

International Center for Alcohol Policies Series on Alcohol in Society

Learning About Drinking

edited by
Eleni Houghton
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Executive Summary

What is the main message of this book?

The main message of this book is that drinking alcohol is a learned behavior and therefore learning to drink alcohol responsibly is a skill young people can acquire. The process of learning begins in early childhood when even very young children are influenced by the attitudes and behavior of other family members especially their parents. As they grow through childhood into adolescence, their peers as well as the culture at large increasingly influence young people. This book reflects the complexity of factors, which impact a young person's decisions about alcohol. Since most young people are likely to experiment with alcohol, it is better that they should be taught about it safely than having to learn in riskier settings.

What are the lessons for the future?

Young people are impressionable and easily influenced as they mature. This influence comes from many angles: peers, family, school, religion, and the media. A better understanding of how this influence affects a young person's worldview, may allow the tailoring of messages which promote responsible choices and behavior and it may also change how families approach alcohol with their kids.

This includes understanding and accepting that most young people will experiment with drinking. An important task of education is to provide them with adequate skills to make appropriate decisions including whether, when and how to drink. Parents, especially early on, exert a strong influence over their children and research shows that provided they stay involved in their children's lives they can continue to have an impact.

A significant proportion of young people in many countries will begin drinking regularly in their late teens. Accidents and injuries are an important cause of morbidity and mortality in this age group. Special attention needs to be given to programs to reduce irresponsible risk-taking.

There are opportunities, in the home and in formal educational settings, to teach appropriate drinking behavior in ways which are legally and culturally acceptable.

How did it come to be written?

The International Center for Alcohol Policies¹ has as one of its primary concerns the understanding and promotion of responsible lifestyles. With this in mind, ICAP was interested in learning how and what influenced young people in different cultures to drink or not to drink alcohol. Why is alcohol such a huge issue on US college campuses and yet in France this setting hardly bears mentioning? ICAP commissioned a number of international experts on youth and alcohol to explore some of these factors. As with all publications and projects of ICAP, the alcohol beverage industry was also asked to contribute a chapter regarding its place in guiding and educating young people.

¹ The International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP) is dedicated to helping reduce the abuse of alcohol worldwide and to promoting understanding of the role of alcohol in society through dialogue and partnerships involving the beverage alcohol industry, the public health community and others interested in alcohol policy. ICAP is a not-for-profit organization supported by twelve major international alcohol companies.

For whom is the book intended?

This book is intended for all those who are interested in alcohol use as a factor in the maturation of young people. Psychologists and sociologists; anthropologists; physicians and other health practitioners; public health professionals; educators; parents; policymakers; as well as beverage alcohol producers and providers can all benefit from the lessons learned in this book.

How can the contents of the book best be summarized?

In broad terms, the book is intended to lay the groundwork for drinking as a learned behavior and to explore the implications of this message.

Chapter 1 gives an overview of the influences on youth and the means through which they assume the behaviors of those around them in general. Sociological theories are discussed, and brief insight is given into various cultural drinking patterns around the world and across the life span.

Chapter 2 describes the theoretical basis for the proposition that drinking is a learned behavior. It describes drinking as a competence that may be added to a host of skills a young person develops on the road to becoming an adult. With this foundation laid, several of the subsequent chapters examine in more detail some of the groups and institutions that impact young people and their view of alcohol: Family, Peers, Religion, Education, Media and Government.

Chapter 7 attempts to explain how all these influences interact with one another to form a young person's worldview and shape their attitude and behavior towards drinking. Chapter 8 provides a glimpse into the historical and current effects of research on this issue and poses challenging research questions for the future. Chapter 12 outlines the beverage alcohol industry's educational efforts to prevent underage drinking and promote responsible consumption among legal adults.

The final chapter wraps up the book's message and points out suggestions for continuing efforts.

Titles in the Series on Alcohol in Society:

Drinking Patterns & Their Consequences. (1998). Edited by Marcus Grant & Jorge Litvak.

Alcohol and Emerging Markets: Patterns, Problems, and Responses. (1998). Edited by Marcus Grant.

Alcohol and Pleasure: A Health Perspective. (1999). Edited by Stanton Peele & Marcus Grant.

Drinking Occasions: Comparative Perspective on Alcohol and Culture. (2000). By Dwight B. Heath.

Learning About Drinking. (2001). Edited by Eleni Houghton and Ann M. Roche.

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