

Youth Alcohol Action Plan

A response from the Family and Parenting Institute

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Introduction

The Family and Parenting Institute (FPI) is the UK's leading centre of expertise in families and the upbringing of children. We advocate for improved family and parenting services and we press for policy change to help address the challenges that families are facing.

We welcome this opportunity to comment on the Government's Youth Alcohol Action Plan (the action plan). The action plan is an important first step in tackling growing concerns around the level of young people's drinking and the negative impact this can have on their health, well being and the communities in which they live. It is encouraging that the action plan places an emphasis on helping parents to discuss drinking alcohol with their children as many may feel uncomfortable and unsure of how to engage their children in talking about the issue.

Support and guidance for parents

Parents play a critical role in raising sensible drinkers and they should benefit from the clearer advice on how to raise these issues with their children that is promised under these proposals. Dependent on the format used, the majority of parents will in all likelihood find guidelines on young people's safe drinking, such as those suggested in the action plan, useful. There is currently a superfluity of media attention on the problems of teenage drinking and its link to antisocial behaviour and later health problems but very little advice on what levels of drinking would be acceptable at different ages, or even how to recognise and tackle problem drinking in its early stages.

The presentation of the guidance would need to take account of differing cultural and social norms associated with the use of alcohol and would ideally be endorsed by health experts. In addition, the guidelines would need to be aware of the necessity of maintaining a consistent message and to learn from the confusion that has been created around safe drinking levels for women during pregnancy.

The guidance would need to be provided in a variety of formats and available from different locations. Both GP surgeries and schools are well placed to distribute guidance, although evidence suggests that parents have less contact with secondary schools and so this avenue of circulation may be less useful. Not all parents are in contact with schools and this may be especially true of those with children who truant

or have been excluded, traveller families, or asylum seekers and refugees. TV advertisements may be of value here, as may billboard posters and leaflets for distribution through community groups. In addition, leaflets in libraries, at One Stop services, sports and leisure facilities, supermarkets, Sure Start and other children's centres, school nurses and health visitors would also be valuable outlets for advice and information. All agencies that are able to apply for parenting orders, including Registered Social Landlords and District Councils, should also be required to make information available to parents and to assist in finding additional support to address issues arising from alcohol misuse.

In general FPI thinks that the areas suggested for inclusion the guidance for parents are right. Advice on sensible drinking levels would certainly be welcome. Appropriate ages at, and environments in which children and young people can consume alcohol will be useful in helping parents clarify with children acceptable boundaries within the family. FPI recommends that the guidance should also signpost parents to further information sources. Many parents will welcome advice on boundary setting, talking about sensitive issues with their children and information on the health impact of various behaviours including drinking alcohol to name but a few.

In terms of supervising young people's drinking, FPI is of the belief that by far the majority of parents already do, or try their best to, supervise their child's drinking.

Research evidence suggests that there are significant limits to the capacity of parents to control their children's behaviour, particularly as they grow older (Commission on Families and the Wellbeing of Children, 2005). The impact of parents own mental ill-health on their parenting ability has been well documented (Rutter, 1989; Cooper and Murray, 1997; Bancroft et al, 2004) demonstrating that parents in crisis may need additional support to that which is primarily focused on parenting skills. Research has also shown that parents of teenagers are often reluctant to seek help for fear of being judged or stigmatized. For this reason, Government policies should be wary of creating a culture of blame that may discourage parents from looking for advice.

Nevertheless, if sanctions are to be used on both parents and young people to curb behaviour induced by juvenile alcohol consumption, then any guidance would need to be explicit about what those sanctions are and when they would be put in place.

The action plan should also address the challenge of parental alcohol misuse. The effects on children are not always acknowledged by adult services working with the parent, especially in cases where the parent is non-resident. FPI has long advocated for more joined-up and coordinated work between adult and children's services. We warmly welcomed the philosophy behind the Think Family documents from the Social Exclusion Unit and would now like to see that commitment to addressing whole family issues fed into action to tackle young people and alcohol misuse. Children whose parents misuse alcohol often suffer from behavioural, emotional and school-related problems. Without important interventions at early stages of their lives, they are much more likely to go on to have alcohol problems themselves.

FPI is pleased to see that the action plan explicitly mentions both the Parenting Early Intervention Programmes and an extension of the Family Intervention Projects to specifically reach families with substance and alcohol misuse. Both these projects

are good examples of whole-family working that are able to work with some of the most chaotic families and help them to make major positive changes in their lives. However, these projects tend to be intensive and long-term and it is essential that they are properly resourced, supported and evaluated.

Support and guidance for young people

It is important to bear in mind that even among the group most often associated with drunkenness -16–24 year olds, approximately six in ten young men and young women, when asked to record how much they drunk, were found to be drinking within the sensible drinking guidelines. Of those young people who do binge drink, only a quarter actually become involved in antisocial behaviour or disorder (Department of Health, 2007).

Nevertheless the action plan should endeavour to support young people in re-assessing their attitudes towards and making responsible decisions about alcohol. FPI would like to see the action plan include a commitment to greater access to alcohol treatment services as well as CAMHs, which can be an invaluable resource for tackling some of the issues that lead young people to consume alcohol. We would also like to see moves toward an integrated whole-family treatment approach as proposed in the Think Family documentation from the Social Exclusion Unit cited above.

Again, dependent on format, the majority of young people will most likely find guidelines on safe drinking useful. Advice on unitary levels and how to judge amount consumed would be useful. GPs, schools, youth centres, sports and leisure centres, libraries, Connexion services, colleges, community centres, entertainment venues such as cinemas and ice-rinks etc, pubs, night clubs and bars would be useful places to distribute and display guidance.

In addition, Accident and Emergency departments would be ideal places to offer information and support to young people to prevent them from progressing to further risk. Likewise the police, as the agency that comes into contact with more young people at risk than any other organisation, should be encouraged to work with local partners to engage young people, rather than just given more powers to remove them from a given location.

Joining up with other policy initiatives

Government has shown an unprecedented commitment to improving the lives of children, young people and families during its time in office. This can be traced through from the Supporting Families document in 1998, to Every Child Matters and ensuing documentation to more recently the Children's Plan. Each of these has built upon what preceded it and has looked to the future; the Children's Plan in particular announced a number of action plans and reviews that are gradually becoming realised. It is essential that each of these policy initiatives acknowledge the other and work together to forge a common theme for families and each of their constituent members.

This action plan does include commitments from both the Children's Plan and the Youth Taskforce; nevertheless a review of CAMHs is being undertaken simultaneously to the youth alcohol action plan and a Youth Crime Action Plan is also in the final stages of development, as is work on information sharing and ContactPoint. It is crucial that each of these projects work together to help improve the lives of some of the most troubled young people in society and to develop a coherent strategy that is sustainable and reliable.

Sanctions for young people and parenting orders

It is important that the action plan does not also serve to unnecessarily criminalise and alienate the minority of young people who misuse alcohol, many of whom may be coping with additional pressures and difficulties. Whilst a coordinated approach from Government is a positive step forward, this action plan should draw back from simply becoming a raft of measures which risk bringing even more young people into the criminal justice system. There are already concerns around the increased criminalising of young people; in the two years between 2003 and 2005 numbers of youth offenders had risen sharply by 13.4 per cent (Telford 2007). This can be seen as a direct result of many of the new provisions already introduced by Government to tackle antisocial behaviour perpetrated by young people. The effects on recidivism are still to be proven.

Alongside the introduction and strengthening of punitive measures to combat alcohol misuse and ensuing antisocial behaviour, the provisions to address problems with drinking through CAMHs, family intervention services and substance misuse services also need to be expanded, resourced and maintained. Those young people with serious problems with alcohol abuse are likely to need sustained support and intervention to change their lives across a whole raft of services.

The majority of parents are responsible for supporting their children, but where they are not able to provide support there has to be intensive support available for them and their children. Done well and early enough, intensive support for families can turn chaotic lives around, prevent anti-social behaviour and save money and resources. In accordance with recommendations made by the Commission on Families and the Wellbeing of Children (2005), FPI advocates that parenting orders should be a last resort, used only with parents who have refused all other offers of support and help.

Both parenting orders and contracts have been shown to be a useful tool in helping families struggling with difficulties that arise from parents not coping with their child's behaviour. Research evidence certainly points to the value of supporting parents in respect of their overall relationship with their child, however it does not suggest that a coercive approach may be the best way forward (Commission on Families and the Wellbeing of Children, 2005). There is evidence from a number of different studies that parenting is influenced by both poverty and external stresses (summarised in Rutter et al 1998). Costello et al have demonstrated that relief of poverty can have a beneficial effect on parenting (Costello et al 2003), suggesting that intervention focused purely on parenting skills may not achieve the desired outcome if other aspects of family life are not addressed in tandem.

Business responsibility

FPI is in agreement with the first aim in Safe. Sensible. Social. The Next Steps in the National Alcohol Strategy (Department of Health, 2007) that there is a need to ensure that the laws and licensing powers that the Government have already introduced in the Licensing Act 2003 and the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006 to tackle irresponsibly managed licensed premises are being used widely and effectively. We also agree that more needs to be done to tackle sales of alcohol to under-aged young people and we would like to see local authorities and the police using their powers to prosecute and even close premises that persistently sell alcohol to children.

FPI was also pleased with the establishment of the Drinkaware Trust introduced in the Alcohol Reduction Strategy for England (Department of Health, 2004), however for this to be effective in changing the culture of drinking, priorities and a work programme urgently need to be agreed and implemented.

We were also pleased to note the introduction of the Social Responsibility Standards for the Production and Sale of Alcoholic Drinks in the UK (2005) following the alcohol reduction strategy. However, adherence to this code is voluntary and we would strongly advise that it should be made mandatory.

Conclusion

FPI is pleased with the general tone of the Youth Alcohol Action Plan and its aim to tackle the problems associated with underage drinking. We continue to be wary of punitive measures against both young people and parents experiencing difficulty and would like to reiterate that these are only acceptable as a last resort and in tandem with the establishment and expansion of support and intervention services that are well resourced and evaluated.

And as a closing thought, we would like to suggest that Government considers the evidence for increasing the cost of alcohol as a means of reducing consumption. The evidence to support this as a strategy was well made in proposals from Alcohol Concern for a national alcohol strategy for England in 1999. (Alcohol Concern, 1999).

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