

Parent-young people communication about alcohol

Introduction

In recent years, concerns over alcohol misuse have become central to government policy and the related alcohol harm reduction strategy (Cabinet Office, 2004). This is due to two rising and largely distinct societal problems: crime and anti-social behaviour, and risks to health as a result of binge-drinking and chronic-drinking. Such policy explicitly acknowledges the importance of families in “making the strategy happen” (p.19), by parents providing young people with “clear and accurate information, and encouragement to make responsible decisions” (p.20). The current research project aimed to improve the evidence-base surrounding how parents communicate and supervise young people in relation to alcohol.

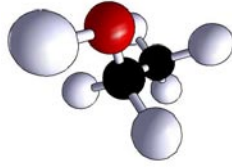
The literature demonstrates a lack of qualitative research that aims to identify how communication and supervision actually occurs within the family. In considering this major gap in the literature, the present research set out to explore how parents communicate with and supervise young people in relation to alcohol. Providing a detailed insight to the varied skills, tactics, and strategies that parents use (as well as any related concerns) will be crucial in helping to prevent alcohol misuse amongst young people. The research involved conducting 40 individual interviews with parents of young people between the ages of 13 and 17 years, following a schedule that was semi-structured around the research objectives. The research findings were then used to inform the development of an evidence-based newsletter, designed to support communication about alcohol and the supervision of sensible drinking within the family.

Findings

The findings revealed a wide-ranging number of strategies and tactics that parents used in communicating, monitoring, and supervising alcohol use within the family.

Communication

Most parents had general worries about alcohol and young people, in terms of its availability and the amount some young people drink. Moreover, many parents felt the need to promote specific messages to young people (e.g. moderation,



and safety) and tried to promote specific techniques to initiate conversations about alcohol (e.g. recounting personal and positive experiences of moderate or sensible alcohol use). Finally, parents often reported that a number of strategies had been effective in their attempts to communicate about alcohol (e.g. talking ‘little and often’).

*Supervision*

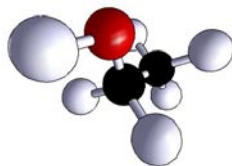
Parents generally found it more difficult to supervise alcohol use within the family than communicate about it. Parental limitations on young people were rarely about alcohol use alone. Instead, they were more often directed towards keeping safe, such as knowing where they are and ensuring they have their mobiles switched on. Difficult issues in relation to supervision included negotiating boundaries about alcohol use, other parents’ attitudes to young people and alcohol, and knowing whether to be concerned about alcohol use.

*Modelling and influences*

Most parents felt their children were receiving positive messages about alcohol from their own influences, for example drinking in moderation. In contrast, parents were more concerned about the influence of friendship groups, and in particular peer pressure and the media. Several parents believed the British drinking culture had an important impact on young people’s attitudes and behaviours in relation to alcohol use.

*Legal and health issues*

Many parents felt confident that both they and young people were generally aware of the legal issues associated with alcohol use. However, the majority of parents did not feel that they were aware of alcohol units or ‘sensible’ drinking levels. Parents reported being concerned about the additional consequences of alcohol use, including: emotional vulnerability, safety and the behavioural effects of alcohol (e.g. fighting), and drink spiking. In general, parents felt they would like more specific information about the legal and health implications of alcohol use for young people.



### *Difficult issues*

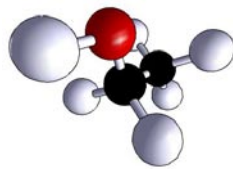
Parents' narratives revealed a number of situations they found difficult to deal with in relation to young people and alcohol use. These included their own child (or someone within their child's peer group) getting very drunk or ill, or getting into trouble with the police as a result of alcohol use. Additional difficulties concerned the attitudes of other parents, alcohol going missing in the house, and the dilemma that if a young person is going to drink, to what extent should they allow them to drink in the family home.

### *Parents' perceptions of what helps*

Parents reported a wide range of approaches that they *perceived* to have helped in relation to communicating about, and the supervision of, alcohol use within the family. The main approaches included using personal experiences about the use of alcohol, being open and honest when communicating about alcohol, and giving young people clear messages. Many parents also suggested the importance of 'being there' for young people when they need to talk, and talking to them about alcohol use from a young age. Incorporating alcohol use into family life in a safe and supervised way was suggested to be a more effective approach than mystifying alcohol, and parents suggested the need to let young people experiment under parental supervision. Negotiating with young people, in terms of rules, restrictions, and limitations in relation to alcohol use was also deemed to be important, as was using the media to initiate conversation and to demonstrate positive/negative examples of alcohol use. Keeping in touch with other parents, particularly parents of peers, to share information and advice about alcohol (mis)use, was also reported by parents as being a helpful approach to dealing with the issues associated with alcohol use within the family.

### **Implications**

This research has qualitatively explored how parents communicate with their children about alcohol, and how they seek to supervise sensible drinking in the family. Through a process of exploration, the research has identified a number of related experiences, concerns and worries, and useful tips for strategies. These in-depth accounts will be of use to policy-makers and practitioners working to



reduce alcohol misuse within the family. Given the recognised important role that parents can have in shaping the culture of drinking in the future, the concerns and worries expressed indicate areas of where more potential support is required. As examples, this research highlighted concerns over the implications (short and long-term) of alcohol use, the location of drinking, alcohol type, and mass-media portrayal. Also, concerns over how to start conversations about alcohol, at a time when communicating about all manner of subjects may be challenging were also raised, alongside a number of more specific difficult issues.

This research has drawn attention to the support that some parents need in supervising a sensible approach to alcohol by children and young people. In response, we used the information to develop an evidence-based newsletter for parents and practitioners working with parents. This newsletter aimed to address a number of concerns raised by parents, and offers practical ways in which these concerns can be addressed (using parents own strategies where possible). For example:

- Strategies used to foster communication about alcohol
- Supervision experiences and difficulties
- Practical and accessible information about legal and health issues
- 'Effective' strategies to prevent misuse (as perceived by parents)

This newsletter is now available from TSA.

#### Further Information

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#### ALCOHOL INSIGHTS

*Alcohol Insights* are brief summaries of the findings made from research or development grants.

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Further information about *Alcohol Insights* can be found at [www.aerc.org.uk](http://www.aerc.org.uk) or email: [info@aerc.org.uk](mailto:info@aerc.org.uk)

