.

However, providing support to families to address alcohol and drug use requires more than the provision of relevant services to those already affected.

*The scale of the problem of parental alcohol abuse alone is such that it cannot be solved solely by services. It requires population-based measures, such as taxing liquor according to its alcohol content, restricting alcohol advertising and providing evidence-based social marketing campaigns.*<sup>13</sup>

## Priorities for policy and program development

### Development of an effective regulatory framework

An effective regulatory framework would provide the necessary legislation to establish and enforce the strategies that work in reducing excessive alcohol consumption. Recommended strategies include:

- strengthening the Liquor Control Act 1988 to make the best interests of children and young people and the minimisation of harm to them the priority
- imposition of a volumetric tax on alcohol
- banning alcohol advertising and sponsorship of sporting events and cultural events
- consideration of legislation in WA to restrict the secondary supply of alcohol on private property to young people under the age of 18 years.

### Support for families and parents

Families and parents need to be supported to provide appropriate guidance to children and young people and to address alcohol and drug use within the family environment. Recommended strategies include:

- promoting clear messages and strategies to parents and young people on the harmful effects of alcohol and appropriate strategies to help them manage young people's consumption of alcohol
- assisting parents to develop effective parenting and family management skills that reduce the risk factors of problematic alcohol use later in adolescence
- providing accessible, holistic, family-focused treatment services that assess and meet the needs of children and young people living with parents who have an alcohol or drug dependency.

### Participation of children and young people

The participation of children and young people is critical when:

- developing strategies to address alcohol and drug consumption, such as public education programs
- children and young people are in the care of adults identified as having alcohol or drug problems.



- <sup>1</sup> CCYP (2010) *Speaking Out About Wellbeing: The views of Western Australian children and young people*. [www.ccyp.wa.gov.au](http://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au)
- <sup>2</sup> Haynes R, Kalic R, Griffiths P, Gunnell A, McGregor C. Australian School Student Alcohol and Drug Survey: Alcohol Report 2008 - Western Australian results. Drug and Alcohol Office Surveillance Report: Number 10. Perth: Drug and Alcohol Office; 2010
- <sup>3</sup> Roche A, Bywood P, Borlag an J, Lunnay B, Freeman T, Lawton L, Tovell A & Nicholas R (2007) *Young People and Alcohol: The Role of Cultural Influences*. NCETA. Adelaide.
- <sup>4</sup> Degenhardt L, Lynskey M and Hall W (2000) Cohort trends in the age of initiation of drug use in Australia. Technical Report 83. National Drug And Alcohol Research Centre. Sydney.
- <sup>5</sup> Chikritzhs TN, Pascal R. Trends in Youth Alcohol Consumption and Related Harms in Australian Jurisdictions, 1990–2002. Bulletin No. 6. Perth, Western Australia: National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University of Technology; 2004.
- <sup>6</sup> Australian Medical Association (2009) *Alcohol Use and Harms in Australia (2009) – Information paper*. <http://ama.com.au/print/4762>
- <sup>7</sup> Australian Drug Foundation 2009 Fact sheet: Young People and Alcohol. Number 7.11 [www.druginfo.adf.org.au](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au)
- <sup>8</sup> Dawe S (2007) *Drug use in the family: impacts and implications for children*. ANCD Research paper 13. Australian National Council on Drugs. Canberra
- <sup>9</sup> Submission by the WA Department of Community Development (now Child Protection) to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry; *Protecting Vulnerable Children: a national challenge*. 2005
- <sup>10</sup> National Health and Medical Research Council (2009) *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol*. Australian Government. Canberra
- <sup>11</sup> Scott D Think Child, think family. How adult specialist services can support children at risk of abuse and neglect. *Family Matters 2009 No.81*. Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- <sup>12</sup> Moore T Who Cares? Young people with parents who use alcohol or other drugs talk about their experiences with services. *Family Matters 2010 No.85*. Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- <sup>13</sup> Scott D (2009) Think Child Think Family: how adult specialist services can support children at risk of abuse and neglect. *Family Matters 2009 No 81*. Australian Institute of Family Studies.

