



Under the Influence: Protecting teens from the impact of alcohol marketing, 21 June 2011, European Parliament (Brussels)

Closing remarks by Policy Officer with Alcohol Action Ireland Cliona Murphy

Every day, in many different ways and in many different media, children and young people are exposed to positive, risk-free images of alcohol and its use.

And yet, through lack of effective regulations and legislation, at both member state and EU level, we have chosen to poorly protect young people from these sophisticated and powerful influences on their drinking behavior and expectations.

Marketing can shape youth culture by creating and sustaining expectations and norms about how to achieve social, sporting or sexual success, how to celebrate, how to relax and how to belong.

Alcohol marketing has colonized many of the worlds in which young people spend their time – the worlds of music, sport and the online world.

And it often seeks out and finds young people in these worlds, uninvited. In a nationally representative survey of Irish 16 and 17-year-olds commissioned by Alcohol Action Ireland, 83% said they had a Facebook page - and 30% of those had received an alcohol-related ad/ pop-up on that page.

Alcohol is not an ordinary commodity yet children growing up today have come to accept alcohol as part of the family shopping basket. Integrated marketing has normalized the use of alcohol as just another everyday product.

So why does any of this matter?

1. It matters because alcohol marketing influences young people to drink earlier and to drink more.
2. It matters because young people's drinking patterns have a direct effect on their health, development and welfare.
3. It matters because young people are more vulnerable when it comes to the effects of alcohol use – alcohol use by children and young people carries an increased risk of harm compared to alcohol use by adults.

Alcohol affects the developing, adolescent brain in a different way to the adult brain. Early and repeated alcohol use can lead to significant brain chemistry changes – changes that affect memory, reasoning, self-regulation and judgment.

It is evident from what we have heard to today that children and young people are not being protected, that self-regulation does not offer the protection needed

The question before us is not whether action is needed but rather whether we want to act to protect

I'd like now to summarise the key points we've heard today on effective, evidence-based actions we can take to protect children and young people from the impacts of alcohol marketing:

- Regulations and legislation need to address all elements of the marketing mix. When one area is regulated, this tends to lead to an expansion of investment and activity in another area. It was for this reason that the EU instituted a comprehensive ban on all aspects of tobacco marketing
- Regulation needs to be independent of the alcohol and advertising industries
- And it needs be embedded in law
- Effective regulation and legislation needs address both content and volume of advertising, with a particular focus on reducing volume
- Alcohol advertising regulations are only effective if both a strong code and a well functioning regulatory system are in place, with substantial deterrents
- Young people should be formally involved in any process which evaluates content —they are the best people to judge what a particular communication is saying, as they are the target audience
- We also need keep in mind that price is an essential element of the marketing mix. There is indisputable evidence that the price of alcohol matters and pricing policy remains one of the most effective ways of reducing alcohol-related harms and costs
- Digital media —including social networking sites, email, viral marketing, and texts— is a fast growing medium for alcohol advertising. The introduction of mandatory age authentication controls, and controls on the volume, content and placement in digital media will go some way to protecting children and young people. However, serious consideration needs to given to banning the use of marketing tools in media that are difficult to monitor, and that reach large numbers of young people
- It is simpler to monitor and enforce regulations that specify what can be included in marketing communications as opposed to what can't be included. For example, in France the only content permitted is that relating to product information

- And of course, a Europe-wide ban on alcohol advertising is the most effective way of reducing the impact. Similar to tobacco, such a move can be considered proportionate on the basis that it protects the health of its citizens.

And finally, whose responsibility is it to provide this protection?

Both member states and the EU support conditions that facilitate their citizens to be healthy in recognition of the fact that the primary asset of a nation is its health: higher levels of health associated with greater overall well-being and productivity.

However, legislative protections introduced in one country generally only apply to that member state and, in relation to marketing, legal protections usually apply only to media licensed in that state. If we are serious about protecting all young people from the impacts of alcohol marketing it is essential that we explore the introduction of harmonised regulations on an EU wide basis.

Children and young people experience a disproportionate negative impact when it comes to alcohol. The evidence clearly shows that alcohol marketing influences their drinking behaviours. As a vulnerable group, children and young people need protection. It is neither appropriate nor desirable to delegate this responsibility to commercial interests, such as the alcohol and advertising industries.

This duty rests with government, it rests with the EU, it rests with the elected, accountable guardians of public interest. Self-regulation can never be a substitute for good legislation.

We have the evidence to inform the action needed to protect young people - we are left with the question as to whether there exists the political will to vindicate those rights to protection.

Thank you