

The Unit's latest 'alcohol' survey examines (among other things) amounts, attitudes, and aggression



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Young people and alcohol: its use and abuse

Confusion reigned. This was the conclusion we reached as the result of a survey entitled *Alcohol Education in Schools*, published by the Unit in 1992.

No consistent pattern of Alcohol Education in the schools was discovered. Amounts varied from almost nothing to 'overkill'. Where it was delivered varied (PSE, Science, RE, Humanities, PE). When it was targeted, and the year groups involved, varied. The resources used were far from consistent. Levels of satisfaction with the programme in the schools amongst the staff also varied considerably.

Alcohol Education lessons are typically not boring. The purpose is not to produce a race of teetotalers, but to promote *sensible drinking*. The industry has frequently supported the development of Alcohol Education programme material, and we suspect it long ago recognised that the programmes could increase rather than undermine sales of alcohol!

The study led SHEU to commence the design of a programme that would (a) include teaching materials across subject boundaries which represent a sensible balance and are not too demanding of time, (b) fit legitimately within National Curriculum subject requirements, (c) be strong on school policy and practice, to involve govern-

ors and parents, and (d) monitor relevant attitudes and practices of the youngsters annually.

The outcome was the two-volume cross-curricular resource entitled *Last Orders*, published earlier this year and described in *Education and Health* Vol. 14 No. 5. The materials are designed to fit within National Curriculum requirements across Years 7-11, and to support liaison between schools, parents and governors in secondary schools and community colleges.

The 'alcohol environment'

The survey on which this latest 122-page report is based arose from a component of the *Last Orders* programme — a means of monitoring the maturation process of the youngsters in their understanding and use of alcohol in the environment in which they lived.

It covered many aspects of their 'alcohol environment', and the complete list of topics is contained in the box overleaf. This article will examine just a few of the findings.

The report is based on the questionnaire responses of 8315 boys and girls, equally divided between Years 8 and 10, all the surveys taking place in 1996. Most of them were in mixed comprehensive schools. There is plenty of classroom material here, and most is photocopyable.

WHAT THE REPORT COVERS

Young people and their use of alcohol
Motivation to drink alcohol
 Parties, pressure and young people
Drinking, driving and young people
 Consequences of drinking alcohol
Alcohol and family life
 Home climate
Aggression at home and the use of alcohol

How many, and how much?

The proportions of young people recording that they drank *any alcohol at all* during the previous 7 days were as follows:

Yr 8 boys	51.3%
Yr 8 girls	48.7%
Yr 10 boys	70.6%
Yr 10 girls	66.6%

Examining just these 'drinkers', the average number of units of alcohol they recorded consuming during the previous 7 days were:

Yr 8 boys	7.1 units
Yr 8 girls	6.3 units
Yr 10 boys	10.6 units
Yr 10 girls	7.9 units

This means that the Year 10 'drinking' boys are, on average, consuming the equivalent of 5 pints of beer a week.

What are they drinking?

We have arranged the histogram (Figure 1) in decreasing average order of popularity of the drinks when Year 10 boys' and girls' results are combined.

wines (*Martini, Cinzano, etc.*)

It is interesting to discover 'alcopops' or alcoholic soft drinks in second place. *Cider* and *alcopops* are equally popular amongst boys and girls. Around one in five consumed *spirits*. The low-alcohol drinks *mixed shandy, low-alcohol beer* and *low-alcohol wine* were consumed by the smallest percentages.

Where do they get it from?



Figure 2. The percentage of Year 10 respondents that purchased alcoholic drink from any of these sources during the previous 7 days.

Deducting the *none of these* column from 100% shows that about 30% of the Year 10 respondents report the purchase of alcoholic drinks, although about 70% reported drinking some! This suggests that more than half the 'drinkers' did not pay for their own drinks at all, or else had them bought on their behalf, perhaps by an older person. We will later examine the extent to which they report that their parents know when they drink at home — a convenient free source of alcohol.

It is worth noting that several respondents report purchasing from more than one source.

Why do they drink?

We asked the young people to indicate how strongly they agreed with a checklist of reasons why young people of their own age drink (Figure 3). On the whole, the levels of response to each statement are extremely similar for boys and girls at the *strongly agree* and *agree* levels, the only marked difference being that more girls than boys consider that *to feel confident* is an important reason.

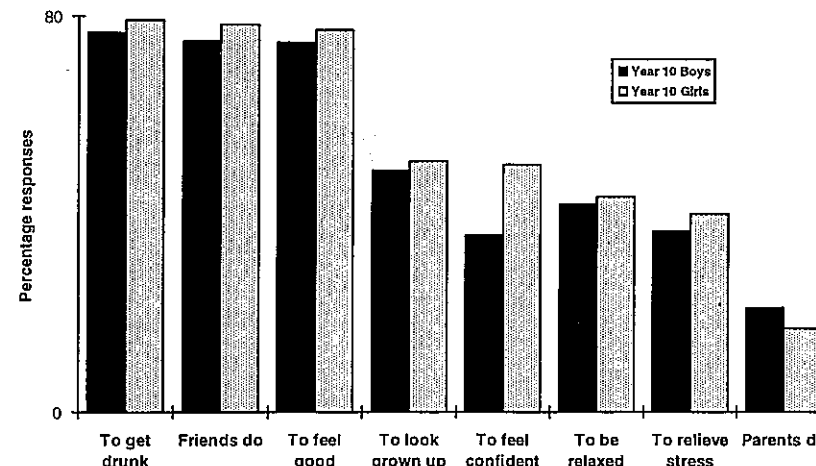
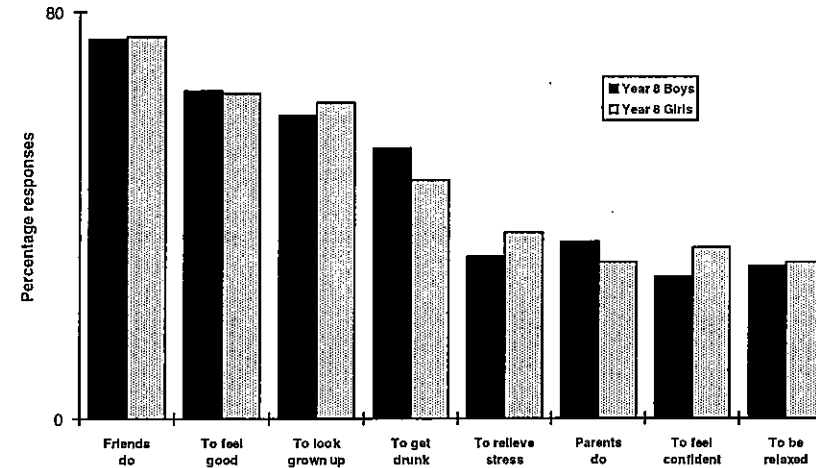


Figure 3. The percentage of young people that 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with these reasons why others of their own age drink alcohol.

Because *friends do* is, overall, the most popular response, agreed with by about 75% of all the Year 8 and Year 10 respondents. Interestingly, because *parents do* is given by a minority. *To feel good* is also very high on the list for both year groups. *To look grown-up* becomes less important for the older respondents, while *to get drunk* is the most widely-quoted reason of all for this older group. What messages are there here for the health educator?

Do their parents know they are drinking?

More than a decade of surveys using the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire has consistently shown that the most commonly-reported venue for the consumption of alcohol by young people is their home.

This immediately raises the issue of whether this consumption is carried on with the permission, or even awareness, of the parents. Is

drinking at home a shared and accepted part of family life? Many parents take the view that modest supervised drinking at home is an appropriate, even essential, part of preparation for adult life.

We therefore asked the young people if their parents know about their home drinking, if any, and got the following responses for the derived category *parents don't always know*:

Year 8 boys	25.6%
Year 8 girls	29.6%
Year 10 boys	39.7%
Year 10 girls	39.6%

The full breakdown is given in the report. The percentages given here are of the whole sample, not just the 'drinkers'.

We then examined the average amount of alcohol consumed during the previous 7 days to see if there is any statistical connection with 'secret' home drinking, and indeed there is. Putting both years and genders together, the mean amount of alcohol that the 'drinkers' reported consuming during the previous 7 days was 8.2 units. However, this was not consistent for those choosing different answers to the question of parental awareness of consumption in the home.

Both years and genders	Units
Don't drink at home	7.4
Parents always know	7.1
Parents usually know	8.7
Parents sometimes/never know	10.1

This seems to imply that heavier drinking is partly based upon secret drinking at home. The heavier or more frequent drinkers are not only more likely to drink at home without the knowledge of their parents, but they are also more likely to drink in places other than their home.

One can summarise therefore that if the parents always know when the child drinks at home, then consumption is *below* average for the sample; if the parents do not always know when the child drinks at home, consumption is *above* average for the sample.

What lies behind this important association? Clearly, it is possible that the climate at home in relation to alcohol, or other parental attitudes, has effects on the children's attitudes towards consumption. But also the parents' absence from the home at certain times may create extra opportunities for the children to consume alcohol, whatever the child's attitude. One is an

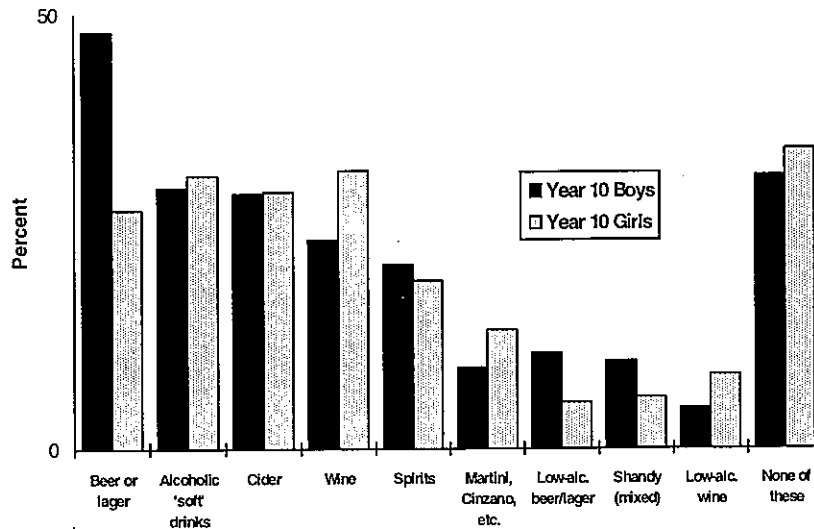


Figure 1. The percentage of Year 10 boys and girls that consumed any of these drinks during the previous 7 days.

The category *none of these* includes those boys and girls who reported no consumption of the listed drinks within the past 7 days. Note that canned shandy is not included as an alcoholic drink.

It is immediately obvious that *beer or lager* shows a higher percentage for the boys than for the girls. Noticeable differences with higher percentages for girls include *wine* and *fortified*

explanation that is about motive, the other concerns opportunity, and they may both be applicable.

How do we encourage 'sensible drinking'?

The large percentage of young people that report drinking alcohol, and the continuing problems of drunkenness and accidents among young people in the 18–24 age group, suggest that even if we hope to encourage sensible drinking in the home there is still some way to go before responsible attitudes and practices prevail elsewhere. It may even be suggested that some parents encourage their children to drink too much, too early. Is the age of 13 too early? Is anything more than a unit or two a week too much? Without clear guidance from authorities, parents are left to improvise in a climate where the opportunities and even pressures to consume may be keenly felt.

I have addressed many parents at meetings held to discuss the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire findings in their school. When I point out the amount of home drinking that is going on, one parent usually offers the observation that the home is the best place in which to encourage sensible, supervised drinking, and this helps to reassure the rest of the audience that they are indeed behaving responsibly. However, what does become apparent is that most parents have no idea of the amount of home drinking that may be going on under their noses. On the other hand, they do seem to accept the reports of generally high levels and high frequency of use of alcohol by even very young people.

Therefore, while accepting the 'responsible' parental statement above that the home is the place to teach sensible use of alcohol, we have to ask:

- Are we really teaching sensible use?
- What examples are we ourselves setting?

Aggression in the home

The home is the best place to develop co-operative cheerful interaction between its members and with friends and neighbours. The drug alcohol can be used positively to enhance good moods but it can and does also release irresponsible and often potentially dangerous behaviour, and aggression. Release of such behaviours can seriously undermine the development of co-operative social interaction.

The survey asked the young people if, and when, they had experienced an 'aggressive' domestic scene. The following parameters were recorded:

1. *Type*. Two classes: verbal or physical.
2. *Presence of alcohol*. Three classes: no drinking by anyone, drinking by the respondent, drinking by other family members.

The report discusses all these combinations, but within this article I shall make the following points.

Frequency of aggression of any sort

The following percentages had been involved in episodes of verbal or physical aggression at home:

After at least one person had been drinking

	Previous 3 months	Ever
Year 8 boys	33.8%	47.8%
Year 8 girls	32.2%	45.9%
Year 10 boys	33.9%	49.8%
Year 10 girls	37.8%	55.0%

After no one had been drinking

	Previous 3 months	Ever
Year 8 boys	40.6%	54.4%
Year 8 girls	46.1%	59.7%
Year 10 boys	44.0%	58.4%
Year 10 girls	55.4%	68.7%

So it is not uncommon to experience aggression in the home. One almost suspects that the substantial percentages that record never having experienced aggression may have a different interpretation from those who say they have, although the prompts (verbal: *shouting and arguing* and physical: *pushing, slapping, punching*) do not seem to leave much room for debate as to what is meant.

We note that the Year 10 girls are consistently the most likely group to have been involved in domestic incidents.

Who is involved?

A question asked the respondent to indicate the family members involved in the incident.

Mothers are more often cited than fathers. There are substantial numbers of young people whose father does not live at home, but even if single-parent families are excluded from the analysis the percentages are very similar. Shouting and arguing may seem to be unwarranted, or

Most parents have no idea of the amount of home drinking that is going on.

The Year 10 girls are the most likely to report involvement in 'domestic aggression'.

may result from legitimate attempts to discipline or otherwise manage the behaviour of the youngster.

Are there 'aggressive' family types?

We examined the frequency of aggressive incidents according to the family structure. Typically, the lowest percentage of young people reporting these incidents is found in families where both mother and father are living at home; the highest is almost always found where one parent has either re-married or is living with a partner. Single-parent families are somewhere in between these levels.

Do we care about young drinkers?

Is the consumption of alcohol by young people ill-advised? Where it causes poor behaviour in public places, action may be taken. But out of sight, who cares? Is it really our problem? Do we mind what happens in people's homes? What action should we be taking? How about:

Step 1 Decide if we really are concerned about so-called under-age drinking.

Step 2 If the answer is 'yes', decide on an age below which the consumption of alcohol by young people is at least against all reasonable judgment, if not against the law.

Step 3 Use this decision to clarify and revitalise the 'alcohol curriculum'; also, encourage parents to use it as a point of reference when deciding how to introduce their own children to alcoholic drink.

Some thoughts on 'under-age' drinking

The 'under-age' market is a very important one.

For more than a decade, SHEU has been monitoring the levels of the disposable income of young people. In our publication *Young People in 1996*, the weekly levels for the 14–15 year olds are discovered to be about £10. Alcohol is one of the items on their list of purchases; it is not the most frequent, but over a quarter of the boys and girls in this age group that we surveyed in 1996 reported its purchase in the previous week.

The teenage market must be a target for the world of commerce. It cannot be ignored, and the alcohol industry appears to consider youngsters a legitimate target since teenage consumption of alcoholic products is not illegal. The new 'alco-pops' are clearly popular with boys and girls, but

so were most other alcoholic drinks before this new variety arrived on the market.

Adults consume vast quantities of alcohol, and so too do their children. They will model themselves upon the older generation in preparation for becoming adults themselves.

Young People and Alcohol: Its Use and Abuse is available from the Schools Health Education Unit for £15.00 including postage.

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