

AlcoholNZ article

Title

Parental supply of alcohol to under-18s – What parents and caregivers think

At a glance

- This article was published in print form in HPA's June 2017 *AlcoholNZ* magazine (available on alcohol.org.nz/alcoholnz).
- It summaries key findings from HPA-commissioned consumer insights research on the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of parents and caregivers to supplying alcohol to their under-18 teenagers. UMR Research Limited conducted this research using a series of interviews. The full report of the research is available on hpa.org.nz.
- Parents are the usual suppliers of alcohol to under-18s, followed by their friends.
- Parental attitudes to supplying alcohol to teenagers under 18 were on a continuum from being comfortable supplying when the teenager was approaching the legal purchase age (16 to 17 years) to not being comfortable in any situation until the teenager was 18.
- Some parents were comfortable to supply alcohol in most situations; others would supply only in specific situations and with some conditions attached.
- Active adult supervision at teenage parties and being a good host were seen as essential.

Citation

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Parental supply of alcohol to under-18s

What parents and caregivers think

The Health Promotion Agency's (HPA's) overall advice for parents is that "not drinking alcohol is the safest option for children and young people under 18 years". Some parents or legal guardians do choose, however, to supply their teenagers with alcohol. The Youth'12 Survey of New Zealand secondary school students found that students who drank alcohol reported that their usual source of alcohol included their parents (60%), their friends (44%) or someone else who bought the alcohol for them (30%) (Clark et al., 2013).

There is limited New Zealand research investigating the reasons parents choose to supply or not supply alcohol, parents' attitudes and approaches to their teenagers' alcohol use, and things that can be done to reduce parental supply. To help fill this knowledge gap, HPA commissioned UMR Research Limited to undertake qualitative research with parents and caregivers of teenagers under 18 years. The research is also being used to inform national and community-based initiatives.

The report of the findings from this research, *Parental supply of alcohol to under-18s*, was published on HPA's website – hpa.org.nz – in March 2017.

Forty-eight people participated in a series of interviews, including Māori, Pacific and general population parents/grandparents/caregivers of teenagers under 18 years. They were from a range of geographic locations and socio-economic status households and included people who did and who did not supply alcohol to their teenagers.

Some of the key findings from the research (UMR Research Limited, 2016) are summarised below. The findings are restricted to the views and experiences of those who participated (which may not be representative of the wider population).

Parental attitudes, beliefs and behaviours

- Attitudes to supplying alcohol to teenagers under 18 were on a continuum, with two extremes – from being comfortable supplying in most situations when the teenager was approaching the legal purchasing age (16 to 17 years) to not being comfortable in any situation until the teenager was 18 years old. Between these extremes there was a group of parents who were relatively comfortable supplying alcohol to teenagers under 18 years in specific situations and with some conditions attached.

- For some parents, all of the following conditions would need to be met and for others just some of the conditions would suffice. These conditions were that:
 - » parents were monitoring and supervising (ie, a controlled situation)
 - » drinking was with family/whānau and trusted adults
 - » drinking alcohol was part of a special occasion.
- The main reasons why those who were *not comfortable* supplying alcohol in most circumstances did not do so were that:
 - » their own personal experiences of alcohol-related harm had impacted on them in such a way that they reinforced a ‘no alcohol till 18 years’ policy with their teenagers
 - » they were keen to support the legal age of 18 years for purchasing alcohol and believed this law set a legal precedent for them to follow
 - » they considered any teenager younger than 14 years too young
 - » a few held strong religious beliefs, in relation to alcohol.
- The main reasons why those who were *comfortable* supplying alcohol in most circumstances did so were that:
 - » it was an opportunity to prepare teenagers approaching 18 years on how to treat alcohol and to experience alcohol in a supportive and safe environment with parents on hand
 - » it gave parents the opportunity to model good behaviour with alcohol
 - » their own personal experiences of restrictive policies on alcohol when they were teenagers influenced them to seek a more moderate approach to drinking for those under 18 years.

Parental attitudes to teenage parties

- Checking out a party (ie, where it was being held, who was going, whether there would be alcohol, adult supervision, safety issues) was seen as crucial to deciding whether to allow a teenager to attend.
- Active adult supervision and being a good host were seen as essential.
- Parents felt disappointed and sad rather than angry if their teenagers were found drinking alcohol without their permission or knowledge.
- The majority of parents, across all age groups, considered it was not realistic to expect teenagers under 18 to be alcohol free until 18 years. There were a few parents who managed to maintain this in their homes but they were a minority. The major barrier to changing this stance was that parents sincerely believed they were taking the appropriate actions in introducing alcohol to their 16 to 17-year-olds in preparation for the legal age of purchase.

Strategies to shift parental attitudes

- Parents suggested ways they could be supported to have better attitudes to supplying alcohol to teenagers under 18 years, including:
 - » encouraging parents and the community to support and back up parents’ decision making around alcohol
 - » providing various forms of parenting education to support parents to be more effective in their parenting
 - » reinforcing key messages and behaviours through schools
 - » supporting school counsellors to address improved alcohol-related behaviours for both teenagers and their parents.

- Some parents also thought it would not hurt to remind parents and teenagers of the damage that alcohol can do, as well as the legal ramifications and consequences.
- For Māori, there was strong support for parenting education that included alcohol strategies. This could be facilitated through local schools and perhaps wānanga.
- Pacific parents also advocated parenting education including alcohol strategies and facilitated through local Pacific churches and community groups.

If you would like to read more, the full research report with other findings and a selection of parents' comments, such as the following quote, can be downloaded from HPA's website at hpa.org.nz/research-library.

It is how my husband and I view alcohol I guess. We place no value on it at all in our home and we instil that into our kids as much as we can. So I guess it is not something that we want them to do at all, acknowledging though that they are free to make decisions for themselves. But I guess because of the impact it has had on our whānau and how destructive it has been.

(Research participant, Māori female)

References

Clark, T.C., Fleming, T., Bullen, P., Denny, S., Crengle, S., Dyson, B. ...Utter, J. (2013). *Youth'12 overview: The health and wellbeing of New Zealand secondary school students in 2012*. Auckland: The University of Auckland.

UMR Research Limited. (2016). *Parental supply of alcohol to under-18s*. Wellington: Health Promotion Agency.