Alcohol: preventing abuse and harm in children and young people

The social context of alcohol use

Alcohol is widely used and enjoyed in the Australian community and is extensively promoted and advertised. The 1999 Australian School Students Alcohol and Drugs Survey (ASSAD) results indicated that, across all ages 12 -17 years, 34% of male students and 29% of female students in New South Wales had consumed alcohol in the seven days prior to the survey. At 17 years of age, only 20% of males and 26% of females described themselves as non-drinkers. Alcohol consumption is a recognised social activity by young people in the 12 – 17 year age group. In NSW, the most common places for drinking alcohol were at home, at a party and at friends' homes.

Research in the United Kingdom has proposed that the family is the primary context for the socialisation of drinking behaviours in young people and that alcohol education should, therefore, be family-based and family-centred. It suggests that young people model and imitate the alcohol-specific behaviours of parents and older siblings and that social reinforcement occurs where behaviours are approved by these significant others.

In 1998, the Commonwealth conducted a survey of teen’s attitudes and behaviours towards alcohol that showed that 63% had consumed alcohol on their last drinking occasion under adult supervision. Children and young people, however, learn about alcohol from many other sources and these also have a significant influence on their attitudes and behaviours.

The importance of educating children and young people about alcohol

Educating children and young people about alcohol is important as this group has particular vulnerability to the potential harms of alcohol. Childhood and adolescence are times of cognitive and emotional maturation. Recent research indicates that brain development continues into early adulthood and that heavy ongoing alcohol use by adolescents can impair brain functioning.

While there are many negative health, social and emotional consequences associated with heavy long-term alcohol use, even a single episode of intoxication can have potentially harmful consequences. Children and young people may be particularly vulnerable because of their relative inexperience with both the effects of alcohol and managing potentially risky situations.

Children and young people are not only at risk of harm from their own misuse of alcohol but they may also be put at risk by the intoxication of a parent, another adult, a work colleague or a similar aged peer. For example, riding in a car driven by a driver who is over the acceptable BAC limit or being the victim of physical assault by an intoxicated person.

Hazardous or binge drinking (three or more drinks on one occasion for females, and five or more drinks on one occasion for males) among young people is of concern. According to the 1999 ASSAD survey, 17,000 NSW students, aged 16 and 17 years, engaged in hazardous drinking in the two weeks preceding the
survey. There is a trend for more male than female adolescents to report regular use of alcohol. However, patterns of alcohol use among females are changing with an increase in alcohol use noted across developed countries.

Polydrug use, the use of two or more types of drugs at the same time, with its unpredictable consequences, is also an increasing concern. The 1999 ASSAD survey indicated that over half the students across Australia who reported using cannabis, amphetamines, hallucinogens and ecstasy in the previous year were drinking alcohol at the same time.

Alcohol misuse is associated with problems of violence and conflict in families. Children and young people are likely to be adversely affected by the violence, additional financial pressures on low-income families and inability to care adequately for children that may be the result of problem drinking by family members. This may interfere with students’ learning and school adjustment.

School-based alcohol education

Schools provide a unique opportunity to educate children and young people about alcohol. Schools can support the positive context provided by the family and provide students with information and skills development to manage situations where they may find themselves potentially at risk.

Alcohol education begins in primary school and is taught as part of the Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) learning area, providing the opportunity to explore a range of relevant alcohol-related issues.

Students learn accurate information about alcohol and its effects, and learn and practise skills that will enable them to make informed decisions about alcohol use to minimise potential harms. The opportunity is provided for young people to explore the impact of alcohol on the health and wellbeing of themselves and others in a supportive classroom environment that promotes a safe and healthy lifestyle.

What makes school-based alcohol education successful?

There is considerable research on what make alcohol education successful in delaying or preventing onset of use and reducing harms. Alcohol education programs are likely to be successful where:

- they are part of a health curriculum (such as PDHPE in NSW) which provides a balanced approach, including the provision of accurate information and skills development
- they are developmental and sequential
- they are based on current theory and research
- teachers target alcohol education before its use begins
- teachers feel confident to teach alcohol education and have received adequate professional development
- lessons are credible to students because the information provided is honest, consistent and relevant to their experience
− lessons are interactive and allow students opportunities to discuss alcohol issues, including both positive and negative consequences of use
− messages which are learned in the classroom are demonstrated consistently by staff and supported by parents
− speakers from outside the school are not used for ‘one-off’ events but are included as part of the planned curriculum.

The UK research quoted previously suggests that school-based alcohol education that is information-based and takes a peer pressure approach will have little effect.

The classroom teacher, with specific knowledge of the peer groups, individual students and the way they learn, is best placed to conduct alcohol education programs in the context of the curriculum. Teachers are professionals skilled in using a wide range of teaching strategies.

Each student brings to the classroom their own understandings and experiences of alcohol. Teachers can take account of this diversity in the classroom and select or modify alcohol education materials to ensure all students can participate and engage in learning that is meaningful for them. Schools need to provide culturally appropriate alcohol education to meet the language and other needs of students including Aboriginal students and students from language backgrounds other than English.

**Promoting social and emotional wellbeing of students**

Schools promote the social and emotional wellbeing of students when they provide an environment that enhances the protective factors that help to build resilience and lessen the impact of adverse life events. Students experience many opportunities across the curriculum to develop skills and behaviours such as problem solving and ways of coping with change and challenges in their lives which help to enhance their resilience. Staying on at school, feeling a sense of 'belonging' at school and experiencing success are protective factors against a range of health and social risks including alcohol misuse.

Schools implement a range of programs that enhance the mental health and wellbeing of students. *MindMatters*, a mental health program for secondary school students, is a good example. Such programs include mentoring and peer support programs, gender equity and anti-racism initiatives, others include programs to support children at key transition points in their schooling such as the move from primary to secondary school, and programs to prevent and address bullying and harassment.

There may be students who are experiencing problems with alcohol misuse, either their own use or someone else’s. School counsellors are available to support these students. They can assess the nature of the problem and refer the student to a specialised service such as a drug and alcohol service, a youth service or a mental health service. The student can be supported at school in a range of ways to help him or her to overcome the problems and progress with their education.
Students who leave school early are identified as being at particular risk of substance abuse, including alcohol. Schools have an important role in helping to prevent alcohol abuse by ensuring that students are encouraged to remain at school to complete their secondary education. Schools and TAFE offer a significant number of programs to engage young people in learning and keep them in education and training.

**What can schools do?**

It is appropriate to expect that schools will:

- implement effective alcohol education
- address the particular alcohol education needs of students within the school community and involve students in planning
- involve the school community in alcohol education
- reinforce community messages relating to the harmful effects of alcohol misuse
- support responsible discussion of alcohol and other drug issues by students within a framework negotiated with and understood by the school community
- provide a supportive environment which protects the social and emotional wellbeing of students and promotes a sense of belonging to school and connection to peers and responsible, caring adults
- encourage students to remain at school
- identify alcohol and other drug use problems early and, in consultation with parents/caregivers, arrange appropriate referrals and ongoing support
- help inform the school community of the impact of alcohol on the health and emotional and social wellbeing of children and young people and the important role they can play in educating their children about alcohol.

**Students in TAFE**

In 2002, just over 25% of all students enrolled in TAFE were aged 15 – 19 years. Fourteen per cent of these students were undertaking vocational courses as part of their school education, including the Higher School Certificate. Over 35,000 students were 16 years and under. These young people have many of the same issues and needs for preventative alcohol education as their peers at school.

TAFE is an adult learning environment where, in comparison to school, there are fewer opportunities to oversee student wellbeing outside the classroom. In addition, many TAFE students undertake apprenticeships where they are jointly at TAFE and work. This introduces them to an adult environment with fewer sanctions around alcohol use.

The curriculum it is set nationally by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and alcohol education is included in occupational health and safety components of relevant courses. This means that there is little opportunity to address alcohol issues that are unrelated to industry needs.
The Young People at Risk program at TAFE operates in locations with high numbers of youth who require individual support including educational assistance, vocational planning and TAFE training. These students are early school leavers and often educationally and or socio-economically disadvantaged and therefore may be at increased risk of substance abuse. They may need additional support within TAFE to address substance use problems including alcohol.

Challenges for alcohol education in schools and TAFE

Alcohol education presents a number of challenges for schools and TAFE.

• How can schools maximise their unique opportunity to provide preventative alcohol education for students to help reduce the harms from its misuse?
• What strategies will best ensure that teachers are well informed and provide effective evidence-based alcohol education that is responsive to the needs of students and the school community?
• What are the most effective strategies for using the strong positive influence of schools and teachers on behaviours of children and young people to reinforce positive influences of peers, family and the community?
• How can schools help students to challenge influences that may promote harmful alcohol use, such as the use of gender stereotypes and the linking of alcohol use with success by the advertising industry?
• How can schools better provide a supportive environment that builds a sense of belonging for students and provide a curriculum that engages them and encourages them to remain at school?
• How can TAFE best provide opportunities for preventative alcohol education for young people in addition to vocationally-focused course work?

Misuse of alcohol is not an isolated behaviour determined solely by an individual’s choice or the amount of information he or she may have about it. It is shaped by a range of complex and interacting factors, many of which are outside the scope of schools to address.

Schools and TAFE need to work in partnership with other Government agencies, families and local communities to develop solutions to problems such as underage drinking and risk behaviours associated with alcohol consumption, and to provide better co-ordination and access to services for children and young people who require help for alcohol related problems.