The Proximity Effect: The Role of Family Life in Shaping Children’s Knowledge about Alcohol & its Social & Health Implications

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Context: Children & Alcohol

- Research in Australia suggests that over half of all 8 year olds have tasted alcohol and over three quarters of those aged 10.
- Average age of 1st supervised drink is 12 (Hibell et al 2009).
- 36% children aged 10-12 self-identify as drinking on a regular basis (McIntosh 2008).
- Boys aged 11-13 are drinking 43% more units than their peers in 2000; girls 86% (Alcohol Concern 2007).
- ESPAD studies: binge drinking is common by mid-teens.
- BMA: Alcohol-related hospital admissions of U16 risen by 33%.
Why Focus on Pre-Teens?

1) Middle childhood is a critical period in which young people develop their knowledge about, and experiment, with alcohol.

2) Family is the primary context for the socialisation of drinking behaviour in young people’ (Foxcroft & Lowe 1997)

3) Relatively little is known about whether parents actively teach pre-teen children to drink within a family setting.

4) Indeed, most research about the role of alcohol within the family has focused, on adult problem drinkers and their children rather than ‘ordinary’ families.
Cross Generational Perspective

Theoretical approach

• Adults & children may experience familial socialisation practices around alcohol differently.

• Often adults’ views about what is in the best interests of children are read through the lens of age-appropriate behaviours in which pre-teens are presumed to be too immature to express opinions.

• Yet, children are active choice-makers e.g. consumption & health behaviours

• Need to pay attention to how families are lived between people, to daily events and the inconsistencies of family behaviour

• ‘Proximity effect’: significance of socially embedded learning
Methodological Approach

- Telephone survey (n=2089 parents of 5-12s)
- Ten case study families: sampled to include those with diverse structures, socio-economic profiles & attitudes to drinking
- Interviews with parents
- Child-centred methods:
  - identify samples of drinks (alcoholic and non-alcoholic) by smell and from common advertisements
  - puppets and a doll’s house with figurines were used with youngest (n=10)
  - older children (n=8) were shown clips from the *The Simpsons* as the basis for a wider discussion about alcohol
- Observation at a family event where alcohol was consumed & on a ‘normal’ treat involving alcohol
‘When you are big you can drink a whole bottle’: What Children Know & How They Learn About Alcohol

- Policy: parental responsibility; yet they consider children too young & alcohol as adult issue
- Children are aware of alcohol from age 6 recognising:
  - it’s a product for adults
  - alcohol affects children more rapidly than adults
  - its impacts on social behaviour
  - risk of addiction
  - misperception of alcohol content (beer/wine; alcopops)

  Girl: children can’t have them but when they grow up they can
  I: So how old do you have to be?
  36 or maybe 49 (Lucy, aged 7)

  Kids can get drunk quicker (Karl, aged 11)

  Kids lose control more quickly (James aged 9)

  Children may not be able to stop (Linda aged 10)
Children’s Recognition of Alcohol

- Product recognition: limited knowledge
- Only correctly identified what their families consume
- Dolls house: association of alcohol with sociality. Positivity & domestic norm of alcohol
- Affective ties with parents intensify learning about alcohol
- Experimentation & mimicking instigated by parents
- Place associated with alcohol = the supermarket
- Home-centred drinking & the proximity effect

It’s beer and its called John Smith’s. Sometimes my Daddy drinks it…Smirnoff, my Mummy’s favourite but she never let’s me have it (Anne, aged 7)

It’s a shot of alcohol…You just go like that [imitating]. I’ve actually put water in there and my Dad asks me how long it takes to drink 4 of them (Karl, aged 11)

In Tesco
I: are there any other places?
You can get some in Waitrose, you can get some in Marks & Spencer
Zig-zagging Around and Going Crazy in the Head: Social Risks of Drinking

- Good knowledge of short-term behavioral effects of alcohol, not long-term health risks
- 1 in 5 parents said their child had shown concern about somebody’s drinking.
- Children from half case studies had seen a parent drunk. Not judgemental, domestic ‘norm’
- Spatial distinction in morality of drinking between home & public

Boy: it makes them a bit less controlled of theirself
Girl: they sing stupid songs. My Mum & her friend got drunk and they sang a sing about what you do when you need the toilet and you are working in the garden (Emma & Tim, aged 10)

They might punch people sometimes say things like ‘I hate you’ if they have a lot they do nasty things (Linda, aged 10)
Health Harms of Drinking

• Limited understanding of alcohol health risks cf. to smoking/drugs & mix messages
• Parents ambivalent about talking to pre-teens & poor understanding of risks & own consumption (Dads: 73% v 16.5%)
• Reverse morality of drinking: good behaviour rewarded with a drink (alcohol & sugary pop)
• No alcohol education at school despite DfE guidelines
• Observation: kids relatively little interest in alcohol (girls more)

You can get addicted, like to Club Penguin (Cathy, aged 8)

I know someone who died of alcohol, Michael Jackson, he was addicted to it (Aileen, aged 8)

I: If you could have a choice what would you ask for? Lemonade but I’m not always allowed it. I: Why not? Mum says its bad for my teeth because its sugary…
I: What sort of occasions do you have it If I be good and we’re allowed it at parties (Mary aged 7)
Conclusion

- Nat. Alcohol Strategy: children only addressed indirectly as responsibility of parents
- Parents regard pre-teens as too young to discuss alcohol – yet:
- Kids have a competent understanding of alcohol & reflections on adults’ drinking
- Knowledge is gleaned from proximal processes (unintentional modelling)
- Children’s identification with parents intensifies their learning so knowledge mirrors family consumption patterns (1980s – to 2014+ assoc.).
- Problematic disassociation of negative effects of drinking to excess and everyday family practices
- Parents & kids weak understanding of health risks and normalisation of drinking to excess
Research

• The presentation is based upon four main research papers:
  • Family life and alcohol consumption: A study of the transmission of drinking practice, 2010 (Valentine, G., Jayne, M., Gould, M., Keenan, J.)
  • Generational patterns of alcohol consumption: Continuity and change, 2010 (Valentine, G., Holloway, S., L., Jayne, M.)
  • The proximity effect: The role of the affective space of family life in shaping children’s knowledge about alcohol and its social and health implications, 2014 (Valentine, G., Jayne, M., Gould, M.)
  • Do as I say, not as I do: the affective space of family life and the generational transmission of drinking cultures, 2012 (Valentine, G., Jayne, M., Gould, M.)