

PROVISION OF ALCOHOL TO MINORS

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Submission

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The NSW Parents' Council Inc. (the "*Council*") is the peak body representing parents of children who are educated in non-government schools in NSW. The Council was founded in 1962 and has, for almost half a century, represented the concerns of parents to State and Federal Ministers of Education and participated in numerous reference committees relating to curriculum development and student wellbeing.

Our supporting principles are:

- Children are entitled to an education which will enable them to attain their full potential.
- Parents have the primary responsibility to educate their children. They are the first and foremost educators of their children, and the family is the first educative 'school' or 'community' to which children belong.
- "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children" (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, clause 3, article 26).
- As a result of the importance of the school in a child's education, parents have the right and duty to choose schools which they consider best suit their children's schooling requirements.
- Parents are entitled to exercise their right of choice of schooling for their children without financial or other disability being imposed on them or on their children by any Government.
- Schools exist to help parents discharge their educational responsibilities, and there should be harmony between the philosophy and values of the home and those of the school.
- Governments, as protectors of the rights of citizens, should assist and encourage, not restrict, parents' exercise of their right to choose schools which they consider best suit their children's needs.
- As a result of their fundamental obligation to protect and promote the rights of all citizens, Governments have responsibilities in relation to schooling for all children, not just for those attending government schools.
- The child, not the school, should be the focus for the allocation of public funds for schooling.
- A Basic Funding Entitlement, calculated as a percentage of the total per capita recurrent cost of schooling in government schools, is a real implementation of the parents' right of choice of school and the right of every child to an equitable share of public funds for schooling.
- For students who are experiencing specified educational disadvantages, their schooling costs should be assessed and more public funds made available, in addition to their Basic Funding Entitlement.
- Governments should acknowledge and support the valuable role of the family in society, and parents in the learning partnerships with schools.

It is common knowledge that the use of drugs and/ or alcohol during adolescence can have detrimental affects on their physical and mental development. The risk of long term damage to the developing brain makes it imperative that drugs and alcohol be avoided during this period of their lives.

"On balance, the available studies suggest that the adolescent brain is particularly sensitive to the negative effects of excessive or prolonged alcohol exposure, including the adverse effects of binge drinking" (<http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/29008.html>).

From the current research, two conclusions can be reached: firstly, alcohol should not be consumed by teenagers under the age of 18 and secondly, the longer drinking alcohol can be postponed, the better. Short term harms of underage binge drinking are outlined in the MBF Healthwatch survey in 2011 and include road trauma, high risk sexual activity, depression, suicidal behaviour, aggression, assault and other harms.

In a paper published in the journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs in May 2011, "*Influence of Family Factors and Supervised Alcohol Use on Adolescent Alcohol Use and Harms: Similarities Between Youth in Different Alcohol Policy Contexts*", it concludes that when adults provide a setting for alcohol use that this results in higher levels of harmful alcohol consequences (page 421). Similar evidence was also revealed in the MBF Healthwatch survey in 2009 that many Australians believe it is acceptable to buy alcohol for teenagers and allow them to drink under parental supervision at home.

(<http://www.bupa.com.au/portal/site/BupaP3/menuitem.bb93fa37758d35a04399e310685420a0/?vqnextoid=01042f3d071d2310VgnVCM1000000c0a400aRCRD&vgnextchannel=286f10e8008d8210VgnVCM2000002745020aRCRD&vgnextfmt=default>)

The Australian Institute of Family Studies conducted a research report in 2004 that concentrated on parenting influences on adolescent alcohol use. Their report stated:

'Longitudinal data from New Zealand also demonstrate that the commencement of alcohol use in early adolescence increases the likelihood of the subsequent development of high risk use, independent of other influences (Fergusson, Horwood and Lynskey 1995). Young people who begin using alcohol at a younger age are more likely to progress to regular use in adolescence (Fergusson, Lynskey and Horwood 1994). Australian longitudinal studies have demonstrated that regular drinking in adolescence is an important risk factor for the development of abusive, dependent (Bonomo et al. 2001) and risky (Toumbourou Williams, White et al. 2004) patterns of use in young adulthood.' <http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/resreport10/alcohol.html>

Data collected from the Australian School Student's Alcohol and Drug Survey (ASSAD) back in 2002 reveals that students in Years 7-12 reported that the most common source of obtaining alcohol was from parents. What is perhaps more confronting from this study was that it appears that parents would provide alcohol to younger rather than older students. Similar figures have been found in other reports (2003 Victorian Youth Alcohol and Drug Survey and Premier's Drug Prevention Council in 2003).

Professor Ian Hickie, Executive Director of the Brain and Mind Research Institute, states "Parents need to understand that early exposure to alcohol can disturb a wide range of key brain functions, with the long-term ramifications potentially causing permanent disruption to some of the brain's most important integrative functions."

Bupa Australia* Chief Medical Officer, Dr Christine Bennett, responded to an MBF Healthwatch survey in 2009 by saying, "Some parents may think this is harmless; some may see this approach as a way to teach their teenage children about socially responsible drinking. But we want parents to understand that early exposure may actually be doing them damage."

"Evidence suggests that the earlier the age that alcohol is introduced, the greater the risk of long-term alcohol related health problems. Binge drinking in young people is on the rise. Too much alcohol impairs young people's judgment which can lead to violence, injury and build a pattern of use that leads to lifetime dependence."

One of the roles of the NSW Parents' Council is to provide information addressing educational and social issues to ensure that parents and carers are well informed and have access to current and credible information surrounding alcohol use and provision of alcohol to underage children. Providing information can empower parents and carers to make decisions that will benefit not only their children and families but the wider community.

Recommendations:

- Educating young people about the risks related to underage drinking- related both to health and potential legal implications, is the key. Young people need to know and understand the laws around alcohol use and the potential consequences of breaking these laws. It is vital that young people realize that there is no safe level of alcohol use.

Consultation with young people is essential in developing effective advertising campaigns addressing both of these points.

- Educating parents and the community about the risks related to underage drinking- related both to health potential legal implications, is the key. It is vital that parents realize that there is no safe level of use of alcohol for teenagers. Informal feedback from our parents suggests that the laws around provision are unclear and can be manipulated to suit a particular situation. Greater clarity is needed around what the law states and what the implications of breaking these laws are. Parents report to us the dilemmas they find themselves in around their rights and obligations when young people are consuming with in their own home. For example, a young person may lie about their age to the supervising adult at a party.

Parents are a major influence in a young person's life and should be encouraged and supported to being good role models for not only their children but all children within their community. This support and encouragement can be delivered via social and mass media as well as through schools and community organisations.