

ALCOHOL and SCHOOLS: the harm

Children's future drinking behaviour can be influenced by seeing adults drink alcohol in the school setting.

From a very young age children are able to identify how adults behave when they drink. In particular, what they see happening in a social context influences not only what they anticipate the effects of drinking alcohol might be, but also what is considered to be normal behaviour in their community.

Children who anticipate there are positive effects associated with drinking alcohol, will start drinking both at an earlier age and more intensively. In addition, early exposure to alcohol increases their risk of later alcohol abuse and dependence.

Direct harm to children can also result from schools supplying alcohol and includes:

- hazardous drinking behaviour shown by parents and guests;
- any disruption of children's activities and events because of this behaviour;
- physical assaults; and
- embarrassment or shame felt by children as a result of the way their parents behave.

Young people are particularly at risk of alcohol-related harm and almost a quarter of New Zealand secondary-school students have reported recent binge drinking behaviour.

There is evidence that alcohol intake in adolescence adversely affects their:

- physical development;
- psychological wellbeing;
- relationships with others and academic achievement; and
- it places them at risk of being involved in any one of a number of adverse consequences and injuries associated with acute alcohol intoxication.

Treatment options are available for young people with harmful drinking behaviours, but prevention remains an important intervention.

Recommendations

It is for these reasons that national guidelines on alcohol consumption in both Australia and the United Kingdom recommend that people under the age of 18 should delay alcohol initiation as long as possible, and those under the age of 15 should not consume any alcohol at all.

It is therefore recommended that schools develop policies to prohibit the use of alcohol at events where children are present, and prohibit the use of alcohol products in fundraising initiatives that involve children.