

ask the children



nsw commission for
children & young people

Young people talk alcohol

In the lead-up to the 2003 NSW Summit on Alcohol Abuse, the Commission for Children and Young People spoke with nearly 150 young people about their experiences with alcohol and sought their ideas on reducing alcohol-related harm to young people.

WHERE DID THE YOUNG PEOPLE COME FROM?

We spoke with young people aged 13-20 years from secondary schools, non-government youth services, student representative councils and local government youth councils.

We also held focus groups with young people who had:

- difficult personal experiences with alcohol and were in rehabilitation;
- out-of-home care experiences;
- been in juvenile detention centres; or
- alcoholic parents.

The young people involved in the interviews and focus groups came from metropolitan, regional and rural NSW.

WHAT KIDS KNOW ABOUT ALCOHOL

Overwhelmingly, children and young people told us they learn about alcohol from personal experiences and by witnessing the effects of alcohol on their friends, family and people around them. They said these experiences can be both positive and negative.

The young people we spoke with had a clear understanding about the physical, mental and social impact that alcohol can have on their lives. They told us:

"It damages the way you think and slows down your mind"

"It makes you lose your inhibitions"

"It's addictive"

"It's a depressant"

"People get violent when they're drunk"

"It makes you do stupid things that you regret"

They also told us that they learnt about alcohol through the school curriculum, movies and the media.

However, some young people feel they do not know enough about alcohol-related harm. They also feel they don't have adequate access to help and information about how to deal with the negative impact that alcohol can have on their lives and the lives of those close to them.

As a 17 year old girl whose father is an alcoholic told us, *"I saw the effects of alcohol through my dad and sometimes mum. I don't need any more information about alcohol, I need information and support about how to deal with the effects of alcohol"*.

WHY DO KIDS DRINK?

From our discussions with young people, it's clear that young people drink for a range of reasons.

For example, young people in drug and alcohol rehabilitation centres told us that some young people drink 'to rebel', because they are 'stressed' or because a member of their family has a problem with alcohol.

As one young person said, *"I drink because my mum has problems with alcohol"*.

Some young people told us that they drank simply 'to get drunk' or because 'sometimes there's nothing else to do' and they 'think it will wash their problems away'. Others said they drank because they 'thought it was cool' and wanted to 'impress friends and fit in'.

There was a general perception amongst the young people we spoke with that drinking alcohol was a 'part of our culture, especially in the country' and that it is a part of growing up. As one young boy said, *"It's a rite of passage to adulthood"*.

Young people also spoke about role models and how their actions can influence them. As a young girl explained, *"At concerts, pop stars and celebrities drink onstage"*.

HOW DO KIDS GET ALCOHOL?

Most young people we spoke with said that they got alcohol either through their parents, through older siblings or friends or by stealing it (from their parents or from shops).

Young people also said it was common to ask older strangers to buy alcohol for them. As one young boy told us, *"It's easy to get them to buy it for you. They don't care, it's not their money or their problem"*.

Some young people said using fake identification was another common way to get alcohol. Others found local bars or shops which did not ask them for identification and purchased alcohol that way.

Several young people living in rural areas felt that it was easier for underage drinkers to buy alcohol in country towns. A young boy living in a Juvenile Justice Centre told us that *"In country towns, kids are sold alcohol through the window so that the publican does not get fined for selling alcohol to underage people on the premises"*.

Some young people said the pressure on them to 'be cool' and 'fit in with friends' led them to take part in violent, anti-social and risk-taking behaviour to obtain money to buy alcohol. They spoke of threatening people on the street or 'rolling them for money' and teenage girls prostituting themselves to get money to buy alcohol.

THE IMPACT OF ALCOHOL ABUSE ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES

Many of the young people we spoke with had experienced problems in their lives because of alcohol abuse – either through their own drinking problem or through dealing with the alcohol addiction of a parent, sibling or friend.

Some of the young people spoke about a breakdown in family relationships as a result of alcohol abuse and being victims of violence when their parent/s, carers or siblings are drunk.

This can be confusing and upsetting for children and young people. As one 13 year old girl said, *"I didn't know why my dad was behaving the way he was. I wish I had known what alcohol did to people..."*

Young people spoke about how alcohol abuse can affect their friendships. They are concerned particularly if friends have to look after them when they are drunk, sick or doing and saying things they normally would not.

WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE THINK CAN BE DONE TO REDUCE ALCOHOL-RELATED HARM?

Young people had a number of practical ideas and suggestions about ways to reduce alcohol-related harm to young people in NSW. These were put to the Alcohol Summit.

Many of their proposals can be acted on now by people working with young people experiencing alcohol-related problems.

The young people's ideas included:

- Involving the whole family in support services for young people who have problems with alcohol;
- Age appropriate education about alcohol in primary school;
- Recreation, music and art opportunities to steer young people away from crime and anti-social behaviour;
- More support for parents to improve their parenting about how to help kids become responsible drinkers;
- Specialist youth staff who know about alcohol dependence in easy to reach services;
- Continuing education for young people about date rape and drink spiking; and
- A system in schools which allows people who have experienced alcohol abuse issues to share their personal experiences of alcohol with young people.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

You can find more about the proposals put forward by children and young people and their involvement in the NSW Summit on Alcohol Abuse on the Commission's website at <http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/ourwork/participation.html>

The Reach Out! website is also a good resource for young people who want to know more about alcohol: <http://www.reachout.com.au/default.asp?ti=68>

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