

Topline results from Drinkaware research commissioned into 'Understanding how best to communicate alcohol messages to 8-17 year olds'

Background

The research was carried out by Iris Concise in six locations across the UK: Glasgow, Barry (South Wales), Derry (NI), Rochdale, Bristol and London Borough of Sutton. 108 young people were seen in total. Six focus groups were run with students in school year 12 (16-17 years). Thirty paired interviews were conducted with students in school years 4-11 (8-15 years).

Summary of results

Across the research there is very little acknowledged need for more information about alcohol, and no-one is actively looking for information.

Eight-10 year olds

Most of their opinions appear to have been learnt by adults, and most would turn to parents or teachers if they were worried about anything. Only younger children (8-12 years) tend to have celebrity 'heroes'. Alcohol is seen as 'unhealthy' and therefore 'bad'. There is no connection with moderate drinking, only excessive use so the consequences are seen to be quite frightening e.g. sickness, getting in trouble with the police. The issue of alcohol wasn't particularly relevant to them. They know the dangers – at least at a superficial level.

11-15 years

From 11 onwards children become more questioning, and will not necessarily take information at face value. Views of peers become more important so peer based messages seem the most impactful, although 11-14 year olds tend to still be willing to listen to health professionals such as nurses and doctors. 'Cool' means what everyone else is doing, especially what older children are doing and the approval of close friends is used to endorse choices or approve decisions. Key drivers to leading a healthy lifestyle are a desire to fit in, to be good at something or to lead a long and happy life.

By 13 there is more awareness of the positive aspects of drinking. The notion of 'moderation' has begun to enter their mindset and they tend to see alcohol as less of a danger than cigarettes or drugs. They are mainly concerned with the effect alcohol can have on appearance and with the risks of fights, getting into trouble with the police/parents and pregnancy.

Pressure where experienced is likely to come from acquaintances rather than close friends who don't put pressure on those in their own group. Few of the older teenagers (14-17 years) make a direct connection between units and health instead it is linked with calories. Some assume they can work off a drink in the same way they can run off a burger without thinking of other effects to health.

16-17 year olds

Sources of influence become more complex extending beyond close friendship groups to the broader peer group at school and in the local area. The social aspect of school life/6th form college is hugely important. Alcohol consumption is normalised and no longer a novelty. The question is not whether they drink but what, how often and how much. All drinkers describe their use as a social activity, with no evidence of solo drinking. It is associated with having a laugh, relaxing and feeling more confident – especially with the opposite sex. They are not interested in being told to stop drinking and have a strong sense of knowing all they need to know about alcohol. A number are open to advice on drinking sensibly and help with moderating drinking behaviour but this needs to feel like a choice.

Appearance is key and a driver to leading a healthy lifestyle. This is of much more concern than the longer term effects to health. The strongest negative association is the likelihood of having unprotected sex and fears focus on embarrassment and regret, and in the worst case STI's and pregnancy. Therefore, key motivating messages are likely to focus on appearance and the links between alcohol and sex. All agreed that shock tactics and statistics are most effective and to create maximum impact, reminders of these consequences need to be communicated by peers rather than professionals; "people who understand what its like to be me".

Influences

From 11 onwards the key concerns for young people are appearance and relationships. There is a strong link between sports and being healthy. Being a keen athlete is generally seen as a legitimate reason for not drinking, particularly for those playing team sports. In relation to alcohol stupid tragic accidents resulting in death, appearance and the long and shorter term consequences of unprotected sex are key.

Media channels

The internet is a key channel. TV and, more notably, magazines and radio generally feature less in the lives of under 18's than the internet. Across all age ranges the internet is seen as a source of fun and enjoyment, from 13 onwards it is used as a way of enhancing their offline social lives. By 16-17 it is a communications tool, used more for connecting with friends than anything else. From 13 onwards, children are more likely to have a laptop or computer in their bedroom so use is monitored less. From this age the majority are accessing the internet on a daily basis for at least a couple of hours.

Internet surfing is limited, instead preferring to use trusted sites (e.g. brands sites such as Apple and Topshop), which are dictated by age, what everyone else is doing and older teenagers use. Links to other sites from these trusted sites are seen as being endorsed and so are seen as more 'acceptable'/less likely to be seen as advertising.

Northern Ireland

The only geographical differences in young people's behaviour and attitudes were seen in Northern Ireland. Young people seemed much more influenced by local cultural factors, in particular the overarching influence of religion and the ingrained culture of adult drinking. The environment is more like Eire than mainland UK.

Drinking alcohol is something which had been witnessed by all young people interviewed and there was a sense of inevitability that it is what everyone will do when they get older. It is seen as part of the initiation process in becoming an adult. However, there is a strong and continual message being given by families and schools about the risks of alcohol, drugs, smoking and underage sex. They are reasonably open to celebrity messaging if the celebrities are believed to have appropriate experience. All age groups mentioned George Best.

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