

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose - Australia's No 1 parenting educator

Teen drinking, never safe

This research provides evidence for a move away from the harm minimization approach, where teenagers are taught to drink sensibly, and even for a rise in the minimum drinking age.

The current trend to introduce alcohol to teenagers before the legal drinking age of eighteen needs to be urgently reviewed in light of recent Australian research into adolescent drinking.

A team from Melbourne's Murdoch Children's Research Institute, tracked 1520 young people's drinking habits over a ten year period and found that there is no safe drinking level for teenagers.

Adolescents under the age of eighteen who drink even small amounts of alcohol have a significantly higher risk of alcohol abuse when they move into early adulthood. In fact, low level drinkers resemble more closely high level drinkers than those who didn't drink at all when it comes to alcohol-related problems.

This research provides evidence for a move away from the harm minimization approach, where teenagers are taught to drink sensibly, and even for a rise in the minimum drinking age.

The move toward zero alcohol for under 18's has plenty of backing from health experts across the nation. There is no doubt teen drinking is linked to a variety of risk-taking behaviours particularly sexual activity, violence and anti-social behaviours.

The brain research conducted over the last ten years leaves little doubt that those who begin drinking under eighteen years of age are highly susceptible to developing dependency problems in their twenties.

A type of hard-wiring of the connections on the brain occurs from the age of 13 through to 18, which means habits such as smoking and drinking alcohol are more likely to become ingrained at this stage, than if they began in their twenties.

The evidence suggests that we need to question the appropriateness of the harm minimization approach and consider the **zero alcohol approach for young people**.

This will be challenging to say the least as the current trend of young people to up-age, is almost reaching epidemic levels. Twelve-year-olds now want to dress like 16 year-olds and 16 year olds want to act like 21 year olds, with the same rights but few of the responsibilities of adults.

Increasingly, drinking alcohol is seen by young people as an essential rite of passage that should be allowed at an earlier and earlier age.

The pressure that young people now put on adults to allow them to drink under age is enormous. Underage drinking is now seen by many young people as normal and those parents who resist can be made to feel so out of sync that surely they must come from another planet.

There is no doubt rolling back the drinking age or suggesting that young people delay drinking until they are eighteen will be met with enormous resistance from many young people. That's why introducing zero alcohol for under eighteens needs strong adult leadership involving schools, parents and community groups.

The evidence seems abundantly clear that in the long term best interests of young people that zero alcohol for the under eighteen age group is the only option that right-minded people should take.

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