

Health and Community Care Research Programme Research Findings No. 14

Consultation with children and young people on the Scottish Executive's Plan for Action on alcohol misuse

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In order to inform the development of the Plan for Action on alcohol problems, the Scottish Executive commissioned a number of consultation projects to gather views on alcohol problems in Scotland. This paper presents the main findings of one consultation exercise which involved 98 young people aged 9-19 across Scotland.

Main Findings

- While participants demonstrated a high level of understanding about the dangers of drinking on both a personal and social level, these did not act as a major disincentive to drink.
- The reasons why young people drink are complex and include a combination of factors such as: the influence of older siblings and friends; cultural acceptability; individual choice; the positive qualities of alcohol; and lack of satisfactory alternative social activities.
- The young people involved in this consultation felt unfairly blamed for the problems of alcohol misuse, and pointed to a double-standard, as adults' use and misuse of alcohol is tolerated.
- There was a widespread view among those interviewed that young people are overloaded with health information on drugs and alcohol. Consequently, it was felt that rather than increase the quantity of education, there is a need to improve its quality.
- The young people interviewed generally emphasised that any solutions to tackle underage drinking and alcohol problems should be set within the wider context of their lives and not considered in isolation.
- A range of suggestions were put forward as potential solutions for tackling problems of alcohol misuse such as: providing alternative activities; promoting tailored, pragmatic drinking messages; and enforcing the law relating to alcohol misuse.
- These ideas for solutions to the problem were underpinned by ideas about the greater involvement and participation of young people in decision making on issues which affect their lives.

Introduction

In April 2001, the Scottish Executive Health Department Substance Misuse Division commissioned Save the Children to consult with children and young people about their views on alcohol problems in Scotland. This formed part of a wider consultation process outlined in the *Consultation Paper on Plan for Action on Alcohol Misuse* issued by the Scottish Executive in February 2001. A separate consultation was commissioned because it was recognised that children and young people were not likely to respond to the written consultation.

Methodology

The project took place in rural and urban locations across Scotland between May and June 2001. Fourteen focus groups were carried out involving 98 children and young people aged between 9 and 19 years. A reasonable gender balance was achieved with 45% males and 55% females participating. To ensure maximum participation, a range of participatory techniques was devised to suit young people of different ages and experience, including: a questionnaire; graffiti walls; brainstorming; worksheets; and follow-up exercises involving voting and ranking. Each session was recorded through facilitator and flipchart notes. The questionnaire was used to elicit basic demographic information on participants, and their attitudes to and experiences of alcohol.

Four key research themes were identified, each reflecting a different focus and each linked to questions contained within the consultation paper:

- Young people's¹ views on alcohol
- Young people's experiences of alcohol use
- Factors influencing attitudes and behaviour towards alcohol among young people

¹ The term 'young people' is used in this report to represent all those who took part in the consultation. Age distinctions are used where appropriate, e.g. 'younger children' or 'older young people'.

- Young people's ideas and solutions for reducing alcohol misuse in Scotland

The general findings within these four themes are summarised below:

Young people's views on alcohol

The young people interviewed expressed a wide range of views about alcohol, reflecting a sophisticated and often pragmatic knowledge of the subject. Some of their views were contradictory, but none were simplistic. Young people recognised that the use and misuse of alcohol is a complex matter, and the problems of alcohol misuse have no easy answers.

Despite evidence of a high level of understanding of the dangers of drinking on both a personal and social level, the majority of young people saw experimentation with alcohol as a natural part of growing up.

There were notable differences in views between younger children and older young people. For many in the 9-12/13 age group, underage drinking was strongly associated with breaking the law and this was seen as a major deterrent to drinking. Older young people, including those less than 18 years, did not see the illegality of underage drinking as important.

Young people's experience of alcohol

Over two thirds of the participants stated that they drank alcohol although this figure decreased with age. When asked how often they consumed alcohol, one third drank once a week mainly confined to weekends, while over half stated that they drank infrequently and no participants reported drinking every day.

Young people reported that a range of strategies are employed for obtaining alcohol. Using older young people or family members to buy it for them was the most common method. Corner shops and off licences

were the most frequently used outlets for young people to obtain alcohol themselves.

While it was recognised that there is a significant problem with alcohol misuse among young people, it was felt that this is confined to a minority. Concern was expressed about the society's tendency to blame all young people for the problems of alcohol misuse while at the same time embracing adult drinking.

Influences on young people's drinking

Participants identified a range of factors which influence young people's decision to drink. These included:

- the influence of others (peers, older siblings)
- cultural acceptability of alcohol misuse
- positive qualities of alcohol (taste, effects, image)
- lack of meaningful activities

Although peer pressure is often viewed as the single most important factor, young people in this study felt it was important not to overplay this; for many the decision to drink is an active individual choice. On the role of parents, participants felt that strong parental disapproval would encourage drinking.

Young people's ideas for reducing alcohol misuse in Scotland

A range of ideas and potential solutions for reducing alcohol misuse was suggested. In developing workable and acceptable solutions, young people stressed the need to avoid separating alcohol-related behaviour from the wider context of their lives.

There was strong support for the provision of attractive, accessible and affordable alternatives to drinking, such as: leisure opportunities; drop ins;

drama groups; and alcohol free youth cafes.

In terms of health information about alcohol, the importance of high quality education was stressed. Many felt that young people are overloaded with information on alcohol and drugs, and consequently there is a need to improve the *quality* rather than the *quantity* of education. Any health education programmes were seen to require a range of methods appropriate to different groups of young people.

On laws, young people were divided about changes to current legislation. For instance, there were mixed views about whether the age limit should be decreased from 18 to 16. There was some support for stiffer penalties for those selling alcohol to underage young people.

Importantly, the ideas expressed were underpinned by ideas about greater involvement and participation in decision making on issues which affect their lives. For instance, participants considered there to be a clear role for their involvement in the design of health messages aimed at young people. In addition, they called for greater involvement in their communities generally, and more opportunities to influence decisions.

Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the consultation:

- The perception that the problems of alcohol misuse are mainly caused by young people should be challenged.
- Solutions for tackling alcohol misuse must be contextualised within the day-to-day reality of young people's lives, taking account of the diversity of their views, experiences, lifestyles and interests.
- Young people should be involved in the development and implementation of any solutions to address alcohol misuse.
- Young people demonstrate wide-ranging and insightful views when consulted on issues which affect their lives; these views are important to those developing policies.

This Research Finding was developed for the Plan for Action on alcohol problems (published January 2002) and published alongside the following Research Findings in the CRU Health and Community Care series:

No 10: Towards a Plan for Action on Alcohol Misuse: Responses to the Written Consultation, Reid Howie Associates, 2001

No 11: Towards a Plan for Action on Alcohol Misuse: Summary of Evidence, Reid Howie Associates, 2001

No 12: Attitudes Towards Alcohol: Views of Problem Drinkers, Alcohol Service Users and their Friends and Families, NFO System 3, 2001

No 13: Attitudes Towards Alcohol Misuse: Views of the General Public, NFO System 3, 2001

No 15: International Alcohol Policies: A Review of Selected Literature, Kate Sewel, 2002

Further research reports published in association with the Plan for Action may be found at:

<http://www.scotland.gov/health/alcoholproblems>

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