

THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN PREVENTING AND ADDRESSING UNDERAGE DRINKING



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SAM BEETHAM - ALCOHOL PROJECT ASSISTANT

“The role of parental approval and norms as an influence in adolescent drinking seems to be a significant factor” (Foley et al 2004)

Background:

One of the aims of the Alcohol Project is to establish a Lancashire countywide high profile campaign to raise awareness of the impact of alcohol upon the life chances of young people and of the resultant impacts upon local communities. Community interventions into problems of alcohol misuse have attracted a lot of interest as a more theoretically robust approach than individually orientated interventions (Gorman, 2001). Findings from a previous consultation exercise undertaken by the Alcohol Project (June 2004) with young people age 9-13 revealed that many of Lancashire's young people were accessing their alcohol through their parents and consuming it in the home environment. A key finding of this study was that the young people overwhelmingly stated that their parents would be their main source of advice or help concerning issues about alcohol. One of the studies recommendations was that there was a need to consult with parents in order to determine whether a social alcohol awareness campaign specifically targeted at parents/carers throughout Lancashire was required.

Introduction:

This study has been designed to:

- Consider the role of parents in relation to preventing and addressing the misuse of alcohol by young people.

- Raise awareness amongst parents of the potential impacts upon young people of underage drinking and to consider their own roles & influences with regard to this issue.

- Determine whether there is a need to develop a social alcohol awareness campaign targeted at parents/carers across Lancashire.

- If a campaign is necessary then identify particular messages and/or target groups by consultation, thus ensuring messages/information are relevant and impactful.

Methods:

A multi-method approach has been adopted for the purpose of this study. Questionnaires were distributed to parents of primary and secondary pupils who were accessed through either school events or through PSHE teachers. Consultation also took place in the form of a focus group with an established parenting group. Five semi-structured interviews were undertaken with parents from the Preston area.

The Sample

Data was analysed from a variety of sources, questionnaires, focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews. The sample represented parents of children of both primary and secondary ages and of both sexes. Eighty-seven parents were consulted in total. The fieldwork was completed across the following districts within Lancashire, Preston, West Lancashire, East Lancashire, South Ribble and Chorley. The majority of the respondents were female, only 18 males took part in the consultation, this had been anticipated prior to the study and it was felt that it would not have a detrimental effect upon the findings.

The vast majority of the parents in the sample drank alcohol, only a very small minority did not. 91% (79 out of the 87) respondents stated that they drank alcohol, only 8 of the parents consulted did not drink. The data from this sub group was analysed in detail to see if there was a significant difference in attitude towards educating their children about alcohol as compared to the drinking group. However there appeared to be no significant difference in the data as the responses to the questions tended to rely on parenting styles and age related attitudes rather than attitudes to alcohol.

Questionnaire sample:

There were 75 responses to the questionnaire (310 were distributed) a response rate of approximately 25%. The questionnaires were sent out via schools which had expressed an interest in getting involved in the study¹. Primary schools distributed sets of questionnaires to Year 6 pupils for them to take home to their parents. The secondary school sample was given out at a Year 8 parents evening. The sample consisted of 60 females and 14 males (1 did not identify gender). Parents ages ranged from 18 to 40. 48 of the parents who responded had children at primary school age (although many had children of varying ages). 27 of the parents who responded had children at secondary school level.

Focus Group sample:

The focus group consisted of 7 members, 6 females and 1 male with ages ranging from 20 to 40+. The members had children of varying ages and of both sexes. The group was an existing established parenting group in the Preston area who were willing to participate in the consultation process.

¹ Schools were contacted via Lancashire Schools Effectiveness Service

Interview sample:

5 interviews were undertaken the sample consisted of 2 females and 3 males of varying ages with children's ages ranging from 10 -16 and of both sexes. The recruitment criteria was essentially one of availability and access given the short timescale allowed for completing the interviews. The interviewees were all accessed in the Preston area.

Data Analysis

The data analysis has been conducted by following a number of stages as identified via a framework analysis approach. A rigorous and systematic reading and coding of the data allowed themes to emerge. Themes from the questionnaire and focus group were provisionally identified and this provided a more detailed focus for the semi-structured interviews. Tape recorded material from the interviews and focus group was transcribed although the interview transcriptions were not verbatim. All the data was organised and indexed, with any sensitive data being anonymised. Respondents were given an identifying letter and number. Provisional categories were developed and four themes were identified.

Theme One: 'Educator'

Theme Two: 'Role Model & Relationships'

Theme Three: 'Social Influences'

Theme Four: 'Environmental Impacts'

For the purposes of this study the 'Social Influences' theme has been defined as issues that impact closely upon the individual as a person. This includes factors such as peer pressure and cultural norms. The 'Environmental Impacts' theme has been defined as factors that have an influence upon society as a whole and have an indirect impact upon the individual, such as media influences, alcohol advertising and Government policies. As the categories developed it became obvious that they were interlinked, with each theme appearing to have a direct or indirect influence upon the others. Therefore some discussion of issues may occur under more than one heading.

THEME ONE:

ROLE OF EDUCATORS

"it's a parents responsibility to care for children and educate them" (P4)

A key theme that has emerged from the data is that parents have an important role as educators and information providers. However it is apparent from the study that many parents felt that they did not formally educate their child/children about alcohol. As such alcohol education appears to be on a rather ad hoc basis. The subject was addressed by adopting a range of strategies typically including; answering children's questions as and when they arose; allowing supervised drinking and emphasising negative consequences on occasion. Many parents felt that their children were sufficiently educated through a mix of informal observations, supervised drinking and information provided by a range of external sources such as schools.

"because as with all parenting issues, children are influenced by what they see hear & discuss at home" C3

"I am sure my older son discusses alcohol with friends but also formally during Social Education Classes" CL4

The role of educator / information giver was applied by all of the parents included in the sample, although there was a range of both formal and informal methods of implementing this role. Many parents claimed not to formally educate their children yet on reflection clearly set defined boundaries regarding the use of alcohol. However this did appear to differ depending on the age of the child. Fifty-five of the seventy-five parents who were consulted (via the questionnaire) said that their child/children had not asked for their advice regarding alcohol. These parents tended to have children who were under thirteen.

"no not asked for advice but we do talk about healthy eating and lifestyle" (CL2)

Some parents adopted the approach of dealing with issues as they arose naturally. All of the interviewees stated that they did not formally discuss alcohol as an issue in isolation but set it within the context of a range of other parenting issues such as drugs, sex and smoking.

"alcohol is part of young peoples lives they have so much to learn about, drink is one small part of it, it is no more important or less important, everything ties together it is all part of educating" (INT 1)

"I have not directly discussed alcohol as such, but the kids have been warned at parties to drink in moderation and have been warned of the consequences" (INT 3)

Some parents however actively approach the issue of alcohol with their children, adopting a proactive style of communication with their children, as shown in the quotes below.

"we talk about drugs, alcohol, tv programmes etc, with our children". (WL2)

"we talk openly about it, therefore they understand without needing to ask" (P2)

"we would volunteer the information and do" (P7)

There was throughout the sample a perception that alcohol need not be formally discussed with younger children. It was suggested that alcohol education messages only become relevant at secondary school age. It was clear from the data that the age of the child had an influence upon the parents view, parents adopted age related attitudes.

"you should start talking to kids when they are at secondary school. I do not see it as an issue at primary level" (INT 1)

"my children are too young to require any more guidance than I can give as and when the need arises which it has not" (W3)

This is also reflected in attitudes to supervised trials of drinking. Several of the parents who were interviewed had children with ages ranging from 10 -17. Parents allowed the children from thirteen upwards to sample alcoholic drinks whilst adopting the view that children who were aged 10 -13 were too young to experiment with alcohol. When parents of primary aged children were asked whether they would allow their child/children to drink alcohol on special occasions, the majority of the respondents said that they would not allow their children to drink. However when asked whether they thought introducing alcohol in the home supervised by parents was a sensible approach the majority agreed. Whilst in the secondary sample (27 of the 75) the majority of parents said that they did allow their children to drink on special occasions and that they felt it was a sensible approach to allow supervised drinking.

"can talk to them about what is reasonable by letting them try it - not making alcohol a big myth" (P15)

Many parents felt that supervised drinking was a way to educate their child / children in adopting sensible attitudes towards the use of alcohol. This method of educating about alcohol use has been identified as another key theme and will be discussed in greater depth when exploring the behaviour and attitudes of parents as 'role models'.

Many parents perceived a need for information about alcohol but some trusted their own judgement and experience in this area. The parents that were more

aware of information on alcohol and felt confident in their knowledge were ones who had some professional knowledge i.e. working within the health profession, social workers. Other parents acquired knowledge more informally through either personal experiences or experiences of others. When the sample was asked whether they thought they could provide adequate and relevant up to date information about alcohol, 30% (23 out of the 75) felt that they could. From discussions with the focus group it became apparent that parents own knowledge about alcohol was often lacking and inaccurate. To test this further, each interviewee was asked to complete a quiz based upon the Governments responsible drinking guidelines (see Appendix Five). None of the interviewees scored full marks, they struggled with the concept of units and some were not aware of the recommended daily guidelines for drinking alcohol. Parents were asked whether they felt that there was adequate alcohol information leaflets and resources available to them only seventeen out of the seventy-five (from the questionnaire) felt that there was. The majority of the respondents answered that they did not know whether there was information available to them.

Parents were asked where they felt that their child/children got their information about alcohol from. There were a range of answers to this question; parents, schools, advertising, the media and peers all feature highly. The majority of parents felt that advertising and the media was an influential provider of information to their children. School also features frequently in the role of providing formal education to children. The majority of parents felt that information regarding alcohol education should be accessed from education settings such as schools, parents evenings, health events, colleges. All interviewees held the opinion that schools should play an important role in educating children about alcohol. However it was also acknowledged that 'too much is put upon schools' and that perhaps education would be more effective in informal settings tackled in the wider community.

It is apparent from the findings that parents see their primary role as educators to their children. However in relation to alcohol and their children, alcohol did not appear to feature as a specific topic of concern. Many parents perceived that there was a specific problem in their local areas regarding underage drinking yet the majority felt that their own children were not interested in alcohol. Most parents accepted their role as educator whether they did this directly or indirectly. The general consensus was that alcohol education was best tackled around the ages of 13-14. Parents perceived their roles to be one of emotional support and guidance whilst the school's role was perceived as a formal factual information provider. Places such as health centres and doctors surgeries were seen as providing factual health information and statistics. The majority of parents in this sample weren't aware of resources, information or agencies that could support in relation to alcohol. Although parents 'educator' role in alcohol issues generally took the form of a wider parenting approach the majority of parents consulted felt that they would benefit from awareness raising information and resources.

"I think I would need additional resources, the reason I am saying that is I think perhaps I could do a pretty good job in my own mind but minds of children are completely different, they ask questions that you would never even have anticipated" Int 5

THEME TWO:

ROLE MODEL AND RELATIONSHIPS

The theme of 'role models' and parent / child relationships was identified as a significant finding of the research. This theme is very closely linked with that of the 'educator' as parents considered adult behaviour/attitudes, both positive and negative, as an indirect means of educating their children about alcohol. The majority of parents perceived alcohol as a part of growing up and one that they could relate to. This view strongly influences their attitudes towards the topic and in many ways results in a quite relaxed view of alcohol as compared to issues such as drugs, smoking and sex.

"me, myself I just tend to go on I hope you are not smoking, I never think of alcohol" F3

Several of the respondents reinforced messages to their children through discussing personal experiences within the family. Parents used examples of drink driving accidents, alcohol related health problems and members of families who had become addicted to alcohol as a means of reinforcing negative messages about the use of alcohol. The respondents were asked within the questionnaire whether they thought that their drinking habits or attitudes towards alcohol influence their child's view of alcohol. The majority of parents, 91% (68 out of 75), affirmed that they felt that their habits/attitudes influenced that of their child's whether this be positively or negatively. The parents who answered yes to this question were asked to explain why they thought so.

" if the child can observe parents drinking sensibly i.e. recommended units then they are more likely to drink sensibly later in life" P14

"I emphasise moderation and use moderation as a set example, I think that will teach them in the long term" C4

The majority of parents believed that their children would experience alcohol in a similar way to their own experiences and would eventually adopt a sensible approach similar to themselves. One of the interviewees mentioned her concerns around parents who have a problem with drink and therefore do not act as a good role model. Several parents felt that their own drinking behaviours were negligible assuming that they would have little effect upon their children, they therefore missed out on the opportunity to act as a positive role model and educator.

"I will only drink on a weekend after the children are in bed so they don't see it as part of life" N3

"I don't drink in front of the children" W10

Many parents acknowledge that alcohol is a big presence in their homes as it's an important aspect of socialising and family gatherings and they use this as a means of introducing their children to the social side of alcohol. When asked in the questionnaire whether parents would allow their children to drink on special occasions the results were as follows, 38 said Yes, 37 said No. Many of the parents felt that the decision to allow their child to drink was dependent upon the age of the child. A major topic of discussion throughout the consultation was whether the introduction of alcohol in the home supervised by parents would be a sensible approach to preventing alcohol misuse by young people. The majority of the questionnaire respondents, 81% (61 out of the 75) thought that introducing alcohol in the home was a sensible approach.

"I am aware of the amount, able to respond if there is a problem, he doesn't lie about drinking" N9

*"simply because it is supervised and can be discussed in the family setting"
(N12)*

This concept was explored further in the focus group session which allowed a more in depth discussion to take place. The group were in general agreement that supervised drinking was a good idea.

"Italy & France and places like that, wine is a every day thing in the family environment you have a drink with a meal and children are allowed to have a taste. I think in our country it is not controlled is it? So children will go out and drink a lot more and they will binge 'cos they have not been used to being able to control it." F6

However the group were aware that adopting a European attitude as described above was reliant upon good parenting skills and communication and a significant change in attitude. These issues of culture and environment will be discussed in more depth later.

"it all depends on what kind of relationship you have with your child you can sit them down and talk to them.....I think we live in a really material world, most parents work I think that children come a very sorry second a lot of the time, sometimes its easier just to give them money and say 'right here's a tenner go out and do whatever you want while the parents chill out. I think we have to take responsibility as parents" F6

This idea of parents taking responsibility and engaging as a positive role model was a strong theme throughout the interviews. One interviewee discussed how he adopted a very proactive role in educating his children informally through his own behaviours and attitudes. This parent continually discourages his children from drinking on the streets by reinforcing negative messages about alcohol and the consequences of misusing it. Although the parent does not actively encourage drinking he does not object to drinking under parental supervision. He adopts practical measures to encourage 'harm reduction'. He is aware that his son will drink so he encourages tactics such as 'not drinking in rounds', he

reduces the ability to do so by limiting his sons money and encouraging him to say no to his mates. These interventions have increased as the son has got older and the parent realises at some point he will have no control over his child but hopes that he has encouraged a sensible attitude towards drink by his actions.

"alcohol is put under your nose its acceptable in society, you cannot then turn round to a child and tell them not to drink, you are not going to win on that one, all you can do is educate them through it. It is a constant battle with teenagers you can control things to a certain point as you have been there before and know what is coming until they get to a certain point and then you lose control" Int 1

However there were some respondents who felt that this approach would not be appropriate as it would encourage young children to drink. It is interesting that very few parents comment upon the health risks, whether they are for or against children consuming alcohol. When parents were asked whether they had ever bought alcohol specifically for their child's consumption 91% (68 out of 75) of parents said that they had not purchased alcohol for their child.

"could get a taste for it at an early age , parents don't always supervise children, encourages easy access to alcohol kept at home" C6

"Children shouldn't be encouraged to drink alcohol at any purpose until the age of 18" N4

"If alcohol is accepted as normal in the home then they think it is ok outside and then misuse it" N6

When asked what they thought influences underage drinking, parents identified a range of influences on the drinking behaviours of young people. The adult / parental influence as a role models was only cited 19 times. This information appears to contradict the data collected when parents were asked whether they

believed that their habits and attitudes towards alcohol have an influence. Parents overwhelmingly agreed that they did have an influence. Although some parents were aware of their influence but readily acknowledged that there were also competing influences upon their children.

"I am not really sure I suppose it must, I don't feel that I have total influence, there are too many other factors" P2

It is clear from the findings that parents readily acknowledge that they have a significant role in attempting to model their child's behaviour and attitudes. Informing about alcohol is just one small part of the parental role. The parents involved in this consultation adopt a variety of strategies both consciously and subconsciously which conveys their attitudes towards alcohol to their children. However this parental behaviour has ultimately been shaped by both social and environmental factors which will be examined further in the next two themes.

THEME THREE:

SOCIAL INFLUENCES

Parents in the sample clearly saw alcohol as a routine part of their life and were aware that this would eventually become part of their child's life. Exposure to alcohol was seen as a normal part of growing up. A range of influences, as mentioned previously, on the drinking behaviours of young people were identified by parents.

"peer pressure, trying to impress others, status symbol, because they generally enjoy socialising" P1

When interviewees were asked to identify why they thought young people drank alcohol numerous reasons were acknowledged. Four out of the five parents admitted to drinking underage and viewed this experience as a 'rite of passage' and one which they assumed their children would undertake. Although a strong theme recurrent in the consultation was that culture has changed and it is far more acceptable to drink at a younger age.

"I think underage drinking is a problem everywhere! Age at which drinking starts is getting lower" C2

"it is a huge and growing problem in the adult community which society is attempting to 'respectabilise' in contrast to smoking" W1

"the culture now is going out to get leathered, alcohol is so much in your face now. Licensing laws were a lot stricter in the 70's, we didn't seem to have the level of alcohol related violence we have today. Kids are educated into drinking stronger drinks these days, trendy drinks" Int 1.

Parents were asked whether they thought underage drinking was a serious problem in their community. There was a common perception that it was, evidence of this was that teenagers were generally seen as congregating around shops and parks with bottles of alcohol. Many parents believed that young people drank because they were bored and there was a lack of leisure facilities.

"I think there are a lack of facilities.....we seem to have gone backwards, we are not catering for these kids, we know we have a problem and we are expecting parents to just deal with it." Int 4

Parents also thought availability was a big issue. They felt that alcohol was too easy to get hold of, many blaming local retailers for selling alcohol and also the government for relaxing licensing laws which they felt encouraged the drinking culture. Parents were aware that alcohol is increasingly presented as an integral part of society.

"alcohol is often presented as the cure all, have a drink and things will feel better. I think the drink drive message is getting through we now need to address underage drinking with the same conviction and level of resources" C5

Some parents felt that underage drinking was a reflection of adult drinking behaviours. Many felt that adults themselves need re-educating in their own behaviours and attitudes towards alcohol. There was an assumption that society needs to address the 'yob culture' prevalent in this country and define acceptable behaviour by setting limits and examples and stop using alcohol as an excuse for bad behaviour.

"parents do need re-educating they need to learn it is not acceptable to wander down the street with a pint glass. There needs to be limits on acceptable behaviour, footballers etc, kids copy role models, they need good role models. Kids need to respect their community and other people and if adults are not

doing and showing this how can we expect kids to. You need to educate kids through adults, parents need to take some responsibility for what happens and at the moment very few adults take responsibility" Int 1

A significant number of parents highlighted British drinking culture and drew comparisons with other European countries. Parents believed that responsible drinking is taught at a very early age in countries such as France and Italy and felt that it was a good example to follow. Many parents commented on the fact that British teenagers are seen as some of the worst binge drinkers in Europe.

"children in France drink wine with meals, this is perfectly acceptable, alcohol is taboo in the UK, hence children want to try it" W2

"removal of the forbidden fruit attraction, in controlled surroundings, other countries do so and have less problems" W4

Parents felt the wider community presents an array of mixed messages about alcohol to young people such as the aggressive marketing of drinks specifically targeted at young people and the 'glamorising' of alcohol. It was also apparent that some of the parental views regarding alcohol, which have ultimately been influenced by societal views, also presented conflicting messages. Although most parents felt that alcohol was an integral part of our society and on the whole had a relaxed attitude some parents appeared to reinforce a 'taboo mentality'. Some parents admitted to hiding their drinking from their children and only negative messages about alcohol were given to their children. Some parents believed that alcohol should not be allowed until a child reaches the legal age limit of 18. All of the parents when asked in the interviews believed that 18 was a good age and did not agree with altering the age limit lower or higher. Most parents seemed to hold a more balanced view of alcohol.

"alcohol is all around us we can't hide it we should explain what it is, what it does, why people drink and what is reasonable. De-mystify it don't hide it" CL16

"seeing alcohol as part of a balanced lifestyle removes the mystique/romance of alcohol" CL43

Parents were very aware of the role that societal influences play, not just upon their children but upon themselves. Parents believed that peer pressure (see Table 1) plays an important part in shaping their child's attitudes towards drinking. They believed that their children's behaviour would be influenced by peers and that they would get most of their information regarding alcohol from their friends. Parents were aware that young people were very susceptible to influences such as advertising and the general 'fun' culture of alcohol portrayed in the media.

Table1. WHAT DO YOU THINK INFLUENCES UNDERAGE DRINKING?

Peer Pressure	56
Marketing / Advertising/Media / TV, film, sport	23
Adult /parental examples, role models / poor parenting	19
Lack of social facilities, boredom	13
Availability	10
Desire to impress, achieve 'adult status'	9
Societal influences, normalisation of alcohol, part of culture	7
Pressures of expectations on young people, insecurities, stress, exams lack of confidence	5

There was a general acceptance that every adult member of society has a part to play in tackling the general culture of alcohol misuse.

"society should tackle the issues, as no man is an island" W1

THEME FOUR:

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

"commercial pressure and big business, profit margins are what dictate alcohol advertising and therefore societies acceptance of the problem. Governments milk a great deal of revenue from tax on alcohol" CL15

A dominant theme identified in the data was that of environmental influences upon underage drinking. Parents felt very strongly that young people were subject to intense pressure from both advertising and the media and felt that they actively encourage young people to drink. Many parents believe that alcohol advertising should be banned completely.

"stop selling alcopops, stop advertising alcohol all over the place, we don't need to know its there we already buy it" Int 4

Parents felt that the media's portrayal of alcohol was very limited. Alcohol is ultimately viewed as being glamorous and fun and the negative effects are seldom portrayed. There was a consensus that the media, suppliers and the alcohol industry need to take more responsibility regarding promoting alcohol to young people. Parents believed that young people are specifically targeted through certain brands of drinks such as alcopops. Alcopops were specifically referred to as a serious cause for concern for parents.

"fruit based vodka laced alcopops, sold cheaply and the cool image and slick marketing that goes with it are to blame..." P6

"I would strongly discourage alcopops because these drinks taste like pop, alcopops disguise the alcoholic content" CL4

Parents stated that they felt their children got a lot of their information and views about alcohol from the media, tv programmes, advertising and magazines. Therefore they felt there was a need to educate children to understand how advertising is used by companies to influence young peoples spending habits and attitudes.

"advertising has the biggest subliminal influence on young people" CL3

Parents had very strong views regarding the role that the media undertakes in educating their children. They felt that the media should portray a more balanced view and show the downsides of excessive alcohol consumption. The majority of parents felt that a national television media campaign was the best method of raising awareness about the dangers of alcohol. Numerous parents referred to the hard hitting smoking adverts which are currently being undertaken to encourage people to give up smoking and felt that similar ones should be produced about alcohol.

"I think that there is not many say like smoking, it is on the telly everyday about stopping smoking. There is that advert where the man is dying of lung cancer and all the rest. Drink is more harmful to you than heroin and all the rest there is no adverts to say how harmful alcohol is. You need adverts on telly." F6

Parents also frequently mentioned the issues of alcohol in relation to television programmes particularly popular television soaps such as Eastenders and Coronation Street. They felt that these dramas were based around pubs and that children would feel it was normal to live your life around a pub environment. Although some parents felt that this would not have a significant influence upon their children.

"in most soaps all the actors spend every night in the pub and every dinnertime, nobody is ever seen drinking soft drinks or coffee always alcohol" N9

Another concern was that of sports sponsorship and sporting events. Parents felt that their children's idols such as Wayne Rooney wear football shirts with sponsors often from the drinks industry. Many parents felt that sporting events should be encouraged to adopt 'sensible' sponsor advertising.

"sports and sports people are people children copy" P5

Availability of alcohol, drinks promotions and relaxed licensing laws introduced recently by the Government are also concerns for most of the parents consulted. The majority of parents identified the Government as having one of the key roles in tackling the problem of underage drinking. Parents felt that the Government benefited from the advertising and sale of alcohol but did not use the revenue to help tackle the problem.

"the Government get lots of money from the sale of alcohol so I think they should do more. I think the money they get from alcohol should be pumped back into research and why children are drinking alcohol" F4

Summary

A small number of the sample did not drink alcohol (8 of the 87 parents consulted), the data from this sub group was analysed in detail to see if there was a significant difference in attitude towards educating their children about alcohol as compared to the drinking group. However there appeared to be no significant difference in the data as the responses to the questions tended to rely on parenting styles and the age of the child rather than attitudes to alcohol. As is evident from the findings parents feel that they have the major responsibility for educating their child about alcohol. However they are aware of a range of social and environmental factors that impact upon their child's decision to drink alcohol. As discussed earlier each of the four themes are interlinked, parental views and attitudes are ultimately derived from social norms and views which are in turn influenced by environmental factors. The findings show that in order to tackle under age drinking as an issue a holistic approach needs to be adopted which encompasses all factors identified. Parents need to be informed of how these issues are being tackled.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

It was evident from the study that parents saw their primary role as educators to their children whether they undertook this formally or informally. The sample reflected that parents own knowledge about alcohol often appeared to be lacking and inaccurate, particularly in regard to the concept of units and recommended daily drinking guidelines. Despite sources of information, consumers are generally not well enough equipped to make informed choices about their drinking behaviour. Recognition of the Government's 'sensible drinking' message is relatively high, with 80% of drinkers having heard of units. But this has little impact on behaviour as only 10% of drinkers check their consumption in units and just 25% know what a 'unit' is (National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy 2004). Only a third of the sample in this study felt they could provide adequate and relevant information on alcohol. Only seventeen parents (from the 75 questionnaires) felt there were adequate information leaflets and resources available to them. The rest of the respondents stated that they did not know whether there was information available to them. This would seem to suggest that there is a need to make parents aware of existing materials, resources and support agencies.

Recent research by the charity Action on Addiction (BBC news online) found that two-fifths of parents leave the job of educating their children about drugs and alcohol to schools and the police. It was reported that one in four teenagers felt that their parents were ill informed on these issues. Cohen and Linton (1995) found that parents lack both basic knowledge about drugs, including alcohol, and confidence about their knowledge which may inhibit their ability to communicate clearly. Previous consultation undertaken by the Alcohol Project in Lancashire illustrated that 65% of the young people consulted, between the ages of 9-13, would go to their parents for advice about alcohol and 55 % of the young people stated that they drank at home with their parents approval. The

findings from this parental study present an opportunity to improve parental knowledge, confidence and communication skills around the issues of alcohol.

It is important for parents to believe that they have a significant influence upon their children's behaviour and attitudes and as such should be a positive role model. A report from researchers at Columbia University published in *Adolescent and Family Life* (2004) found that young people select friends who share their attitudes about drinking and that these attitudes have been shaped by observing their parents. They concluded that the peer group largely reinforces what young people have already learned from their parents. UK surveys have shown that up to 90% of parents believe that young peoples drug use derives from the need to conform with their peer group (Evans et al 1997). Parents in the sample identified peer pressure as the biggest influence in underage drinking. However too great an emphasis on peer pressure, may lead parents to underestimate their own influence on children which though it varies at different ages has been shown to affect young peoples long term behaviour (Oygard et al 1998).

It was evident from my sample that parents perceived their roles to be largely one of emotional support and guidance. Knowledge of alcohol was often derived from personal experiences and situations. However this has a downside as certain parenting styles and attitudes may not result in a neutral portrayal of facts. Parent's behaviour and attitudes can portray a negative influence as well as a positive influence. How alcohol is used is the important issue, alcohol itself should be seen as a neutral substance neither good nor bad. It is the individual's relationship with alcohol that needs to be sensibly addressed. Some parents in my sample felt that underage drinking was a reflection of adult drinking behaviours. They felt that adults themselves need re-educating in their own behaviours and attitudes towards alcohol. It is reported that 8.2 million people in Britain approximately 25%, exceed the recommended weekly/daily safer drinking guidance (Alcohol Harm Reduction strategy for England 2004).

The dominant paradigm in Britain is that adolescent drinking is essentially normal behaviour, being part of a process of socialisation and a behaviour which reflects adult norms and drinking practices within a wider cultural setting (Wright 1999). Drinking is seen as a regular and normal practice situated in the context of everyday life rather than just being occasional. The findings from European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs (2004) seem to suggest that countries in which teenagers drink less and with fewer problems are those in which parents teach their children to drink from an early age and within the context of a controlled home environment.

Foley et al (2004) reported that the most consistent antecedent risk factors for adolescents starting to drink were parental and peer approval. Drinking with parents appeared to have a 'protective effect' on general drinking trends, with the family environment providing an important setting for encouraging sensible drinking. The parents consulted in my study appeared to reflect this view. The majority of the sample drank alcohol, 91% (79 out of 87) and 70% (61 out of 87) of the parents felt that introducing their child/children to alcohol within the home was a sensible approach. Recent figures published by the Government (Expenditure and Food Survey 2003-04) suggest that there has been a significant increase in the amount of adults consuming alcohol at home. The purchase of alcoholic drinks by UK households has risen 10% in a year and the average quantity of alcoholic drinks consumed per person over 13 years old is 0.97 litres a week. This would seem to indicate that there is an increased need to ensure that parents are aware of their responsibility as a role model.

"the first step for parents is to educate themselves, the second is to review their own behaviour and attitudes towards drink and drugs in the home and set an example". (Lifeworks Clinical Director 2005)

INFORMING AND EDUCATING PARENTS

KEY CHALLENGES

The analysis of the parental data would seem to suggest that there is a need to provide awareness raising and educational resources for both parents and their children. Parents need to be made aware of the importance of their role and how this can practically and effectively be utilised to reduce the harm associated with alcohol misuse. It therefore seems appropriate to consider the role of alcohol within adult society in order to engage and target parents in educational and social awareness interventions. This would raise awareness amongst parents of the role they play in terms of 'role models' and influences in shaping young peoples behaviour and perceptions of alcohol. Findings from this study will be used as a basis for developing targeted awareness raising campaigns with the purpose of attempting to begin to modify social norms. The origins of British drinking culture have long been debated, according to the Institute for Alcohol Studies a 'culture of intoxication' has developed over the past decade. It is societies informal sanctioning of public drunkenness that now needs to be addressed. This presents a major long-term challenge for British society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Currently there are numerous support leaflets, resources, websites and support agencies dedicated to providing help and guidance relating to alcohol misuse. The Portman Group Trust² have recently published an excellent leaflet 'A Guide for Parents - Lets talk about Drinking' which incorporates many of the issues identified by parents within this study. It is clear from the studies findings that many parents are not aware of resources or where they can receive support

² Portman Group represents the Alcohol Industry. It is a principal provider of responsible drinking advice in the UK and support the government, media, industry and consumers with research, educational materials and campaigns.

from. It would seem appropriate to raise awareness of good existing resources rather than duplicating these resources.

In order to address this issue it would seem sensible to undertake a mapping exercise to identify what information provision is currently available for parents and children. Any gaps identified in information provision can then be addressed by the Alcohol Project. This study identified that parents felt that there were inadequate resources available to them. With reference to this the Alcohol Project can commission a campaign using these findings as a context for developing a social awareness campaign targeted at children and parents in both school and community settings.

INFORMATION NEEDS

It was clear from this research that it would be beneficial for parents to have access to a range of information. Any information designed should be user friendly, allowing both parents and young people to use it. It should be 'easy reading', well presented and laid out in a manner in which you could zone in upon specific information. Most importantly the information should be age specific, starting from as young as 5 years old. This information should include the following:

- Awareness raising literature needs to make explicit the link between young people's drinking and its potential impact on society; health, anti-social behaviour, school performance and teenage pregnancy. It is also essential that parents receive advice on how to discuss alcohol use with young people and how to access appropriate support agencies. Parents need to be aware of the risky situations that can occur for their child/ children through not drinking sensibly. This would allow parents to discuss alcohol in the context of other parenting issues, as

identified by the parents in the consultation.

- Practical help for parents regarding issues such as:
 - How to address issues of alcohol with young people.
 - Practical measures on how to deal with physical symptoms of excessive alcohol consumption such as suspected alcohol poisoning.
 - Directory of support agencies with local and national help line contact numbers
 - Guidelines as to strengths of drinks and units of alcohol, with particular reference to drinks such as alcopops, and recommended daily guidelines, noting that there are no recommended safe guidelines for children.

- Information with regard to laws concerning alcohol for example:
 - New police powers to confiscate alcohol , fixed penalty notices, dispersal orders, the new licensing legislation.
 - Fines for adults purchasing alcohol for underage children.

The dissemination of information needs to be linked through both primary and secondary schools across Lancashire. Links should also be made with key agencies such as Youth and Community, Youth Offending Team and Drug Action Team and voluntary agencies such as Drugline. It would also be beneficial to feed into established parenting programmes such as Surestart. Information should also be disseminated via easily accessible community settings such as libraries, health centres and workplace environments. This would ensure maximum coverage to the parents of Lancashire.

AWARENESS RAISING

There is a need to provide reassurance to the local community of positive activities and responses to issues of concern that parents have raised in this study including the availability and ease of access to alcohol for young people. Information should be disseminated regarding the Governments' national strategy which focuses upon issues such as advertising, in order to keep parents informed of current activity. Information should be provided regarding what is happening across Lancashire in relation to tackling issues of alcohol misuse including for example Community Safety Strategy district objectives. Information on local initiatives and campaigns, should be disseminated to the community via a range of mediums such as internet, newsletter and radio campaigns.

NORMATIVE EDUCATING

Parents should be encouraged to actively discuss alcohol with their children from an early age in order to begin to inform their attitudes and behaviours towards alcohol prior to the age of experimentation. The study showed that there is a need to encourage those adults who drink to examine their own alcohol use and ways they themselves could adapt their behaviour and attitudes within a more preventative context. This would allow parents to adopt appropriate informed strategies for preparing their children to live in an alcohol drinking society, whether they choose to drink 'sensibly' or abstain from alcohol. There is currently much debate surrounding the issue of British drinking culture with particular reference to binge drinking and the relaxing of licensing laws. The Government is currently developing an advertising campaign which is due to be screened around Christmas time to coincide with the new liberalised licensing laws. Formulation of these strategies can then complement wider initiatives. For example, the campaign will attempt to portray public drunkenness as 'socially

unacceptable' aiming to educate the adult population into drinking sensibly. This in turn should help enable parents to begin to sensibly guide their children.

KEY MESSAGES

Approximately 97% of parents consulted in this study felt that a national media campaign should be developed in order to raise awareness about alcohol and its harms. It would be beneficial to the community if a local media campaign broadcast key messages in relation to the parental role in influencing underage drinking issues. It would seem advantageous for a local campaign to be scheduled to coincide with the Government's national campaign. This would ensure maximum coverage, a consistent approach and the reinforcement of identified key messages. A series of impactful key messages need to be developed incorporating the following aspects:

- How to be a good role model portraying an attitude of sensible drinking for example along the lines of '**Is your drinking affecting their thinking**'³ These messages should
 - Reinforce how important the parental role is in preventing and influencing their children's attitudes to underage harmful drinking.
 - Provide advice / support surrounding the issues of supervised drinking adopting a balanced approach.

- Messages to counteract the media's glamorous image of alcohol and its role in society.

³ *An alcohol awareness campaign developed in Northern Ireland 2004*

- Addressing individuals and societies relationship with alcohol in order to begin to modify social norms and thus affect the behaviour of individuals and society.

THE WAY FORWARD

A combination of 'social prevention initiatives' and awareness raising would appear to offer the most constructive way forward for Lancashire. This means that it is not just parents who must accept responsibility regarding their own attitudes to alcohol and their drinking behaviours. The Government, the alcohol industry, media and local communities must all play a participative role in addressing the issues of underage drinking. A holistic approach needs to be adopted, specific targeted initiatives need to complement and sustain activity in this area both at local community and national levels.

The principle task of this investigation was to identify how parents in Lancashire perceive their role and influence in relation to preventing and addressing the misuse of alcohol by young people, specifically looking at the extent to which the role of parents can positively contribute within a preventative context. It aimed to determine how best to enable and inform parents of the issues relating to underage drinking and for parents to recognise their importance as role models. The outcome of this research was to identify, through consultation, relevant and impactful key messages and understand the requirement for information and support materials for parents.

The data obtained provided confirmation that the parents consulted with all had their own distinct views, behaviours and attitudes in relation to alcohol, whether they approached the subject from a positive or negative standpoint. The research findings indicate that in order to maximise receptiveness of future interventions, a campaign of wider public education and alcohol awareness

regarding alcohol consumption and the potential consequences for both adults and young people needs to be undertaken. Young people are essentially participating in a culture in Britain where 90% of the adult population consume alcohol. The drinking of alcohol is socially structured, culturally defined and environmentally influenced by society itself. It will therefore be a major long-term challenge to address societal norms around alcohol and have an impact upon individuals attitudes and behaviour.

LIMITATIONS

It has been acknowledged that multi-media campaigns may not result in direct changes in drinking behaviour but research has shown that they can be effective. It is also difficult to assess the impact that these campaigns have and to document their effectiveness. However to achieve the necessary cultural change and changes in behaviour a sustained long term normative education campaign needs to take place. This study has achieved its aims having identified and quantified a need for a social awareness raising campaign. It presents an opportunity to begin to address alcohol issues within Lancashire, raising awareness of parent's responsibilities as positive role models. This study should be viewed as a starting point, in the formulation of a strategy to complement other ongoing local initiatives.

EVALUATION:

Short-term

- Evaluation will be undertaken by a quantitative analysis of demand for information, monitoring the uptake and dissemination of the resources produced.

- An evaluation form should be made available for both parents and agencies to provide them with an opportunity to feedback on the resources. This would allow the Alcohol Project to effectively evaluate the contents of the resource. The evaluation form could be divided into 3 sections to evaluate the impact upon parental knowledge, confidence to relate to their children and impact upon parents behaviour.

- The process of disseminating information should also be evaluated i.e. settings, where and how the information is accessed. If information is to be supplied via website access, hits to the site should be monitored.

Long-term:

It will be very difficult for the Project to successfully determine whether the parents' resources have had a significant impact, long term upon the drinking behaviours and attitudes of young people. However the Alcohol Project is set to undertake a two-year longitudinal study looking into the drinking behaviours of school years 7 and 9 in several schools across Lancashire. It may therefore be possible when analysing this data in two years time to see if there has been any significant changes in young peoples drinking behaviours.

The Alcohol Project could also aim to get Alcohol Awareness sessions or resources incorporated into local parenting programs, which could then be further evaluated.

The key focus of this research was the parental role in preventing underage drinking, however the study identified particular areas of work which need to be addressed in the future. The next stage is to look at ways awareness campaigns can complement community interventions raising awareness of alcohol related harms across the board, for example young people, retailers and the media.

AREAS FOR FUTURE WORK

- The study failed to identify issues surrounding ethnicity and underage drinking and the parental role. Research into young peoples drinking has paid little attention to the role of ethnicity (Wright 1999). Even when studies have included a focus on ethnicity, fairly crude classifications have been used which do not reflect the importance of ethnic and cultural diversity. Some important ethnic differences in drinking have been reported. Previous consultation carried out across Lancashire by the Alcohol Project reveals that 8% of young people from Asian backgrounds between the ages of 9 and 13 drink alcohol. A crucial barrier to supporting these young people is the fact that alcohol misuse is not an issue that is widely discussed in Asian communities. Specific research into the drinking habits of young people from ethnic minority backgrounds needs to be undertaken within Lancashire.

- There has also been an acknowledged increase in drinking by young females, consumption is rising in women across all age groups, 21% of female single persons drink in excess of sensible limits (Society for the Study of Addiction 2005). The study did not particularly investigate the issue of whether parent's attitudes differed between male and female children. It would be interesting to see if there were particular gender implications in strategies to address underage drinking. An area for further research would be to focus upon investigating attitudes of young

females and their parents with regard to developing targeted alcohol harm reduction strategies specifically for young females.

- The Governments Blueprint Initiative is a normative education approach. It has been developed to examine the effectiveness of a multi-component approach to drug education, involving parents, community and the media. However this approach is specifically targeted at 11 and 13 year olds. The potential importance of school-based education approaches particularly in primary schools also needs to be recognised. Alcohol information needs to be incorporated into a 'healthy lifestyles' approach. This needs to be reinforced at primary level even as early as 5 years old. Any school based approaches should complement the parents role.

Appendix One - Parent Questionnaire

ALCOHOL AWARENESS CAMPAIGN - PARENT CONSULTATION

How old is your child/children? Are they? Male Female

Has your child / children ever asked for your advice regarding alcohol?

Yes No

*If you answered **Yes**, did you feel that you were able to provide adequate and relevant up to date information about the use of alcohol to your child?*

Yes No

If you answered **No**, where do you think they get their information about alcohol from?

Do you think there are adequate information leaflets and resources available for you as a parent/carer to enable you to discuss sensible drinking of alcohol and other related issues with your child/children?

Yes No Don't know

If you answered **Yes**, what information have you accessed and where from?

If you answered **No**, what information / resources do you think would assist you in discussing sensible drinking with your child /children?

Where would you like to access this information from ? eg, health settings, schools, etc

If your child was experiencing problems with alcohol, would you know where to go for help?

Yes No

If **Yes** where?

In reference to alcohol awareness messages, which of these mediums would be effective in targeting parents?

Television Radio Posters Leaflets

Letters from school Internet web page Other

Do you think underage drinking is a serious problem in your community?

Yes No Don't know

If **Yes** give reasons **why**

What do you think influences underage drinking?

Do you think the community sends mixed messages to young people about underage drinking for example, sport alcohol advertising, tv programmes etc.

What do you think can be done about this?

If Yes Why do you think this happens?

Who do you think is most responsible for solving the underage drinking problem?

Do you think your child / children drinks alcohol or has tried alcohol at some time?

Yes No Don't know

Do you allow your child / children to drink alcohol in your home, at family celebrations, Christmas etc?

Yes No

Do you think introducing alcohol in the home supervised by parents is a sensible approach to prevent alcohol misuse by young people?

Yes No

If yes Why?

If no Why?

Would you allow your child/children to drink some alcoholic drinks rather than others

eg. Beer, Cider, Wine, Alcopops? Yes No

Describe which ones and reasons why

Have you ever purchased alcohol specifically for your child's consumption?

Yes No

Do you drink alcohol yourself?

Yes No

Do you think that your drinking habits or attitudes towards alcohol influence your child's perception of alcohol? Yes No

If yes **WHY?**

If No **WHY?**

Are you? Male Female

Age 18-30 31-40 40+

Appendix Two - Focus Group Schedule

Focus Group

- Introduction
- Overview of Project
- Explanation of aims of Focus Group (refer to consultation exercise)

Aim:

To explore the role that parent's play in influencing young people attitudes and behaviour in regard to alcohol and to identify gaps in resources for parents.

Objectives:

By the end of the session project staff will be able to:

- List gaps in information materials aimed at parents.
- Identify key alcohol awareness messages and the most appropriate mediums through which to disseminate them.
- Analyse discussion to identify the role that parents play in shaping young people's attitudes and behaviour.

Focus Group Questions

Perceptions

1. Do you think that underage drinking is a serious problem in your community?

Give reasons?

2. Do you think that all young people engage in underage drinking or is it just a few?

Is underage drinking just a common right of passage?

3. Which factors influence underage drinking?

Parents/society/peers

4. Does the community send mixed messages to young people about underage drinking?

Is there too much alcohol advertising?

Do adults condone underage drinking?

What do you think of the new 24 hour licensing laws?

Do you think we should raise the legal age limit for consuming alcohol to 21 (USA) ?

5. UK teenagers have one of the highest rates of binge drinking when compared to other European countries, what do you think the reason for this is?

Culture /parental attitudes

Parent's Attitudes

6.How would you introduce alcohol to your children?

7.What rules do you enforce/try to enforce on your children's drinking behaviour?

8. How do you (try to) monitor and control your children's drinking?

9. What do you perceive as acceptable or unacceptable drinking?

10. Do you think that your drinking patterns and attitude towards alcohol influences your child's behaviour and attitude?

The Way Forward

10. How do you think that we can begin to tackle the problem of underage drinking?

Education in schools/ stricter enforcement?

11. What role / influence do you think you as a parent have in addressing the issue of underage drinking?

Do you feel you have enough support and are confident in talking to your children about alcohol?

Are you aware that in a recent survey across Lancashire most young people said they would approach their parents for advice about alcohol

13. Who else is responsible for tackling these issues?

Schools/police/Government

14. If you felt your child was developing problems with alcohol, where would you go for help

15. What resources / information do you think would be useful in helping you to talk to your children about these issues?

Posters

Leaflets

Letters home from school

Media Campaign

Internet

Local radio

TV

16. Any other issue/comments/questions

Appendix Three - Parent Schedule

"The Role of Parents in Preventing and Addressing Underage Drinking"

Introduction and Aims of the Study

Research Aims

- 1 To consider the role of parents in relation to preventing and addressing the misuse of alcohol by young people.
- 2 To determine whether there is a need to develop a local social alcohol awareness campaign targeted at parents/carers across Lancashire.

Research & Alcohol Project Objectives

- 1 To raise awareness amongst parents of the potential impacts upon young people of underage drinking and to consider their own roles and influences with regard to this issue.*
- 2 To identify particular messages and/or target groups by consultation, thus ensuring any messages/themes are relevant and impactful. Findings from this study will assist in the development of a social alcohol awareness strategy across Lancashire. Any personal data will be anonymised. Some of the data it will be incorporated into an M.A. project and a report for the Alcohol Project Steering group.

Semi-structured interview schedule 30-45 minutes

Topic Guide - for interviews 4 main themes

Four main themes for discussion have been identified as central to the study. The interview will cover these issues in more depth than is possible within the questionnaire. It is beyond the remit of this study to focus upon parent's personal drinking habits, the researcher is only interested in a more general overview of the parental role and influence of parents in relation to issues of underage drinking.

Question One:

How do parents define their roles in relation to underage drinking?

Question Two:

Can parents prevent underage drinking?

Question Three:

How can the parental role be used to address issues of underage drinking?

Question Four:

Informing and Educating Parents - What are the Key Challenges?