



Title: Pre-teens Learning About Alcohol: Drinking and Family Contexts

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<http://www.irf.org.uk/publications/pre-teens-alcohol-learning> (accessed July 2011)

SCS topic headings: Personal Safety; Home Safety; Safety of Vulnerable Groups; Partnership Working; Community Engagement; Evaluation and Monitoring

This document is a REVIEW of research to recommend effective intervention approaches.

Summary of the research aim

This report examines the influence that family can have on how children in their pre-teen years learn about alcohol. The study's aim was to explore how children learn about alcohol and to identify differences by socio-economic status, age, family structure, geographical locality and parental drinking behaviour. The authors identify the need for approaches to provide parental guidance on the subject.

Outcomes

The research design aimed to provide insight using multiple perspectives of children's socialisation to alcohol during key transition stages in ages 7 to 12 years. By examining how different economic circumstances, parenting styles and parents' drinking behaviours can influence how children view and understand alcohol, the report:

- provides a children's perspective on exposure to family drinking and sampling alcohol
- offers insights into the ways that parents introduce alcohol, and into their influence over future drinking behaviour
- illustrates the diversity of parental approaches through a series of family case studies.

Much of the research on drinking alcohol and pre-adolescence examines the impact of problem drinking within the family, however, this study addresses a significant gap in the literature by focusing on family settings where family members are not problem drinkers. The research findings also provide the following insights into understanding these different contexts:

Children's understanding of alcohol and drinking behaviours

- Across the study age range, children demonstrated a nuanced understanding of alcohol and its effects, and an ability to appraise different consumption styles.
- Older children revealed a more sophisticated knowledge- girls demonstrated a better understanding of the social attributes of drinking than boys.
- 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's impact on drinking behaviours

- Young children had a modifying impact on parental drinking behaviours. Many parents (mothers especially) felt a need to act as a positive role model and to avoid their child seeing them intoxicated.

Learning about alcohol

- School-based education appeared primarily to convey facts about alcohol and the effects of consumption, especially with regard to health.
- Formal education about alcohol was also perceived differently from learning in the home. There is therefore a danger that children are receiving mixed messages about alcohol and its acceptability.
- Dialogue about alcohol between parents and children was limited for the study age group; much of the learning was informal and based largely on observation.

Children's exposure to alcohol

- Children were socialised to alcohol in markedly different ways, and differences within the home and in exposure to wider community contexts emerged as a function of socio-economic group.
- While children from affluent areas appeared more likely to be exposed to alcohol consumption during meal times, they were also less involved in family celebrations where alcohol was consumed, and much less likely to witness drunkenness either in the home or in the wider community. As a result, alcohol consumption was more hidden in the affluent study communities.
- In the deprived communities it was more integrated into home and family settings, and heavier drinking was generally more accepted.

Alcohol compared with other issues

- In comparison with other substances, 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.

Summary of evaluation conclusions

Targeting pre-teenage children

- The study provides evidence that children at this age are receptive to parental advice and influence regarding alcohol and many anticipate modelling their future drinking behaviour on that of their parents. The age group is therefore an appropriate time to provide information and guidance and to encourage a dialogue about alcohol between parents and children.

Advice and guidance for parents

- The study findings reveal wide variation between families in drinking experiences and practices, in parenting styles, and in approaches to talking about alcohol and introducing children to it. There is underlying uncertainty in parents' feelings about educating their children about alcohol and therefore a need for better guidance for parents. In this respect, the study findings indicate that initiatives designed to support parents must not only respond to the educational needs of their children; they must also be sensitive to adult drinking cultures and the wider social values surrounding alcohol use in order to engage parents in ways that are constructive and meaningful.
- Findings indicate that care needs to be taken to avoid stigmatising parents, particularly those living in socially disadvantaged circumstances who sometimes feel overwhelmed by information and advice. There may be value in providing alcohol advice through generic (as opposed to alcohol-specific) parenting initiatives and through initiatives that focus on the broader family and community.
- Findings suggest that young children are receiving mixed messages about alcohol in the home and at school, irrespective of social background, and that there is a need to encourage greater involvement of parents to help ensure consistency of message.
- As well as highlighting the diverse ways in which parents approached educating their children about alcohol, the study findings highlight the many other factors that are seen to influence young people's interest in alcohol and their willingness to experiment with it as they mature.
- Providing clarity on the law would offer a neutral platform from which to provide parenting guidance on introducing alcohol and emphasise that parenting in this area can make a real difference.

How the evaluation gathered information for findings and conclusions

Appendix 1 details the research design and methodology. A qualitative methodology was used, comprising a mix of focus groups and family case studies and in-depth interviews. The study had three main stages, each one informing those that followed:

1. Preparation. This included a brief literature review and a focused re-examination of data from the research team's recent drinking cultures research in Scotland.
2. Broad exploration of issues, using focus groups with children and parents to provide insights into social interaction within the family and beyond; drinking-related experiences, norms and values; and response to policy and practice interventions.

Focus group interviews were undertaken with parents of children aged 7–12 (four groups of mothers and four groups of fathers), together with eight friendship group interviews with children aged 7–9 and 10–12 years of age (75 participants overall).

Preliminary analysis enabled identification of additional issues for inclusion in the family case studies undertaken in stage 3.

3. Family case studies to provide a more focused analysis of influences in the family and home context, incorporating perspectives from 'index' children in the target age group, parents and significant others. The use of one-to-one interviews enabled in-depth examination of individual understanding and experiences, as well as interactions and cross-referencing between family members.

The sample represented a range of family structures from contrasting socio-economic backgrounds in four different community contexts (urban affluent, urban deprived, rural affluent and rural deprived). A total of 15 family case studies were conducted, spread across the four study communities, incorporating 61 individual interviews.

Further details about the SCS evaluation of this report are available on request. Please contact info@scsn.org.uk

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