



Policy brief
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Alcohol and the role of parents

"Having parents at home who drink responsibly really helps as you learn good habits from them."

In 2017, there is still considerable concern across the community about the harms caused by alcohol consumption, particularly the effect on young people. Encouragingly, national data shows that fewer young people are drinking, with 82 per cent abstaining from alcohol in 2016, compared to 72 per cent in 2013.¹ Recent research conducted in WA² also shows that the proportion of students reporting they have never consumed alcohol has more than tripled over three decades (from nine per cent to 31.5 per cent). However, those who do drink are doing so at increasingly risky levels, and the upward trend is continuing.

These statistics are pleasing and show that public health campaigns promoting key messages and harm minimisation strategies are important and can have a positive effect. They also show however that there is still more to be done to reduce alcohol-related harm on children and young people. This requires a multifaceted approach and understanding of the important role parents play in reducing alcohol-related harm.

What do young people say about the role of parents?

In 2011 the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA engaged researchers to undertake a consultation with nearly 300 young people aged 14 to 17 years from across WA. The aim of the consultation was to find out their views on alcohol-related harm and the strategies they saw as likely to work in reducing this harm.

Young people who participated in this consultation indicated that parents strongly influence their decisions about drinking alcohol, with 51 per cent of participants nominating them as the

most significant influence. The views of young people who participated in the consultation identified a number of ways in which parents were significant in influencing their decisions about alcohol consumption.

"My parents are not big drinkers, so I'm not really interested in alcohol." male

"I'm not allowed to. My parents are pretty much strict." female

"My mum used to drink wine so that is what I drink." female

"In my family it would be all of them that drink and get drunk." female

Parents were often responsible for providing the first alcohol consumed by the young person.

"Even when I was 12 I was drinking at Christmas." male

"I've been drinking at home since I was 14." female

Some young people did modify their drinking because of their parent's views, particularly if they thought their parents would find out – either because they didn't want to get in trouble or because they didn't want to disappoint their parents.

"If your parents are picking you up you don't want them to know you have been drinking because they won't let you go out again." female

"[I regret] having my parents see me [drunk], losing trust in me." female

"Mum doesn't drink but so long as I don't get drunk and pass out she doesn't mind." female

Parents supplying alcohol

Parents also commonly purchased alcohol for young people. Often this was done in an effort to educate young people about drinking responsibly and to restrict the amount they consumed. Young people however identified that often their drinking pattern varied if their parents weren't directly supervising the consumption of the alcohol.

"My parents buy me drinks, they've let me have a four pack and that's it." female

"Their rule is we'll buy you a four pack but that's all you're allowed and if you drink anymore and if you get drunk then we won't do it for you anymore." female

"Yeah I drink with family but you do it politely when you are with them." female

"I wouldn't obviously get smashed in front of my parents... I'd like have a drink, it's just a different kind of drinking." female

Family conflict and violence

For some young people the effect of alcohol-related conflict and violence at home was a significant issue on their health and wellbeing.

"My father is very abusive and I see him get angry off alcohol, and worse. It's a genetic thing, I don't want to be like that." female

"If my parents are drinking, they have a fight and they walk out and you don't really know where they have gone." female

Family conflict is strongly associated with a range of poorer outcomes for children and young people, including risky alcohol and drug use, mental health problems, homelessness, exposure to abuse and neglect, and poor school achievement.

In December 2016, the Commissioner consulted nearly 100 children and young people who had been in contact with the justice system, supported by the WA Department of Corrective Services.

Many of the young people taking part in the consultation highlighted the effect of alcohol on family relationships and how it contributed to family and domestic violence, as well as their own alcohol use and offending behaviour. When asked to reflect on issues that had led to this behaviour, alcohol and drug use in the home was the second-most frequent response cited.

"Yeah, especially and if you're in a house where there's a lot of drama and a lot of alcohol and drugs and yeah, a lot of things...and that's what gets them in [Banksia Hill]." female

"Cause they grow up seeing their parents drink. They see the oldest sibling, they drink and, 'oh yeah, I'm going to be like my sister and brother, they're drinking. They're allowed to drink.' So they thought they could most probably drink too." female

Family conflict is strongly associated with a range of poorer outcomes for children and young people including risky alcohol and drug use, mental health problems, homelessness, exposure to abuse and neglect and poor school achievement.

Supporting and educating parents

Supporting and educating parents was considered an important strategy by young people to reduce the effect of alcohol-related harm.

"Maybe start with educating parents about alcohol so they know how to act with it and educate their children about it and so on and so forth."

"I think it really is down to the parents to give their son/daughter the education and warning they need of what's out there."

Some young people identified the importance of having a quality relationship with their parents as an effective strategy in reducing alcohol-related harm.

"I've always had the confidence that if anything ever happened I could call my parents." female

"[What reduces harm] Respect, trust and communicate with your children." female

Young people were also supportive of strategies that increased pressure on parents to act responsibly, even if they didn't necessarily like the implications for them personally.

"I think there should be more strict laws on the parents giving alcohol to their children." female

"I don't like the idea of it being illegal, but I think it should be – parents are responsible for you." male

What does the research say about alcohol and the role of parents?

Consistent with the Commissioner's consultation, research³ shows that while alcohol consumption is influenced by a range of different factors, parental influence is significant and can effect on young people's choices around alcohol in a number of ways.

Alcohol use during pregnancy

A significant body of research now exists tells us alcohol should be avoided throughout pregnancy. Alcohol can disturb the development of an embryo or foetus, with the early stages of pregnancy being a particularly vulnerable time in the developmental process.⁴

While the degree of harm to the baby from alcohol use is difficult to predict, there is an increasing awareness of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) – the term used to describe a range of adverse clinical outcomes for a child that may result from alcohol exposure during pregnancy. FASD is now recognised internationally as the single biggest, preventable source of intellectual disability, with a range of negative and lifelong consequences for affected individuals, including learning difficulties and disrupted education, unemployment, increased mental health problems, higher rates of juvenile crime, and alcohol and drug problems.

For more information on FASD, see the Commissioner's Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Issues Paper at ccyp.wa.gov.au.

Parental role modelling

Parental role modelling of alcohol consumption has a significant effect, with research showing parents' own drinking behaviour directly influences young people's consumption. One Australian study showed that children aged 10 and 11 years 'whose parents drank at least weekly were significantly more likely than other children to have intentions to drink alcohol and were more likely to accept an alcohol beverage if offered one'⁵.

It is estimated⁶ that more than 13 per cent of children aged 12 years and under in Australia are living in households with at least one 'binge-drinking' adult. A British study showed that parents who were generally very conscious of modelling appropriate alcohol consumption and not exposing their children to excessive drinking, were unaware when they adopted different practices on holidays, including drinking to excess, and their children were very aware of this different behaviour⁷.

Parental supply of alcohol to young people

Consistent with young people's views from the consultation, research shows parents are a common source of supply of alcohol to young people, with 30 per cent of 12 to 17 year-olds in WA reporting that their parents provided them with alcoholic beverages.⁸ Some young people from the consultation indicated that parents were providing at least four standard drinks for consumption at a single event.

However, the intention of many parents in supplying alcohol to their children is to introduce responsible drinking practices, set limits on consumption and provide a relatively safe,

monitored environment for consumption. The 'European model', as it is known, has traditionally been thought by many to prevent future alcohol abuse. Recent research in this area that surveyed a group of nearly 2,000 young people annually from 2000 to 2014, found that those whose parents supplied them with alcohol were more likely to drink full serves by their mid-teens, but less likely to binge.⁹

While parents may feel conflicted by these results, the evidence clearly states that due to the effect of alcohol on the developing brain, people under the age of 18 years should not drink alcohol at all. The case for total abstinence under the age of 18 is a strong one; parents should aim to delay their children's consumption for as long as possible.¹⁰

Importantly, in November 2015 new laws came into effect regarding the secondary supply of alcohol. Under this law it became an offence for anyone to supply a young person under the age of 18 with alcohol in a private setting, without parental or guardian permission. The offence carries a maximum penalty of \$10,000.¹¹

Parenting style and parental monitoring

According to research, parenting style and parental monitoring are the two most significant protective factors that influence young people's alcohol consumption.¹² Low parental monitoring has been associated with teenage alcohol use, initial levels of alcohol misuse and rates of increase in alcohol consumption, lifetime alcohol use, frequent drinking, and excessive, risky, binge or problematic drinking.¹³ Conversely, adolescents whose parents use effective monitoring practices are less likely to make decisions that can negatively affect a wide range of health behaviours, including drinking alcohol.¹⁴

Research confirms that high levels of parental monitoring are associated with lower drinking frequency, and that higher parental monitoring during the middle years (typically understood to be from the ages of nine to 14) has a lasting protective effect across the early teenage and late pre-teen years. Similarly, parental control (that is, the extent to which the young person has to seek permission to visit friends, go on outings, etc) showed that a higher degree of control was associated with lower rates of drinking.

Parental style also plays a significant part in determining drinking behaviours. Authoritative-style parenting (sometimes known as 'tough-love'), characterised by a monitoring approach with rules and consequences, but still bound in love and warmth, was found to be the most effective in limiting the risk of future risky drinking.¹⁵

How can parents be better supported?

Accurate and clear information on the effect of alcohol, particularly during pregnancy and during the development of the adolescent brain, needs to be more widely promoted through the appropriate channels, and better understood by the broader community.

Legislation

Secondary supply laws introduced in November 2015 are an important tool to support parents to have greater influence and a stronger mandate over their children's drinking choices and the potential harm they may be exposed to. They should arm parents with the knowledge and

confidence to say no, conveying the message that it is not acceptable to expose children and young people to alcohol-related harm.

Education

Research shows parents need information, education and support to develop effective relationships with their adolescent children so that they can provide appropriate levels of guidance around alcohol consumption. Programs that support parents in this important role need to be based on evidence of what works, and widely accessible in a variety of mediums. In addition to programs that adopt a more universal approach, tailored programs for families with more complex issues such as mental health problems, parental drug or alcohol dependence or family violence are also required.

Culture of alcohol consumption in Australia

The broader culture of alcohol consumption in the Australian community also impacts on the capacity of parents to effectively implement strategies to reduce alcohol consumption with their adolescent children. Strategies that address the broader culture of excessive alcohol consumption and tolerance for intoxication across the community will also need to be implemented to reinforce the messages to parents and from parents to their young people.

Priorities for policy and program development

Considerable work is already being done by a range of agencies in WA to reduce alcohol-related harm on young people. Due to the vital role that the evidence suggests parents can play in delaying and reducing young people's consumption of alcohol, further policy and program development needs to occur to maximise the capacity of parents.

Key priorities:

- Strategies that address the broader culture of alcohol consumption and provide a supportive environment for parents, reinforced in external environments such as schools, sporting clubs and the media.
- Compulsory education on alcohol in schools and widely disseminated and available resources for parents.

Alcohol-related harm is a multi-faceted problem and requires a comprehensive long-term strategy based on the best available evidence. Specifically, this strategy should include:

- reducing the availability of cheap and discounted alcohol, through means such as volumetric taxation, introduction of a minimum floor price, and abolishment of the Wine Equalisation Tax (WET)
- legislation to restrict the advertising and promotion of alcohol, particularly where it is visible or exposed to children and young people
- reform that includes a robust and effective regulatory framework which can sufficiently cover all forms of marketing and promotion, including social media
- strategies and alternatives to replace the widespread alcohol industry sponsorship of sport
- the provision of more alcohol-free events for children, young people and families.

Further information

For further discussion about these issues and the Commissioner's work on reducing alcohol-related harm, visit the website ccyp.wa.gov.au:

- Alcohol and sport policy brief
- Education on alcohol policy brief
- Alcohol availability policy brief
- Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) issues paper

More information on the problem of alcohol-related harm and its effect on children and young people:

- Alcohol Think Again Fact Sheets alcoholthinkagain.com.au/
- School of Drug Education and Road Aware (SDERA) sdera.wa.edu.au/
- McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth mcaay.org.au
- National Alliance for Action on Alcohol actiononalcohol.org.au
- National Preventative Health Taskforce preventativehealth.org.au
- Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education fare.org.au

Endnotes

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¹³ Higgins, Dr K., McCann, Dr M., McLaughlin, Dr A., McCartan, C., Perra, Dr O. 2013, *Investigating parental monitoring, school and family influences on adolescent alcohol use*, Institute of Child Care Research Queen's University Belfast

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