

Peter Slattery

Therapist, Educator, Trainer.

Mobile 0418 456 577

Email: petersla@zip.com.au

web: www.peterslattery.com

Correspondence:

PO Box 153, Dulwich Hill, Sydney NSW 2203 Australia.

ABN 17 861 766 294

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Young people and alcohol. Helping the risk-takers survive

We hear that irresponsible drinking by teenagers is terrible and parents should take more responsibility for their kids. And I hear this from members of the alcohol industry who also happily advertise the very products that young people are acting 'irresponsibly' with. We hear more sensible comments that we should restrict hours of trading, increase prices, and have a greater police presence in certain areas. And there is probably some truth to each of these. So to this frothy mix let me add some ideas of my own. And a reasonable place to start might be by asking if in fact we do have a problem with young people and alcohol.

Drinking and young people in Australia

If we take a look at the National Alcohol Drinking strategy we can read that in 2005 '...in any given week, approximately one in ten – that is 168,000 – 12 to 17 year olds reported binge drinking or drinking at risky levels (defined in this report as seven or more drinks for males and five or more for females). For 16 and 17 year olds, one in five drank at risky levels. Interestingly they also found amongst club goers that:

- 13% of 18-20 year olds drank 13 or more standard drinks each time they visited the club
- 83% left the club as the driver of a vehicle; and
- 70% of males (30% of females) believe drinking is an important tradition at their club.

Various other reports about alcohol and violent crime found that

- 47% of those who did violent crime were drunk
- 43% of victims were drunk

All in all, sounds like we have a problem, doesn't it.

The Backdrop

Things don't just happen. They happen for a reason and usually creep up on us rather than popping up full-blown on their first appearance. Hazardous drinking is no exception. We can go back 200 years for this history. And as relevant as this I will simply look at a more recent background.

Physiological facts

- Once puberty hits in and adolescence follows, young people have new bodies with new thoughts and feelings to contend with
- Young people's brains are still growing, perhaps the most relevant bit being that which regulates impulsive actions

Sociological facts (or more accurately peter's ideas)

- Pathways to adulthood are unclear. Young people do not always know how to grow into adulthood nor indeed when they are adults
- Legal introductions to driving, drinking and leaving school all occur at roughly the same time...???
- We live in an alcohol saturated society
- A 17 year old driver on a P1 plate is 4 times more likely than a 26 year old to have a fatal motor vehicle accident

Adolescence characterized by a new body complete with new thoughts and feelings, a brain that is as yet incomplete in the 'let's stop here' department, combined with unclear pathways to adulthood and then fueled by alcohol and often cars, is a dangerous cocktail.

A way of thinking about a response

The following is one way of thinking about how we respond to all this, and it takes into account a number of aspects.

Perspectives

Each of the following has an interest in young people and risky drinking, but the response of each might be quite different:

- Parents
- Workers with young people
- As a society

Risk assessment. Where to focus our attention?

The simple answer is that we focus everywhere, but sometimes what can be more helpful for a worker or a parent facing a scary and potentially dangerous Saturday night with their kids, is a standard risk assessment. This approach can allay some fears and also suggest a course of action. A fairly standard view of risk assessment asks:

- What could go wrong?
- What will be the consequences if it does go wrong?
- How likely is it to happen?

This can be fairly useful and while we may continue to be fearful for our young people, our fears may be somewhat more realistic and our attempts to help the young person stay safe more accurately and successfully developed.

Different motivations for dangerous drinking

Sometimes we just try to deal with behaviours. We just try to stop them or make sure no-one gets hurt. Laws sometimes have to take this approach. At other times if we really want to have an impact, especially in the long term, we need to consider what lies behind the behaviour. The following is one way of thinking about the differing motivations that can lie behind risky drinking. And for a parent or a worker, looking at the motivation for a young person's behaviour is fundamental to working out a useful response.

- The danger is incidental
- The danger is part of the attraction
- The danger is part of the attraction especially when there is an audience
- The behaviour is a way of dealing with problems
- The person simply doesn't care

Our response. Three options

And here it gets tricky because in deciding on a response, almost immediately our views and values start intersecting with possible strategies. And of course whether we call it 'risk management', or 'reducing the danger' or something else, the phrase 'harm minimization' will spring to mind for many, with all the associated feelings and opinions. Having said this, there are three ways we can think about not engaging in risky drinking.

- Do not drink (or stop people drinking)
- Avoid situations where drinking is likely to occur thereby reducing the chances of drinking. (Or how do we decrease the chances of people engaging in risky drinking).
- Reduce the harm. (If you do drink, do it as safely as possible)

Reducing harm

This one requires a comment. Harm reduction has traditionally been about focusing less on the person's use and more on the harm associated with it. Instead of trying to stop the use, the aim is to reduce the damage associated with the use. It has always been a very emotive and controversial issue. If reducing harm is something you are interested in then there are three ways of thinking about this:

- The person using
- The environment
- The substance

The chances of any strategy being successful

Put simply and pragmatically, a good strategy is one that works. Part of the framework outlined at the beginning asks: 'What are the chances of this strategy working?' If the chances are low then it isn't such a good strategy.

So what do we do? Possible responses in terms of differing motivations

The danger is incidental

As just mentioned, this is where our views and values come into play. Let me run with an example of two friends, Sam and Serina. They are turning 16 and want to have a joint party. Remember the options:

- Do not drink
- Avoid situations where drinking is likely to occur (Thereby reducing your chances of drinking)
- Reduce the harm. If you do drink, do it as safely as possible.

The 'no drink' option. Some parents would say 'no party'. So what happens then? It may be accepted and that's that. Maybe there is a safe and happy celebration in other ways? Or possibly people go quietly (or not-so quietly) to the park and get drunk? (Some schools breathalise kids on the way into the school formal, but of course then there is the after party.)

Avoid the drink. Parents might say okay to a party but alcohol is not on. So the situation is much less likely to have people drinking. Or of course some may drink on the-quiet with alcohol in the soft drink bottle, or drink before they come.

Reduce the harm. Other parents will opt for 'drink but keep it in moderation' whatever the legalities. Parents and workers with youth, while being consistent philosophically may opt for quite different options. As a worker, harm minimization may be the way to go with the party for the 16 year olds...safer drinking. As a parent the same person with two younger children or someone concerned that their home will become a haven for underage drinking, may opt for an alcohol-free party.

As a society we can make laws governing use, when, where and who. With all laws at least one question to ask is: Is it enforceable? And if it is, will the behaviour simply move somewhere else? Instead of at the pub, to the home, where the chances of family violence increase?

If a harm minimization approach is opted for and we continue with Serina and Sam's party, we can look at the three aspects:

- **The person.** Have a word with the party holders about what is expected. Possibly have a word with all the party-goers

- **The environment.** Put out food and water. If you live on the sixth floor you might lock the door to the balcony. Possibly stick around and maintain an adult presence. (Outside of the party example for instance, some pubs only give glasses to well known customers, others get plastic cups. They don't jab in the face with as much damage)
- **The substance.** You might come to a decision about what drinks; no spirits and only low-alcohol beer. (Again outside the party example, non-sniffable petrol is an example)

Whatever we opt for, the following three criteria are worth thinking about. A person who is exposed to danger **INCIDENTALLY** may well take on board a strategy for staying safe if the strategy:

- Is cheap or better still free
- Easy to implement
- Does not interfere with their fun

Another consideration for anyone considering that party for the 16 year-olds might be to do a risk assessment.

- What could go wrong?
- What will be the consequences if it does happen?
- How likely is it to happen?

And work things out from there. Sometimes doing this can ground our more irrational fears...so that we can then deal with the real ones!

When the danger is part of the attraction

Now this one gets tougher and it is linked to the next two as some of the comments apply to each equally. Removing the danger here means the person will no longer want to engage in the activity. So making jumping off the deck into the pool a **NON** option by locking the door to the balcony will stop **THAT** behaviour. But it may not stop the next. And there is likely to be a flow-on effect for this person.

Parents and workers might approach this via the underlying stuff. And we know from research that the things that help people grow into healthy human beings are - among other things - being securely part of something (a family, a culture, a group), having a strong sense of self and having a sense of control over your life. There is encouraging evidence that working with these dynamics over time can lead to a lessening of this destructive behaviour. In the short term ways of keeping the person as safe as possible may prove the way to go.

Laws can play a part here. Seat-belts have almost become second nature to lots of young people. Not driving and drinking also has for a significant number. So while a person may still be interested in danger, some behaviours of safety can just become automatic; stopping at red lights, wearing seat belts, wearing helmets.

***When the danger is part of the attraction...
especially when there is an audience***

For parents and workers we need to focus on helping build young people who are confident in themselves and comfortable with who they are. People of all ages can be concerned with impressing others. This has a particular place for younger people in the growing-up process and it would be unrealistic to expect that a strong sense of self will always over-rule wanting to impress. But it does have some protective value.

Also as for the above, at a societal level we can work on developing behaviours which occur almost on a subconscious level. You can wear a seat belt, be drunk AND still show off to others!

Again we can work on the environment. We can put traffic lights where we know they are needed, make sure cars are fitted with seat belts because we know that alcohol and speed are two major killers; make sure that poles bend when we hit them, rather than crashing through spear-like into our vehicles.

Are these strategies less than perfect? Yes. And is it lamentable that we have to so construct our society? Well yes. But depending on your point of view, worth it.

The person has life problems

For this person we do whatever it is that we think works to keep them safe in the short term while we work on the long term stuff. Again the same research applies that tells us that we grow strong when we are being securely part of something, when we have a strong sense of self not so dependent on others, and when we believe we can control our lives, when we have a sense of belonging, when we have meaning in life.

The person simply does not care

As with the person above, we do whatever we can that might keep them safe. Our response as a society might be to create safer cars which might provide some greater safety for this person. And we construct our roads that lead to the least damage if there is an accident. Or we can look at responsible practices in hotels which might from moment to moment and situation to situation, provide some safety for this person. A parent or worker with such a young person may focus on helping the young person lead a meaningful life connected to others, knowing that leading such a life the person will be less likely to act in destructive ways towards themselves and others. Someone who feels connected to others and part of something bigger than themselves is more likely to act in ways respectful of themselves and others. And some individuals do have desires, emotions, worries, fears, memories, events, that hold them back from a life of safety let alone a life that helps them flourish. And we need to help them stay as safe as possible while we help them deal with these demons.

A long term view

Our approach to smoking has taken us over 20 years to get where we are now. And while the advances are real and laudable there are those seemingly untouched. Or possibly we have added to the creation of a sub-set. Young people doing it hard over time are often smokers. It is part of the role. Is this just co-lateral damage? And a price we have to pay? However we proceed with the drinking thing in Australia, and it is shaping up to be much more complex, more controversial and longer-term than smoking, we need to proceed making sure that as we go we are looking after as many of our citizens as we can.

If I can go back to the statement on binge drinking and quote Dr. David Caldicott who is an emergency doctor and independent drug expert based in Adelaide: 'The issue of how to reach the hearts and minds of young Australians remains problematic...politicians must tread carefully when it comes to using shock tactics where young people are concerned...campaigns based on wit and satire...are far more likely to enter into popular culture and spread virally, than campaigns designed by fifty year olds trying to scare them into changing their behaviour when they were a 'young un'.'

Well I'm past 50 and I ain't trying to scare nobody! Not on purpose anyway. But there is a point in what David says, winning the hearts and minds of our young people is a real challenge for us. And I think he is right about the scare stuff. It protects very few if any and usually not for very long.

For my part, I will add that I would be well pleased if we took a look at the society we are building; all of it, and ask ourselves what needs and desires we are creating within ourselves. I have yet to see a study that says we grow well from watching television, accumulating money and having a big car. How do we do well as people? Put in different words in different studies it keeps adding up to the same things. We grow strong and flourish when we have a sense of belonging and security, when we have good relationships, when we have some mastery over our lives, when our sense of ourselves is solid and full, when we act generously, when people look for the best in us and find it, when we view the world around us optimistically as a place that we feel part of are and want to be involved with.

And the presence or absence of these things makes a difference as to how riskily we behave with alcohol, or anything else.