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

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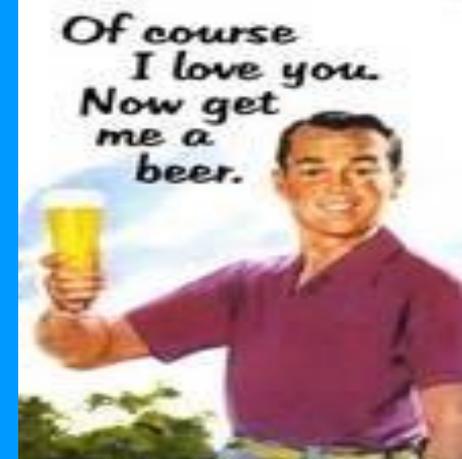
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## Context: Children & Alcohol

- 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 song 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.)