

# The influence of family and friends on young people's drinking

**Round-up**  
**Reviewing the evidence**

January 2011

This *Round-up* examines family and friendship influences on young people's drinking habits, in order to shed light on how the negative aspects of young people's drinking culture in the UK might be changed.

## **This paper:**

- draws on five research projects aimed at understanding how family and friendship groups influence young people's drinking cultures;
- examines the implications for policy and practice interventions which aim to reduce alcohol-related harm among young people.

## **Key points**

- Family is a key influence on children's and young people's behaviour. Both parents and children see the home as a 'safe' place to drink.
- Parents develop ways of giving their children messages about drinking; these include the 'continental' style introduction of small samples of alcohol to children. Parents tend to rely on their own childhood experiences with alcohol and personal beliefs rather than government public health messages.
- Parents feel that they are best placed to influence their children's alcohol intake. Parental supervision and parental drinking in front of children are key factors that influence a child or young person's knowledge, attitude and behaviour in relation to alcohol.
- Most young people do not seek to get out of control from excessive drinking. Indeed, many viewed this negatively. Although many do drink to get drunk, friendship groups often find their own ways to manage alcohol consumption in order to get 'drunk enough'. Price is more likely to limit consumption than concerns about health or personal risk.
- Policy and practice implications include:
  - Prevention and harm reduction approaches need to take into account how parent-child dynamics, social contexts and socio-economic factors all vary.
  - Public health messages need to connect more with the realities of parents' attitudes and practices. Parents require information and advice which they can apply flexibly and adapt to their individual approaches as their children grow up.
  - Interventions to enable young people to manage their drinking need to consider group drinking situations and decision-making not just individuals' behaviour.
  - Further consideration is needed of the potential for using price as a harm reduction measure and the need for more appealing, alternative spaces for young people to socialise with friends.

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## Introduction

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (JRF) Alcohol Programme aims to contribute to halting or reversing negative drinking cultures and patterns amongst young people in the UK. The focus of the programme is on examining the transmission of drinking cultures. To this end, JRF has commissioned a number of research projects which explore the ways in which drinking culture is transmitted through influences such as family, peers, media and location so as to shed light on how young people's negative drinking cultures might be changed.

Family and friendship influences are key factors in shaping young people's drinking culture. Whilst there are some points in childhood where family or friends are more or less influential, the findings of JRF research suggest that these influences are interconnected and that family influence continues as children grow up. Moreover, the research highlights that young people do not have a drinking culture entirely separate from their parents or other adult relatives.

This *Round-up* is based on the findings of five research projects with a focus on family and peer influences. Two research projects examined the role of the family in shaping primary-school-aged children's knowledge, attitudes and expectations around alcohol. A third explored young people's social networks and drinking behaviour during their teenage years. A fourth project investigated the influences, motivations and decision-making which underpins the drinking habits of young adults aged between 18 and 25 years. The final project surveyed over 5,700 young people at Year 9 (13-14 years) and Year 11 (15-16 years) focusing on levels and patterns of drinking and the multiple influences on their alcohol consumption.

The *Round-up* also draws on supporting evidence from an earlier JRF research review (Velleman, 2009).

## The role of the family and home

Velleman's review of the literature examining the factors that prevented excessive alcohol consumption among young people suggests that parental and family influences are at their strongest at an early age. As a young person gets older this parental influence is lessened by messages from the media and by the influence of their friendship and peer groups. The JRF research projects confirm the role of the family and parents as the most important influence on children's expectations, attitudes and – up to a certain age – behaviours relating to alcohol use. For younger children (for example, those aged under 13) the home emerges as a 'safe' place to drink alcohol (Eadie, 2010; Valentine, 2010). The findings from the Ipsos MORI survey (forthcoming) suggest that the home environment continues to be a potential protective factor. Here supervised alcohol consumption at home was shown to reduce the likelihood of teenagers drinking to excess.

Even at an early age, young children have a fairly sophisticated understanding of alcohol and its effects which mostly comes from observing their parents or other adult relatives (Eadie, 2010). Many children were aware of their parents' and adult relatives' drinking habits, including their drink preferences. Children were shown to understand different levels of intoxication. Girls in particular were seen to have a nuanced understanding of the links between alcohol use and different social situations (Eadie, 2010).

For most families, alcohol was viewed not as something bad or hidden, but as a normal, unremarkable feature of everyday life. Many parents felt happy to drink (but not to get drunk) in front of their children and wanted to teach them to drink moderately by example (Eadie, 2010; Valentine, 2010).

## Parental influences on younger children

### *Introducing children to alcohol*

The parents in Valentine's study introduced their children to alcohol with an implicit belief that the home, rather than school, is a better place to learn about alcohol. This corresponds with Velleman's concept of 'responsive parenting' which aims to engage children in a dialogue about the nature and effects of alcohol rather than enforcing more traditional family boundaries that deny access to alcohol.

The survey data in Valentine's research suggests that the dominant attitude among parents is that children should not be introduced to alcohol at home until their mid-teens. However, the qualitative element of the study suggests parents actually introduce their children to alcohol at an earlier age. Alcohol was most commonly introduced to children at home or at family celebrations (Valentine, 2010). This was shown to be similar to a 'continental' style whereby parents would introduce alcohol by offering a sip or providing small samples of alcohol mixed with water or juice under controlled or supervised conditions. The intention was to encourage children to drink responsibly in the future. These decisions were taken not on the basis of public health messages, but parents' own childhood experiences or personal beliefs (Valentine, 2010).

### *Teaching children about alcohol*

The research suggests that at this stage, parents mostly do a good job of conveying the social pleasures and risks of drinking and the message that alcohol should be consumed in moderation (Eadie, 2010; Valentine, 2010). The research indicates that parents of young children were likely to moderate their own behaviour so as to set an example; this was particularly noticeable for mothers (Eadie, 2010). Indeed, young children anticipated modelling their future behaviour on their parents' drinking styles, rather than on teenage drinking habits (Eadie, 2010; Valentine, 2010).

But, of course, parents are not perfect. There were occasions where some parents drank to excess in front of their children (for example, on holiday or at family celebrations) and there were gaps in what children learnt from home. The research highlights that children are not taught to recognise the potential future health consequences of excessive drinking, with parents tending to focus on short-term consequences such as hangovers (Valentine, 2010). This may in part be explained by the fact that health risks do not resonate with parents' own experiences. Also, parents' emphasis on learning to drink safely in the home missed the opportunity to teach children about drinking outside of the home and the impact of drinking behaviours on others (Valentine, 2010).

Parents did not have specific rules on drinking as other issues, such as a child's use of computer games, were considered more pressing, (Valentine, 2010). Parents preferred to highlight what they saw as more problematic substances, such as tobacco or illicit drugs, and discussion between parents and children about alcohol was limited (Eadie, 2010). This absence of information was reflected in a gap in knowledge among children about the effects of excessive alcohol consumption and through children confusing health promotion messages about the impact of smoking and drinking.

For some children, witnessing their parents' excessive alcohol consumption actually had the potential to act as a moderator for future alcohol use (Valentine, 2010). Here, seeing a parent in a state of inebriation was off-putting to some children and actually raised greater awareness of alcohol misuse. In addition, there were instances when a child expressed disapproval of their parent's alcohol consumption which in turn acted as a moderator for their parent's behaviour (Eadie, 2010). What emerges from this research is a dynamic, complex series of interactions relating to alcohol, not always *from* parent to child but rather between parents and their children.

## Parental influences as children grow up

### *Influences outside the family*

As children get older and socialise more with friends, Velleman argues that the pull of parental influence becomes weaker in favour of other external pressures (Velleman, 2009). Although the research projects suggest that parents have a vital role in shaping their children's alcohol consumption, there was a sense of pragmatism among parents that they would have a diminishing influence as their children grew up at the expense of other external factors such as their children's friendship networks (Eadie, 2010; Valentine, 2010).

Drawing on their own experiences, parents accepted the future erosion of natural authority with their children. Underpinning this was a sense that parents felt overwhelmed by the volume of external pressures that they felt were being placed on their children through, for example, pervasive alcohol advertising (Eadie, 2010).

### *Parenting strategies*

Parents were increasingly shown to develop an 'individualised strategy' (Valentine, 2010) to equip their children to manage their own alcohol consumption. Broad public health messages aimed at reducing consumption levels did not seem to resonate with parents who were required to adapt their strategies in response to a range of increasingly complex factors.

Percy describes an 'implicit contract' between young people and parents once alcohol begins to be consumed outside the family home. In return for parents' tacit acceptance of alcohol consumption, young people would deploy strategies aimed at ensuring that their parents did not see them drunk. One strategy was for young people to drink earlier to achieve the desired level of intoxication but also to allow time at the end of the evening to sober up so as not to come home drunk (Percy, forthcoming).

There are mixed findings about the effectiveness of parenting strategies in this context. Research by Ipsos MORI (forthcoming) suggests that young people who have more supervision and monitoring by a parent (for example, parents know where their children are on a Saturday night) and have a parent (or older sibling) who drinks moderately in front of them (rather than to excess) are at a reduced risk of drinking to excess.

However, Percy's research found that parental attempts to restrict their teenager's contact with alcohol are often circumvented and rarely lead to a reduction in drinking (Percy, forthcoming). In some situations parental actions actually increase the risk of young people getting too drunk. When parents provided young people with limited alcohol *within* the home, this often occurred without them being aware that the young person was already drinking *outside* the home. Here, parents are facilitating an increase in consumption through providing additional alcohol.

There is evidence of the ongoing influence of family as young people get older. Seaman's research with young adults indicated that when drinking with their parents or in a family context, young people tended to drink more moderately than with their peers (Seaman, 2010). Here, parents are helping to establish ideas around the contextual appropriateness for different drinking styles. Indeed, it appeared it was witnessing examples of moderation that influenced young people, rather than whether or not parents had introduced them to alcohol in the home.

## Drinking with friends

### A 'culture of intoxication'

The research projects found that both teenagers and young adults navigate a 'culture of intoxication' (Percy, forthcoming; Seaman, 2010). When drinking with friends, young people are drinking to get drunk. Many (although not all) friendship groups actively pursue drunkenness. Here young people described excessive drinking as one of the few occasions in their lives for relaxing, having fun and making and maintaining friendships. Young people found it hard to imagine ways of spending time with their friends without drinking (Seaman, 2010). Research into friendship networks among young people under the legal drinking age showed that increased alcohol consumption was shown to confer a degree of social standing among some groups of young people (Percy, forthcoming).

The survey findings from Ipsos Mori indicate that the perceived drinking behaviour of friends was a key factor in young people's drinking habits. For example, young people were much more likely to admit drinking in the last week if most (as opposed to some or a few) of their friends did too. The amount consumed (in terms of volume per drinking session) was also shown to be associated; the more their friends drank, the more a young person admitted drinking.

Although young people were drinking to get drunk, simplistic portrayals of this as 'out of control binge drinking' do not appear to reflect the reality of young people's drinking behaviour. They rarely set out to drink so much that they are sick, lose control or pass out. In fact, there is considerable stigma associated with getting too drunk, with young drinkers in particular placing considerable emphasis on being able to control their drinking (Percy, forthcoming).

Most young people were not concerned about their levels of consumption. They saw young adulthood as a safe period for regular heaving drinking – a time of independence without responsibilities. Young people perceived their current style of drinking as temporary, believing that they would drink more moderately when they reached full adulthood and took on responsibilities such as getting a job or starting a family. (Seaman, 2010; Percy, forthcoming).

### Managing consumption

Drinking culture is not static; it evolves over time as young people become more experienced consumers (Percy, forthcoming). Friendship groups develop their own drinking cultures, habits and customs. These customs cover what they drink, how much they drink, where they drink and their intended level of intoxication. Whilst most young people would pursue drunkenness, the level of intoxication that was acceptable within the group did vary across friendship groups (Percy, forthcoming). Groups also develop strategies to regulate their drinking upwards (if they are not drunk enough) or downwards (if they are getting too drunk).

Teenagers strive to develop drinking expertise, the ability to control their level of intoxication. When attempting to manage their consumption, young drinkers walk what Percy describes as an 'intoxication tightrope' – trying to balance the desire to get sufficiently drunk and have a good time, with their ability to sober up before going home to their parents.

Over time, most teenagers appear to develop a degree of self-control over their alcohol consumption. However, this is gained through trial and error, with mistakes occurring along the way. Teenage drinkers are particularly vulnerable when they change the social context in which they drink alcohol, for example when they move from drinking on the street to drinking in pubs and clubs, or when they go on holiday without their parents for the first time. Here their established drinking culture fails to protect them in the new social situation (Percy, forthcoming).

'Pre-loading' was one way in which young adults managed their alcohol intake. Here, alcohol would be consumed at home prior to going out (Seaman, 2010). This might include a friend's home where alcohol would be cheaply consumed to the requisite level of intoxication before going out for the evening. Pubs and clubs were often seen as an expensive night out and staying in for a period of time prior to going out was seen to offer a more cost-efficient option (Seaman, 2010). Yet as Seaman and colleagues persuasively argue, *'seeing domestic drinking as exclusively economically motivated misses the point of why young people choose to socialise in the first place'*. In this context, 'pre-loading' provides a social function, namely socialising with friends and peers in a more convivial environment than can be achieved within a bar or club.

## Price and the drinking environment

In deciding how much to drink, the money young people were able to spend was more likely than other factors to curtail how much they drank; they did not set limits based on alcohol units or health or personal risks (Percy, forthcoming; Seaman, 2010). One way of trying to limit consumption was to only take a restricted amount of money on a night out – although the cheap alcohol offers in bars and clubs could undermine that strategy.

On this basis, price could be seen as a more effective indicator (that ‘makes sense’ to young people – quoted from Seaman, 2010) of consumption levels than units and therefore could act as a potential moderator of alcohol use. There were some (usually those that were already doing so) who said that if they were priced out of alcohol consumption, they might seek intoxication through black market alcohol or other illegal drugs. Others said that they would find ways to consume alcohol whatever the price, for example by changing to cheaper brands (Percy, forthcoming; Seaman, 2010).

Seaman’s research found that young people matched their drinking to the norms of a given situation. Bars and clubs aimed at young adults often encouraged or exaggerated an excessive drinking culture, especially when drinks were cheap and it was standing room only. When drinking with their family or with mixed age groups, young people tended to moderate their alcohol consumption (Percy, forthcoming; Seaman, 2010). However, the social worlds of young people and adults were largely separate, limiting young people’s exposure to a variety of attitudes to alcohol and different, more moderate, drinking styles.

## Socio-economic factors

There were many commonalities across socio-economic groups; including parents’ belief that home was the best place to introduce children to alcohol, parental acceptance of the perceived inevitability of their children’s future experimentation with excessive alcohol use, and young people claiming relatively easy access to alcohol. Although the samples used in the research were relatively small, it was possible to demonstrate a complex interaction between alcohol consumption and wider social-economic factors.

One difference was the way children were socialised to alcohol both at home and in the wider community. Children from affluent areas were more likely to be exposed to alcohol at mealtimes and less likely than children from deprived areas to be involved in family celebrations where alcohol was consumed and to witness drunkenness in the home or the wider community (Eadie, 2010). Parents from less affluent areas were aware of this dilemma; some felt acutely the danger of being stigmatised as a ‘bad parent’. However, the research does not provide evidence that there was less alcohol consumption in affluent areas, but rather suggests that it was more hidden.

When looking at young adults, Seaman’s research concludes that the potential for alcohol-related harm is not the same across all groups. For those young people with fewer socio-economic resources excessive consumption was more likely to be in private houses or public spaces (streets or parks) where they were at greater risk of alcohol-related violence. Those who find it difficult to attain aspects of full adulthood, such as a steady job or independent housing, had more difficulty imagining their excessive drinking style changing in the future.



## Implications for policy and practice

This research indicates that parents and young people are sophisticated consumers of alcohol and that any public health messages need to reflect the complexities of alcohol consumption and the dynamic transmission of information between parents and their children. Simple, didactic public health messages did not have much resonance with the parents and young people in these studies because such messages did not appear to be grounded in the reality of their alcohol use.

### *Parental advice and guidance*

The research presents parents as important brokers of information and family life as complex set of interactions between parents and children. Furthermore, for most, drinking was seen as a normal, unremarkable feature of everyday life. As a result, simple health messages did not have much meaning for parents. This suggests that any advice or guidance for parents needs to be grounded in the reality of alcohol use and the different approaches of individual parents. Clearly, public health messages which advocate an alcohol-free childhood do not reflect the variety of strategies and approaches used by parents who attempt to guide their children towards acceptable alcohol consumption in a safe, controlled environment. Advice to parents which ignores their current practices may lack credibility and be more likely to be rejected or ignored.

The research highlights that drinking is a dynamic phenomenon and that parents need advice which is age-appropriate. The fairly sophisticated understanding of alcohol and its effects amongst young children in the studies suggests the importance of parenting strategies relating to alcohol from a young age. Also at this age children appear to be receptive to parental advice and guidance, which diminishes in teenage years. For older children, parents may need to consider that their children are consuming alcohol outside of the home much earlier than they anticipated.

### *Harm reduction approaches for young people*

The findings of the JRF research projects indicate that any interventions which aim to reduce alcohol-related harm among young people need to consider how young people make decisions around alcohol consumption and the strategies that young people themselves already use to try and manage consumption.

### *Understanding young people's decision-making around alcohol*

Young people's decision-making around alcohol is often based on contextual criteria (who they were with, where they were drinking). Furthermore, drinking is almost entirely a social activity – young people did not drink alone. Therefore harm reduction approaches that focus on individual decision-making (say in relation to health or personal risks) do not appear robust enough to limit consumption in friendship group settings and once intoxication has been reached. Advice and interventions which aim to enable young people to manage group drinking situations as well as their own consumption and alcohol-related behaviours may be more appropriate.

### *Developing strategies for young drinkers*

The research findings suggest that alcohol interventions targeted at young teenagers which aim to prevent or delay initiation into alcohol use, do not take into consideration that young people may start drinking at a much earlier age than anticipated.

Teenagers do engage in risky behaviours when drunk and although many do learn to moderate their alcohol consumption as they get older this learning is gained through trial and error, in the company of other young people trying to get drunk but not caught, and without any real adult input. Also, the strategies used by teenagers to control their drinking and intoxication are relatively simplistic, prone to failure and of little use if the context changes. This suggests a need for the development of more pragmatic interventions for underage drinkers that are focused on reducing the acute risks associated with their drinking. These interventions could attempt to teach young drinkers better strategies and techniques to control and regulate their consumption and to reduce instances of excessive.

### *Price as a moderator of consumption*

Price is already one measure by which young people monitor their alcohol consumption. This suggests that increasing the minimum price of alcohol, or at least banning low-cost alcohol and discounted alcohol promotions, is more likely to curtail drinking than approaches focused on the health consequences of drinking or on counting units. However, it is important to note that manipulating price may not be sufficient to remove young people's motivation for excessive drinking with friends. Furthermore, if priced out of alcohol consumption, some young people may choose to substitute alcohol with black market alcohol or other drugs.

## Alternative social spaces

Controlling the price and availability of alcohol should limit the amount drunk on one night out, but it fails to tackle the cultural issue, namely that socialising has become synonymous with drinking for young adults in the UK. If young people are drinking to excess in order to participate and belong, then there is an impetus to create more appealing, alternative social spaces for them to relax, have fun and socialise with friends. Based on the findings of this research, this would need to move away from the idea of trying to 'divert' young people from drinking but to try and address what is seen by young people as 'missing' and which can only be found through excessive consumption. Given the success of youth-orientated clubs and bars, this trend may be hard to reverse.

## About this paper

This paper was written by Arun Sondhi, independent consultant, and Claire Turner, manager of the JRF Alcohol Programme, with support from Betsy Thom, Middlesex University.

## The research

All the reports are published by JRF and are available for free download on publication from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk).

Eadie D., MacAskill S., Brooks O., Heim D., Forsyth A., and Punch S. (2010) *Pre-teens learning about alcohol: Drinking and family contexts*

Ipsos Mori (forthcoming 2011), *Multiple domains research on drinking cultures: predicting a young person's behaviour with alcohol*

Percy A., Wilson J., McCartan C. and McCrystal P. (forthcoming, February 2011) *Teenage drinking cultures*

Seaman P. and Ikegwuonu T. (2010) *Drinking to belong: Understanding young adults' alcohol use within social networks*

Valentine G., Jayne M., Gould M. and Keenan J. (2010) *Family life and alcohol consumption: A study of the transmission of drinking practices*

Velleman, R. (2009) *Children, young people and alcohol: How they learn and how to prevent excessive use*

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Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.  
ISSN 0958-3084 ISBN 978 1 85935 820 7

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