

FACT **OR** **FICTION**

**A STUDY OF ATTITUDES TO
ALCOHOL AND RELATED ISSUES
AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN
THE BALLYMUN AREA**



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Ballymun Youth Action Project Ltd. November 2011

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ABSTRACT

A Questionnaire was developed to engage young people from the ages of 12-18 on their attitudes to alcohol in the Ballymun area. The purpose of this research was to determine if attitudes are different according to age group. Questions ranged from opinions on public drinking, peer pressure and relationships with parents/guardians. The study groups were divided into three categories. It was clear that the 12/13 year age group overall were still at the stage where they agreed that drinking alcohol was against the law for young people, they were at times quiet judgemental and used either stereotypes or education to influence their answers. While the 14-16 year age group were at the stage where drinking alcohol was seen to them as the norm and their answers very much reflected on their social life and their friends, they were not looking at consequences and saw no harm in the activity. The 17/18 year age group were at a reflective stage and at times their answers were quite similar to the 12/13 year olds, this time using life experience/education, they were starting to look at consequences. This research has shown that there are significant changes in attitudes to alcohol among young people; the 12/13 year olds not having a vested interest, to the 14/16 year olds at the stage of experimenting, to the 17/18 year olds now assessing their use. A number of recommendations are given based on the findings.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Peer research was undertaken by a sixth class participating in Ballymun Youth Action Projects drug/ alcohol awareness schools competition, they looked at attitudes toward alcohol. It was very interesting and highlighted how much young people actually know about the subject. The peer research was compiled with 11/12 year olds before entering secondary school. It was decided the topic of alcohol and young people's attitudes toward it should be pursued further from the time they enter secondary school to the age of 17/18. This research will seek to identify when changes in attitudes occur and will discuss said changes, with a view to making recommendations, based on the three groups being in very significant stages of development. For the purpose of this research the focus will be on three different age groups (12/13 yr old, 14/16 yr old, and 17/18 yr olds).

LITERATURE REVIEW

What follows is a brief presentation of some literature relating to issues that presented in the findings which illustrate key areas that helped to inform our research.

RATES OF DRUNKENNESS AMONG SCHOOL STUDENTS:

Young Irish have one of highest rates of drunkenness - survey "ALMOST HALF of all Irish 15-16-year-olds reported being drunk in the past 12 months and three-quarters had consumed alcohol, according to a major European study of drink and drug consumption by school students. Ireland has one of the highest rates of drunkenness among school students, according to the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs."

<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2010/0416/1224268445657.html>

CONSEQUENCES OF YOUNG PEOPLE DRINKING ALCOHOL:

The effects of drinking at a young age can have both short and long term consequences, physically and emotionally; from saying and doing things they regret to having a negative effect on relationships, health and life choices.

"How a teenager copes with alcohol depends on their body size and shape, as well as what stage of puberty they've reached. In inexperienced hands, alcohol can be very dangerous.

Young people are just starting to discover the effects of alcohol so it's easy for them to inadvertently drink an amount well beyond the recommended guidelines.

In minor cases this will cause the slurring, staggering and sickness associated with being drunk.

But the consequences can be much more severe. Statistics show that around 5,000 teenagers are admitted to hospital every year for alcohol-related reasons."

<http://www.drinkaware.co.uk/facts/factsheets/alcohol-and-young-people>

A NEW APPROACH TO AN OLD PROBLEM:

"Instead of stigmatizing alcohol and trying to scare people into abstinence, we need to recognize that it is not alcohol itself but rather the abuse of alcohol that is the problem. Teaching about responsible use does not require student consumption of alcohol any more than teaching world geography requires them to visit Nepal, or teaching them civics requires that they run for office or vote in presidential elections. We teach students civics to prepare them for the day when they can vote and assume other civic responsibilities if they choose to do so in spite of good intentions and the expenditure of massive amounts of time, energy, and money the best evidence shows that our current abstinence-only alcohol education is ineffective. Simply doing more of what is not working will not lead to success; it is essential that we re-think our approach to the problem.

Our youth are too important and the stakes are too high to do otherwise."

<http://www2.potsdam.edu/hansondj/YouthIssues/1116635269.html>

THE LAW AND PUBLIC DRINKING:

The law is clear that public drinking is not tolerated especially in regard to young people

"Under the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2008 the Gardaí have the power to seize alcohol in the possession of a child under 18 years of age where the Gardaí have reasonable cause to believe that the alcohol will be consumed by a child under 18 years in a public place."

http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/justice/criminal_law/criminal_offences/alcohol_and_the_law.html

PEER PRESSURE:

“Although there is strong evidence that family factors are important, there is also strong evidence that peer relationships are a major influence. There is a strong association between adolescent use of alcohol, tobacco and drugs, and contact with similarly using peers.”

http://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/12563/1/JRF_children-alcohol-use-partone_2009.pdf

“There is, however, also evidence that the role of peer pressure declines with increasing age; children’s accounts suggest that the role of peer pressure declines substantially as children get older and that the decision to experiment with drugs is increasingly a matter of personal choice.”

Why Do People Give in to Peer Pressure? “Some kids give in to peer pressure because they want to be liked, to fit in, or because they worry that other kids might make fun of them if they don’t go along with the group. Others go along because they are curious to try something new that others are doing. The idea that “everyone’s doing it” can influence some kids to leave their better judgment, or their common sense, behind.”

http://kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/friend/peer_pressure.html?tracking=K_RelatedArticle#

PARENTAL GUIDANCE:

“Adolescence is a period of contradiction for teenagers. While they want to spread their wings, they also want their parents to guide them, though they would never admit it. Parents should take heart from the fact that even though their teenage children might act like know-it-all, they crave parental guidance as they stumble and fumble through new experiences.”

http://www.indiaparenting.com/teen-issues/155_1264/drugs-and-alcohol.html

But at the same it is worth noting: “The Chief Medical Officer has issued guidelines (2009) recommending that parents should try and keep their children’s lives alcohol free until age 15, and that then any drinking should be with parental supervision and within the government daily sensible drinking guidelines of 2-3 units for women and 3-4 for men.”

<http://talkaboutalcohol.com/AtSchool/location-48.aspx>

ALCOHOL V^S DRUGS:

“Drinking and enjoying recreational substances is nothing new to humanity. Though what is relatively new, are laws against these acts. With this whole majority/minority deal going, many people are subject to laws and societal rules put in place to decide if something is wrong or right. If you happen to be in a society that feels drinking isn’t so bad, but doing drugs is way out of line - then having a drug addiction would be seen as much worse than an alcohol problem. It could also work the other way, if you were in a society that view alcoholism as a worse problem than drugs.”

<http://hubpages.com/hub/Drugs-Vs-Alcohol-Which-Addiction-Is-Worse>

ALCOHOL... GATEWAY TO DRUGS?

“Using alcohol and tobacco at a young age has negative health effects. While some teens will experiment and stop, or continue to use occasionally, without significant problems, others will develop a dependency, moving on to more dangerous drugs and causing significant harm to themselves and possibly others. It is difficult to know which teens will experiment and stop and which will develop serious problems.”

http://alcoholism.about.com/od/teens/Teens_and_Substance_Abuse.htm

METHODOLOGY

This research used data collection tools that were rooted in a qualitative position which recognises the importance of locating the research within a particular social and cultural context. Qualitative research is a method of inquiry that aims to gather information which lends itself to gaining a deeper understanding of the subject matter. It can also seek to provide practical support to a specific social phenomenon and helps to understand the complex reality of a given situation and the implications of quantitative data.

The data collection initially consisted of a pilot questionnaire conducted with a number of young people in Ballymun on an individual basis. Following this, it was deemed more appropriate to continue this research in a group format.

The research methodology consisted of semi structured interviews with three different age categories of teenagers from one school and four youth projects in Ballymun.

These semi structured, open ended interviews took place over a 2 week period and notes were taken. Consistently emerging themes were noted, as were individual departures from a common thread.

ETHICS

Before each interview was conducted, the authors spent time explaining why they were conducting this piece of research. Informed consent was secured from all participants. Respondents were assured that they would not be identified in the work. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, all respondents were informed that they could meet with the authors afterwards to explore any issues that might arise during the course of the interviews. The authors fully adhered to the ethical codes of the Sociological Association of Ireland.

INTRODUCTION TO FINDINGS

When discussing the issue of alcohol with children and young people, it is clear that they know a great deal and have learned a lot from a very young age, thus having developed their own attitudes towards the subject.

This report will provide findings on a number of questions raised with young people around their attitudes towards alcohol.

The young peoples learning comes from different sources at different stages in their lives and while it is fair to say that they are mainly influenced by parents and family in their early years, as they grow older their influences change when peers become a significant part of their life.

There are factors that hinder/ influence and play a role in the thinking/attitudes of young people:

- The law forms a structure for what the legal age of consuming alcohol should be and is used as a platform from which it is acceptable to start drinking.
- Alcohol awareness is a venue to respond to the dangers of drinking alcohol and providing awareness on the subject.
- The environment the young person is in, what they witness there and how they spend their time can have an impact on their life style and choices.

The following questions were chosen with a view to generating discussion in relation to the factors associated with alcohol that face young people in Ballymun on an everyday basis.

FINDINGS

Question 1: WHAT DO YOU THINK THE LEGAL AGE OF DRINKING SHOULD BE?

Number of respondents to this question:

| AGE GROUP | MALE | FEMALE | TOTALS |
|-----------|------|--------|--------|
| 12/13 | 7 | 23 | 30 |
| 14/16 | 13 | 11 | 24 |
| 17/18 | 7 | 15 | 22 |
| Total | 27 | 49 | 76 |

12/13

Half of this group agreed with the legal age of 18 and the other half thought it should be older.

"That's the age it is"

"You haven't reached your maturity"

"You better able to control it"

"No legal age, more about choices and what's going to happen to you"

One 12 year old felt that there should be no legal enforcement.

We found this group did not challenge the law and the general feeling was that people are not mature enough to handle drink at a younger age. The majority had also just finished doing drug/alcohol awareness in sixth class and were seen to be reflecting on that learning. As the majority of the group had not drank, they did not have a vested interest in the subject.

14-16

The majority of this group felt the legal age for drinking should be under 18.

"17, if you can drive you can drink"

"Better time when your 16, can't learn if you don't make mistakes"

"16/17, average age left school, if they allowed they won't rebel and not street drink"

"Legal in Spain"

In this group we found many compared the legal age to other countries who are allowed. They were seen to have a vested interest and had a lot to say. They felt they were mature enough to drink alcohol and gave the impression that they are going to do it anyway. If they were allowed drink they see it as a way of avoiding getting into trouble street drinking.

17/18

The majority of this group felt it should be younger than the legal age.

"16/17 if legal wouldn't be frowned upon, drinking anyway, if allowed they would drink less, if they were allowed like Spain, less excitement if you're allowed"

"Easier to get at that age"

"Going to do it anyway"

Some agreed with the legal age.

"End up in hospital if you drink younger"

"More mature; do stupid things when you're older"

We found the older group seemed to reflect more from experience. Having the experience and knowledge of the repercussions of their actions they highlighted the impact alcohol can have on a younger person both physically and mentally.

Question 2: SHOULD THERE BE MORE AWARENESS/ADVERTISING TO ENCOURAGE DRINKING RESPONSIBLY?

Number of respondents to this question:

| AGE GROUP | MALE | FEMALE | TOTALS |
|-----------|------|--------|--------|
| 12/13 | 6 | 23 | 29 |
| 14/16 | 14 | 20 | 34 |
| 17/18 | 6 | 10 | 16 |
| Total | 26 | 53 | 79 |

12/13

The majority of this group wanted advertising to show how it affects the body, and real life situations.

“Show a girl with greasy hair and no teeth”
 “Showing how alcohol affects the liver”
 “Don’t know where you have been, kidnapped, drugged, anything can happen to you”

“Put more ad’s on the music channels”
 “On drinking adverts the box should be bigger saying drink responsibly”

A couple made recommendations.

We found this group was mainly influenced by TV and what they believed were the consequences of drinking irresponsibly, which were exaggerated effects on the person. They suggested that current advertising of alcohol does not sufficiently encourage drinking responsibly.

14/16

This group wanted more real life situations in advertising having a different view/uptake.

“How the body is affected, like pumped out”
 “People that get battered”
 “Real people, sun, sex and suspicious parents”

“Just ignore them you do what your friends do anyway”

Although answers were similar to 12/13 group their responses were more about actual life experiences than being influenced by television, it is important to highlight that a number of this group felt no one in this age group pays attention anyway.

17/18

This group was more focussed on showing what effects alcohol has on the body.

“Yeah, especially showing what units mean, how much, cause you don’t know what it’s doing, like long term effects and what happens to your body”
 “Show how they are when they get older”
 “Show death related illnesses”

Having experienced drinking alcohol, we considered most of this group were more focussed and reflective on what the effects are on the body from alcohol, particularly the long term effects.

Question 3: WHAT IS YOUR OPINION ON PUBLIC DRINKING?

Number of respondents to this question:

| AGE GROUP | MALE | FEMALE | TOTALS |
|-----------|------|--------|--------|
| 12/13 | 5 | 23 | 28 |
| 14/16 | 11 | 21 | 32 |
| 17/18 | 6 | 8 | 14 |
| Total | 22 | 52 | 74 |

12/13

The majority of this group said it was a bad example and a danger to those drinking and others.

“Bad example on kids in the park, they see drinkers and want to do it”
 “Should be stopped, best friends end up fighting”
 “You are afraid of walking by them, you just cross the road”

This group did not tolerate public drinking at all, they saw nothing positive or fun about it, having experienced real fear when having to walk by a group that was drinking and witnessing the negative behaviour of youths when drinking alcohol in public showing a bad example to younger children.

14/16

Most of this group felt it was fun.

“Good fun outdoors, has bad name, not everyone drinks to do something stupid”
 “Would rather drink outside”
 “Deadly, great buzz”

“Cause you not allowed to drink in the house”

This group sees public drinking as harmless fun that has been given a bad reputation, it is a way of mixing with their friends and they are quiet happy to do it once it doesn't get out of hand. It is important to mention that some said they had nowhere else to drink.

17/18

“Nothing else to do if underage, not safe but people do it anyway”
 “Dangerous have to go to the park to hide and fights happen”
 “It encourages younger people and they think it's ok”

This group were of the opinion that while it was okay to drink outside they still highlighted some of the dangers of public drinking and that young people would do it anyway. They did reflect on how bad it was for younger children to witness it.

It is important to add that when discussing public drinking, while there was a tolerance by young people for their peers to drink (okay for kids to do it, rite of passage), it was seen as inappropriate for adults to be drinking in public.

“Disgusting, it's not mature”
 “Older people make the place look bad, lose respect for them”

**Question 4: DO YOU KNOW UNDERAGE PEOPLE THAT DRINK?
WHY DO YOU THINK THEY STARTED DRINKING?**

Number of respondents to this question:

| AGE GROUP | MALE | FEMALE | TOTALS |
|-----------|------|--------|--------|
| 12/13 | 6 | 18 | 24 |
| 14/16 | 8 | 19 | 27 |
| 17/18 | 5 | 9 | 14 |
| Total | 19 | 46 | 65 |

62 out of 65 knew at least one underage person that drank alcohol.

“At least 20 out of my class of thirty”
“Yes I do and all my friends”

12/13

While there was mixed answers from each group, the main reasons from this category were based on family, or looking cool.

“Want to act mad and think they are cool”
“See parents doing it at home or older brothers and sisters”
“They don’t have a life”

This group see external reasons as influences for underage people to drink, and as a way of fitting in with peers, why else would they do it? Another reason that was mentioned was to cope with depression.

“Cos of what happens at home to let the pain ease”

14/16

This category’s main reasons for drinking alcohol were for fun or from influence from peers.

“See other people, you feel more grown up, get slagged if you don’t”
“Seeing people having a laugh, you want that”
“For fun, a buzz”

“To block things out, depression, bullying, family problems and school pressure”

This group didn’t need a reason to drink other than having a good time with friends; this being their social life, it is again important to mention that one person said the reason was due to emotional issues.

17/18

This group looked at underage drinking from a view point of a group that has moved on and now has worldly experience (they know) of drinking, listing “reasons” for drinking as experimenting, peer pressure and seeing others doing it.

“They think they are mad”
“Girls hanging around showing off to fellas”

Question 5: DO YOU FEEL OR HAVE YOU EVER FELT UNDER PRESSURE¹ FROM YOUR FRIENDS OR PEOPLE YOU KNOW TO START DRINKING?

Number of respondents to this question:

| AGE GROUP | MALE | FEMALE | TOTALS |
|-----------|------|--------|--------|
| 12/13 | 4 | 23 | 27 |
| 14/16 | 13 | 25 | 38 |
| 17/18 | 4 | 10 | 14 |
| Total | 21 | 58 | 79 |

12/13

While the majority of this group said no, the rest were mixed with a comment relating to a friend or family member.

“Yes, friends trying to talk me into it”
“Yes, cousins and said no”

“Yes, do you want some vodka and if you don’t want to drink they say “I won’t be your friend”

While this group mainly had not much to say on the subject and said they had not felt pressure, any examples of pressure came from either close friends or family members. While only a minority felt “bullied” it needs to be mentioned

14/16

Again most of this group said no

“No, if you don’t want to you won’t”
“No pressure, go home if you really don’t want to”

“Yes, go on take some it’s gorgeous; you can stay in my house”
“Yes, not doing it in a bad way, want you to get involved”
“Yes, offering drink and/or money”

The rest were of the mind that it wasn’t “bad” pressure.

While this group again mainly felt no pressure, any pressure given was harmless and only encouraging them to be part of the fun and not to be left out. One person made the following point.

“If they are your mates they don’t force you”

“How good it is, advertising amongst friends”
“Today” is important, afraid of missing out, not bad pressure but banter”

17/18

No pressure felt from this group at all.

The majority of this group said there was no pressure, any talk on alcohol was seen in the context of friends missing out on the fun and being inclusive of everyone, one person made the point of saying.

“Depends on what friends you have”

¹Pressure had to be explained, as the majority thought it meant only bullying and did not see “ah go on”, or similar practises, as pressure.

**Question 6: WHAT ACTIVITIES COULD YOU GET INVOLVED IN THAT DO NOT INVOLVE ALCOHOL?
DO ENOUGH PEOPLE DO THEM? WHERE CAN YOU DO THEM?**

Number of respondents to this question:

| AGE GROUP | MALE | FEMALE | TOTALS |
|-----------|------|--------|--------|
| 12/13 | 7 | 23 | 30 |
| 14/16 | 13 | 11 | 24 |
| 17/18 | 7 | 15 | 22 |
| Total | 27 | 49 | 76 |

All of the young people could identify activities to get involved in that do not involve alcohol. In relation to peoples involvement in those activities only 28 of the 76 respondents said that enough people got involved in them and none of the 17/18 year olds felt that enough people got involved in them.

Further supporting this trend is the fact that although 42 activities in total were mentioned, 48 out of the 76 young people who responded still said they were not involved in any activities.

12/13

“Didn’t know they existed - need more signs”
“No don’t think, obviously not or we wouldn’t have problems”

14-16

“No clubs opened the weekends”
“No enough things to do in Ballymun”
“If you don’t have money you have nothing to do”
“Yeah do some but still get drunk”

17/18

“No motivation, no campaigning for them, at 16 people have their opinion - informed decision already”
“No too cheesy, embarrassing, they don’t appeal if they do exist”

Question 7: DO YOU THINK PARENTS SHOULD KNOW IF THEIR TEENAGER IS DRINKING? HOW WOULD THEY REACT IF THEY KNEW YOU WERE DRINKING BEHIND THEIR BACK?

Number of respondents to this question:

| AGE GROUP | MALE | FEMALE | TOTALS |
|-----------|------|--------|--------|
| 12/13 | 6 | 22 | 28 |
| 14/16 | 12 | 20 | 32 |
| 17/18 | 5 | 13 | 18 |
| Total | 23 | 57 | 80 |

12/13

For this group the reasons they felt parents should know were divided between being safe and drinking less.

“Yeah cause something could happen to them out on the streets”
 “If their ma knows they drink less, if she doesn’t know they drink more”

“Don’t want them to be disappointed”

This group were concerned with how much a person would drink if not allowed by their parents and how in turn they then drink in public; leading to the dangers of public drinking. Only two out of this group did not think a parent should know if they were drinking.

They were the main group to discuss how they parents would react and their relationship with them.

“Yes - they would be sad/angry”.

“At least they know where you are, who you’re with etc.”

“Yes should but won’t tell parents for fear of being grounded”

“Cause you could be getting sick in your sleep or fall when you are out”

“You could have got drunk and had sex”

14/16

Getting grounded and dangers were big issues for this group.

Implications and dangers that directly affect them were the reasons this group felt their parents should know they are drinking.

Three out of this group felt their parents should not know.

“No me ma would ring me 24/7 or not let me hang around with certain people”

“Yes but most don’t, but they should, it cuts down drinking when they do know”

“Parents won’t trust you if you don’t tell them”

“Should put the foot down, watching where they are going, don’t let them out late”

17/18

This group looked at relationship with parents, and reflected on how secrets accumulate.

Now knowing from experience there should be a limit to alcohol intake, the relationship with a parent is important to this group, because if the parent knows they drink alcohol they believe it will cut down the amount of alcohol taken; cut down on binge drinking. The relationship with their parents is important again. There was an emphasis put on secrets by one person.

“Yeah definitely cause of secrets, they get in the habit, can’t tell anything then if it happens when they are drinking i.e. sex, initially it may be trouble but in the long run more beneficial”

Question 8: ALCOHOL IS NOT AS BAD AS DRUGS..... WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Number of respondents to this question:

| AGE GROUP | MALE | FEMALE | TOTALS |
|-----------|------|--------|--------|
| 12/13 | 5 | 22 | 27 |
| 14/16 | 10 | 21 | 31 |
| 17/18 | 5 | 12 | 17 |
| Total | 20 | 55 | 75 |

12/13

Answers from this group concentrated on drugs being worse or both the same.

"You get all wrinkly on drugs"

"You can have a couple of drinks, if take drugs you get addicted"

"Children can be born addicted, why do drug users get licences" (driving Licence)

"You can die from taking drink and drugs"

"Both the same"

14/16

Drugs are worse

"You wouldn't sell your body / jewellery for drink"

"Drugs are worse, snowblow etc."

"Heroin and Crack are worse"

"Drugs are illegal, won't get into trouble drinking"

Alcohol is worse

"On drinking you could get spiked / raped etc."

"Can overdose on drink, can choke on sick and die"

"Don't know what you're doing, drugs you know what you're doing"

This group was divided about which they thought was worse. Those who thought drugs were worse focused on certain drugs, crack, heroin, snowblow and the fact that to take drugs was illegal. With the subject of alcohol they focussed on personal side effects when drinking and how it would affect "them."

17/18

"Alcohol is worse than certain drugs, you can get abusive, and on drugs you know what you're doing"

"Alcohol is short term, drugs long term, alcohol physical effects, horny"

"Depends on what you drink, not certain drugs i.e. heroin, rather be around people drinking, feel safer"

"Only some drugs are, coke, snowblow, e, blueys, steroids - hash, weed and cigarettes are not as bad"

This group was more realistic and educated in their thinking, weighing up the pros and cons of each, they looked at the effects of both while believing that only certain drugs were bad, one person pointed out that drugs must be worse as society has said this "Society allowing you to drink so it must be ok" like the 14/16 group they had attitudes to both sides but like the 12/13 they also acknowledged that both can be bad.

Question 9: DO YOU THINK YOU ARE MORE LIKELY TO TAKE DRUGS WHEN YOU ARE DRINKING?

Number of respondents to this question:

| AGE GROUP | MALE | FEMALE | TOTALS |
|-----------|------|--------|--------|
| 12/13 | 8 | 22 | 30 |
| 14/16 | 13 | 6 | 19 |
| 17/18 | 4 | 8 | 12 |
| Total | 25 | 36 | 61 |

12/13

In general, people answered yes.

“Yes because they are drunk, that it’s all funny to them, first time they give it a try and then they are addicted”
“Yes drinking your more tempted and not concentrating as hard cause it causes a fog in your head”
“If you drink and take drugs at the same time, you could go mental have and seizure and die”

This group has extreme views on this issue, looking at the effects with excessive outcomes (mental health problems, addiction, death), the reason for doing it in the first place again is for extreme reasons “*You can forget all your worries*” (depression) Why else would they do it? was the principle position that they took.

14/16

Although three in this group said no, the majority said yes.

“Yeah cause they can be persuaded, don’t think of the consequences”
“Yes you wouldn’t smoke a joint or do drugs when sober”
“Yes to fit in “be on the same level”
“Yes, buzz, giddier”

For this group peer pressure and a sense of having even more fun, is almost acceptable because they don’t do it when sober and looking for the next buzz featured strongly. They also suggested that taking drugs when drunk was more acceptable than taking them when sober.

17/18

“Yes, everyone smokes hash/weed, bad humoured when comedown”
“What’s the next buzz, alcohol is not good enough”
“Yes different mind-set when drunk, don’t think twice, living in the moment”

This group agrees that this happens, while now acknowledging the effects of taking drugs and of drinking “*Your judgement is clouded*”.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In Ireland the legal age for consuming alcohol is 18, generally this is supported as it is seen that young people are unable to cope with the effects of alcohol physically and emotionally; physically in most cases the same amount of alcohol consumed by a child in comparison to that of an adult will have a bigger impact on the body, as their bodies are still developing; emotionally a young person does not have the capabilities and mental strength to cope with the effects of alcohol and the dilemmas they may be faced with. In this research it was clear to the 12/13 age group that the law is there for a reason and should be obeyed without question. Recent education they have received in school would also back that up for them, thus creating a certain intolerance to those that do decide to drink young. The 14/16 age group are now experimenting and have the belief that society is at fault for their drinking in public places and that it should be acknowledged that they do it anyway. The law is seen by them as just another way of ruining their buzz and the feeling that the law is not consistent was clear when it was mentioned more than once that other countries have a lower legal age to drink and that you can drive at a younger age. The 17/18 age group had the experience of drinking and looking back at when they were “kids” and they acknowledged the dangers of drinking alcohol at a young age. The findings suggest that looking at the bigger picture and the journey of a young person, while the agreed legal age is 18 and while the 14/16 year olds want it younger, there has to be a point of entry and if brought to a younger age, it would still be challenged as at a certain time in a young person’s life they see it as a rite of passage.

When looking at the issue of advertising and raising awareness of responsible drinking it has to be taken into account that young people enjoy drinking, and when ascertaining what message should be sent to them it is important to look at where they are at. They are at an age of developing and looking at their own image and what they can get/not get out of life, a time where they are usually engrossed in self. There are myths and legends around the dangers of drinking and there are the facts. At a certain stage much of these have lost their credibility for young people, because of “scare tactics” and adverts that do not in a young person’s mind have anything to do with them. In this research the 12/13 year group were influenced by advertising and did not question or challenge what was being said, thus “scare tactics” were still working with them. By the age of 14/16 “scare tactics” were no longer working and if awareness raising was to work it had to be more real life experiences aimed at their age showing how it effects the body, acknowledging that mortality was not an issue to them and again acknowledging that they made it very clear that they would not stop drinking. By the age of 17/18 having the experience and being “older” this group was more focused on long term effects and the logistics of drinking, for example how many units of alcohol is safe for a young person to drink and information on pacing consumption. The findings suggest that it is clear that if a young person is not going to stop drinking alcohol that there should be unprejudiced information about alcohol and it’s consumption, providing accurate and helpful information with a view to allowing young people distinguish the difference between use and abuse of alcohol.

To have a drink outdoors (public drinking) with the majority of young people is seen mainly as a rite of passage and a fun venture, and most of them do not want or intend to cause any harm. In this research the group who did not accept public drinking were the 12/13 year age group, to them it was not only a bad example but a danger to others and those who were drinking.

The 14/16 year age group see no harm in public drinking and felt it was given a bad name, and it was only a minority that fight or smash bottles. The 17/18 year age group felt it was okay but were more reflective on the negative points of public drinking and the influence it has on younger kids. The findings suggest that young people start drinking outdoors long before the legal age for many reasons such as, having nowhere else to go, wanting to have fun and being part of the gang who are drinking outdoors. While the majority of the young people in this research felt it was ok for them to drink in public, it was not however acceptable for adults to drink in public, “there are pubs, they shouldn’t be drinking in the streets”.

When reaching the teenage years, teens are beginning a new journey of their life where friends are more important than family, where independence, curiosity, having fun and taking risks are part of their development, in most cases this is how alcohol is introduced. It is fair to say that teenagers also go through a rough time while developing, getting confused or anxious about life in general, while others may also have external and internal negative factors that could cause them to drink alcohol. For example different forms of depression and addiction, problems within the family. In this research the 12/13 year age group generally could only see teenagers drinking if there was a “reason” and focussed on the negative reasons for drinking, while the 14/16 year age group were at the stage mentioned earlier of independence and curiosity, seeing drinking alcohol as the norm, associating it with friends, partying, having fun and normal social life. The 17/18 year age group were at a stage where they said that while they may have started to drink alcohol for fun, they acknowledged that on hindsight there were reasons as to why, be it to fit in with friends and/or society and experimenting. The findings suggest that while the 12/13 year age group searched for “reasons” for drinking alcohol and the 17/18 age group reflected on reasons for drinking alcohol, the age group where the majority actually started drinking 14/16 year age group, see it as fun, mixing with peers and just part of growing up.

When asked where they got their drink – every group had an answer, the main place was the off licence, while others asked friends and family members. Some paid others to do it or robbed it, a few said their parents get it or it is delivered to the house. Suffice to say that if they want alcohol they will get it.

Although there is evidence that shows family dynamics have a role in influencing teenagers to drink alcohol, as young people develop it would be fair to say that their peers have more of an influence than teenagers are aware of. Connections between who a young person is hanging around with and their attitudes to alcohol are very strong and they tend to stick with the friends they consider to be like minded. A lack of tolerance can be seen from both groups, of those who don’t want to get involved in drinking culture and those that think people who don’t drink are boring. In our research the 12/13 year age group mainly felt no pressure and anyone who mentioned having pressure stated it came from family members or that they were hanging around with older youths, thus being part of their relationships. The 14/16 year age group could not relate to having any pressure, however when discussed it became apparent that they did not consider encouragement/banter as a form of peer pressure and said that they felt included with what their peers were doing, peers playing a very important role in their life, thus peer pressure does appear to be very much an influence in their lives. The 17/18 year age group were very clear that peers did not influence them and spoke more around their own benefit in drinking alcohol in

the sense of missing out or being included, and about personal choices including choosing friendships. It is clear that at this age they are developing their own opinions, moving on physically and emotionally from their original peers and their influence. The findings suggest that peer pressure was not an issue for 12/13 year age group and the 17/18 year age group, but for very different reasons. Looking at the answers from the 14/16 year age group it is fair to say that peer pressure is a factor that influences choices made by them, however, the young people do not identify with it as pressure but again as a rite of passage and having fun with their friends.

DEFINING PEER PRESSURE:

Peers influence your life, even if you don't realize it, just by spending time with you. You learn from them, and they learn from you. It's only human nature to listen to and learn from other people in your age group.

Healthy adolescent development is majorly influenced by the relationship between parent/guardian and the adolescent. It is expected that a parent will give a child food, education, clothing and a roof over their head, however these are just the basic fundamentals of rearing a child. The most valuable rearing is seen with the parent who affords their child a safe, warm and friendly environment with open communication, encouraged and maintained by the parent throughout their relationship. It is fair to say that there are times when this relationship can be challenged when matters arise that are a normal part of teenage development and yet are either not spoken about or quite difficult to discuss, one of which being alcohol. This research found that the vast majority of the respondents wanted their parents to know they were drinking, even though there may be consequences. If there was communication with their parents on the subject of drinking alcohol the young people in this research felt that they would drink less, feel safer about where they are and what they are doing and that there would be less to hide (less secrets).

Having the communication on this matter would set a precedent in their relationship for discussion on other related subjects. This research has shown that if the subject of alcohol is not discussed it can lead to a series of ramifications. When a young person sets out to drink alcohol it is with a view to having fun, however, if this is done without parental knowledge the drinking can be done in an irresponsible manner leading to binge drinking, and drinking in risky environments. When young people are drinking they are susceptible to losing control of their inhibitions hence leading to them getting sick, passing out, being a danger to themselves and others and for some receiving unwanted sexual advances. This research has shown that the young people are very aware of negative consequences associated with drinking alcohol but still will drink, however, having the security of parental knowledge makes for a healthier and safer way of doing it, according to the young people in this study.

When it comes to the question of whether alcohol is as bad as other drugs, there is no clear cut answer for this question, as each individual opinion depends on their own life experience, be it family, friends, culture and society as a whole. Any or all of these would play a huge part in forming their opinion. In this research the 12/13 year age group's view on this subject was that drugs are worse, having much more dire consequences than alcohol. The 14/16 year age group were divided in their opinions, with the consequences more about the realistic dangers,

associated with taking drugs or alcohol. The 17/18 year age group were more contemplative than the other two groups, looking at the subject as a whole, while also categorising drugs and the effects not only to the person taking the substance but to others.

Young people are more susceptible than any other age group to take risks especially under the influence of alcohol. While developing their relationship with alcohol some young people start experimenting with other substances for a variety of reasons. Because of their age, inexperience and naivety they however do not link this behaviour with future consequences, believing they “are just having fun” and because of their young age, the side effects and cost of their use has not yet affected them. In this research it is very clear that the progression from alcohol to drugs is perceived by the majority of the young people as something that does occur. The 12/13 year age group used very dramatic and stereotypical examples of their beliefs, while the 14/16 year age group were more laid-back about the subject and almost accepting it as a norm.

Though mentioning consequences it is clear they are living in the moment. The 17/18 year age group have developed, still having the “buzz” but also reflecting on the side effects, consequences beginning to become more realistic to them.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are a number of key findings emerging from this research. While many young people's attitudes and opinions on the subject come from their own personal/life experience, having realistic information on the topic of alcohol is very important.

This research has shown that the 12/13 year age group mainly receive their knowledge of alcohol from education, home, TV and the local environment. Peer influences at this stage are not a highlighted factor in their views/attitudes to alcohol while their parents are still a feature in their opinions. It appears from this research that their attitudes appear to be quite stereotypical and judgemental using extreme examples of the effects of alcohol and drugs.

This research has shown that the 14/16 year age group have a lot of knowledge on the subject of alcohol, at this stage the knowledge mainly comes from first-hand experience. Peers play a very important role in shaping their beliefs/attitudes. This is an age of experimenting, not thinking of consequences and that feeling of being indestructible, where the main objective in consuming alcohol is one of having fun.

This research has shown that the 17/18 year age group were more reflective with their answers through personal experience and hindsight. Their opinions were balanced and well-articulated; they seemed to refer back to what is acceptable in society, being older and wiser. They also appear to consider their parents point of view.

This research has shown there is a difference in attitudes to alcohol in the three age groups. Our findings suggest that the defining age when attitudes change is between the ages of 12-14. This is the age where peers start becoming very significant and parents start taking a back seat. This is a vital age for educating young people in personal development, showing them skills such as self-esteem, wellbeing and values, but mostly showing them how to make positive healthy choices. Although most of them have drug education in sixth class, the defining changing in their lives starts in secondary school, if they are taught core personal development skills followed by drug education in secondary school they will be better equipped on the subject of alcohol and drugs.

The research also highlighted the following themes concerning young people and alcohol, and the researchers consider it useful to draw attention to these.

- Being the victim of violence (physical or verbal) or being violent themselves;
- Having unprotected sex or not being able to deal with unwanted sexual advances;
- Being sexually assaulted;
- Alcohol poisoning and loss of consciousness;
- Being injured while swimming, playing sport, climbing, even trying to cross a busy street, and the dangers of drink-driving are well known;
- Difficulty coping with school and/or work commitments;
- Having money problems because of the amount spent on alcohol;
- Breaking the law or getting into trouble with the police;
- Losing control of themselves and harming friendships;
- Drinking in unsafe environments;
- Binge drinking;
- Using drugs with alcohol;
- Being influenced by others;
- Relationships affected with parents/guardians: lying, secrets, lack of communication;
- Impact on development: physical, emotional and mental.

THE FOLLOWING ARE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION ON THE BASIS OF THE FINDINGS:

- It appears that campaigns highlighting safer use of alcohol should not be linked only to special occasions as young people indicated that they drink all through the year.
- Peer influence can be a central part of a young person's development. This should be utilised in the form of positive role modelling. i.e., peer led themed discussions.
- It is important for young people to have open communication with their parents on the subject of alcohol and consideration should be given to facilitating this,

