

## **Alcohol consumption among children and young people**

Drinking alcohol in Ireland is culturally acceptable and is seen as a social event. While the extent of teenage drinking is frowned upon it is unsurprising given the wider environmental context. Young people learn through their parents, peers and societal behaviour. Barnardos believes that any strategies to address teenage drinking also have to involve the wider society otherwise it would be seen as hypocritical<sup>1</sup>.

### **The extent of alcohol use among children and young people**

- In 2005, 83% of 14-17 year olds drank alcohol and the average age of starting to drink was 12 years<sup>2</sup>.
- 33% of all 15/16year olds binge drink<sup>3</sup> at least three times a month.
- Underage Irish girls have the highest binge drinking rate in Europe
- Ireland's teen alcoholism rate is 6% - double the USA. Teen alcoholism is defined as having a high tolerance of alcohol, has experienced or caused harm and has life problems as a result of drinking such as not meeting educational potential.
- Since 1996, there has been a 390% increase in intoxication in public places by underage drinkers.

### **Effects of alcohol on young people**

Alcohol, like any drug, affects every organ in the body. However, as young people's bodies are still growing and developing its effects are worse.

- Alcohol causes brain damage in teens especially before the age of 16.
- 13 year olds who drink alcohol are four times more likely of becoming an alcoholic than those who start drinking at 19 years of age.
- Binge drinking can directly cause depression, anxiety, suicide and attempted suicide. 93% of men under 30 who committed suicide had alcohol in their blood stream<sup>4</sup>.
- Alcohol increases the likelihood of teenagers being involved in risky or dangerous behaviour e.g. violence, crime or sexual activity.
- 35% of sexually active teenagers say alcohol is a factor in their decision to have sex<sup>5</sup>.

### **Recommendations to tackle issue of teenage drinking**

The lack of Government intervention to address binge drinking and overall alcohol consumption rates has remained on the public agenda yet there is no political driver to challenge societal attitudes towards drink. Drinking is a normal adult behaviour, legally and commercially facilitated and central to the social life of adults. Also the drinks and hospitality industries continue to be highly influential pressure groups looking after their own interests and feeding the economy through the collection of VAT on drinks.

The issue of binge drinking has been raised not only in Barnardos projects throughout the country but also at national young people's fora such as Dail na nOg. These young people want to see alcohol advertising banned as it makes it attractive and normalises drinking<sup>6</sup>. Other suggested recommendations, echo those of the Strategic Taskforce on Alcohol by calling for more effective law enforcement and more alcohol free facilities and venues for young people.

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<sup>1</sup> Barnardos (2002) *Every Child Matters – Families under the influence*, Dublin, Ireland

<sup>2</sup> [www.irishhealth.com](http://www.irishhealth.com)

<sup>3</sup> Binge drinking is defined as having 6 or more standard drinks

<sup>4</sup> Irish Medical Journal (2006) Blood Alcohol Levels in Persons who Died from Accidents and Suicide, March 2006, Volume 99, Number 3.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Health (2006) Health Promotion Unit statistics

<sup>6</sup> Dail na nOg (2005)

Barnardos believes that no child under 15 years should be allowed by their parents to drink alcohol. This is due to the proven adverse health effects of alcohol on young teenagers such as increased chances of brain damage, increased likelihood of becoming an alcoholic and increased chance of engaging in risky or illegal behaviour.

Parental involvement is also crucial as they have a responsibility to educate their children through example on why it is not in the child's best interest to drink. Given the presence of peer pressure, parents' simply advising their children to abstain is insufficient. Linked to this is the need to target educational programmes delivered through the schools and aimed at teenagers to stop their drinking or at least moderate it.

The health system must respond to the fact that Ireland has such a high rate of harmful drinking and that specific age related addiction services must be available throughout the country. At present there are only two teenage addiction clinics.