Supporting a young person in their decision not to use alcohol or other drugs

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What do these people have in common?

None of them drink alcohol – some due to religious reasons, others due to prior problems with the drug and others … just because ….

Other famous teetotalers through history

As you can see – just because you don’t drink, it doesn’t mean you’re going to be a better person …

Increasingly seeing people talk about their ‘non-drinking’

Usually people who have had problems with alcohol in the past … what about those who choose not to drink in the first place?

Outline of presentation

- Australian culture and alcohol – ‘it’s tough to be a non-drinker’
- How many young Australians choose not to drink alcohol? How many choose not to use other drugs? Are things changing? If so, why?
- Why do some young people choose not to drink alcohol?
- What are the challenges they face?
- What should parents do to support their children in this area?
- How can those who work with young people support those who choose not to drink?
Alcohol: Do we really have a chance?

In a culture where alcohol is not just socially accepted but increasingly ‘socially expected’ – how do non-drinkers feel?

How many Australians choose not to drink alcohol or other drugs?

Australian alcohol and other drug use

How many Australians choose not to drink alcohol or other drugs?

More than one in five (14 years and over) choose to abstain from alcohol

- increasing from 18.5% in 1991 to 21.8% in 2013
- those who had never had a full serve of alcohol rose from 6.5% to 13.8%
- number of ex-drinkers dropped from 12% to 8%

Most Australians (14 years and over) report never using illicit drugs

- relatively stable – decreased from 60.7% in 1991 to 58.2% in 2013
- recent ecstasy use (0.9%-2.5%) and cocaine use (1%-2.3%) increased
- methamphetamine was stable and recent cannabis had decreased (13.1%-10.2%)
Alcohol drinking status: proportion of the population aged 14 years or older, 1991-2013

Never used illicit drugs (%) - 14 years and over

1991-2013: Changes in 'recent use' (%)

How many school-based young people drink and/or use other drugs?

How many young Australians choose not to drink alcohol or illicit drugs?

Students who describe themselves as a 'non-drinker', Australian secondary school students (%), 2011-2014
Young people and alcohol

“When it comes to underage drinking, most youth deserve an A+”

Prevalence (%) of last year drug use among 12-17 year old students, 1996-2014

Great social pressure – not just ‘socially acceptable’ but ‘socially expected’ – underage drinking portrayed as the ‘norm’ and teens want to be seen as adults

… caught up in the constitution of teenagers’ identities in two ways in that it is understood as part of what teenagers ‘normally do’ and also as what adults ‘normally do’

- choice between being ‘normal’ or ‘weird’ – not surprising many conform to the norm of drinking alcohol
- in fact, it’s surprising that many don’t and growing numbers are choosing not to
- a group ‘rendered invisible’ – most health promotion and educational strategies focusing only on the drinkers

Never consumed alcohol, Australian secondary school students (%), 2011-2014

White & Williams (2016) Australian secondary school students’ use of tobacco, alcohol, and over-the-counter and illicit substances in 2014

“Straight edge” – ‘sXe’ or ‘X1’

A youth sub-culture promoting a ‘clean living’ lifestyle – no sex, no alcohol or other drugs

Never used alcohol, Australian secondary school students (%), 1999-2014

White & Williams (2016) Australian secondary school students’ use of tobacco, alcohol, and over-the-counter and illicit substances in 2014

It’s tough to be a non drinker, particularly for a young person


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‘A youth sub-culture promoting a “clean living” lifestyle – no sex, no alcohol or other drugs’
Why do young people choose not to drink alcohol? (Herring et al. 2014)

- Religious Beliefs
  - Why do young people choose not to drink?

Other reasons — modern issues faced by young people could be affecting their decision:

- financial pressures – student debt, greater job insecurity, rising housing costs
- socialising no longer requires meeting in a pub or bar – online communication does involve drinking
- cameras everywhere – concern about online image
- increasingly diverse populations – newcomers from cultures where drinking is less common
- possible ‘backlash’ to the excess of their elders – the ‘Ab Fab’ theory
- public health messages being more effective
- alcohol being the 'witch' in films and TV shows

Choose not to drink for reasons of religiosity

- Some comments from interviewees from Herring et al’s study (2014)

How do young non-drinkers 'survive' in a world of teen drinking?

- NZ study identified 4 alternative discourses non-drinkers use to battle drinking norms
  - have legitimate alternative subject positions
    - sporting and ‘healthy’ lifestyles
    - religious and cultural reasons
    - constructing oppositional leisure identities
  - reconstitute alcohol consumption as abject
    - view alcohol in ‘kushooma’ terms, thus validating their decision not to drink
  - ‘pass as a drinker’
    - while others hold visible or overt positions as non-drinkers, some attempt to ‘pass’ as a ‘rinker’ by holding a bottle or glass and/or act intoxicated

How do we effectively support those teens who choose not to drink?

A guiding principle of WHO’s Global Alcohol Strategy (2010):

- focus on teen ‘binge drinking’ reinforces belief that all young people do this
- important to ‘redress the imbalance’ – represent and promote diversity of young people choosing not to drink to help address existing stereotypes
- across all levels of policy making and areas of practice (health, education, etc) and within the family

Religious Beliefs

Why do young people choose not to drink?

- Why do young people choose not to drink alcohol?

TASTE

COST

Why do young people choose not to drink alcohol?

Herring et al. (2012) “But no one told me it’s okay to not drink”: A qualitative study of young people who Don’t Drink, Journal of Substance Use 19, 304-311

How do they 'survive' in a world of teen drinking?

- Some comments from interviewees from Camroy and Visscher’s study (2014)
How can parents support teens who choose not to drink?

Do not worry that they’re not going to ‘fit in’ – it is possible to not drink and have a social life!

From an early age parents should

- acknowledge all types of drinking – ‘risky’, ‘moderate’ and ‘non-drinking’ – it is an option!
- if you know a non-drinker – talk about them
- discuss reasons people choose not to drink
- promote positive norms – most 15 year-olds classify themselves as non-drinkers, most don’t use illicit drugs
- challenge misconceptions and avoid generalisations– alcohol is a drug, ‘not everyone does it’ and it is possible to celebrate without it, drugs aren’t ‘everywhere’
- be a positive role-model

What simple things can we do to be positive role models?

Parents - powerful influence, even on teens ...

- don’t be frightened to talk about your alcohol use – how do you try to drink safely?
- limit your alcohol use, especially in front of your children
- provide food and non-alcoholic beverages if making alcohol available to guests
- organise events with families and friends that don’t involve alcohol
- don’t portray alcohol as a good way to deal with stress, e.g., “I’ve had a bad day, I need a drink!”
- sometimes decline the offer of alcohol

As someone who works with young people, what can you do?

How can workers ‘redress the imbalance’? Some simple tips that can make a difference and support non-drinkers:

- ensure conversations around alcohol begins with “If you choose to drink alcohol ...” and not “When you drink ...”
- changing those few words can make so much difference
- non-drinkers feel included, validated and builds resilience
- promote positive norms
- even where teen drinking is the norm, let them know that non-drinking is an option
- avoid perpetuation of stereotypes and challenge misconceptions
- be mindful of language - don’t let inaccurate statements pass
- examine your school’s/agency’s/organisation’s practices around alcohol and drinking
- what is being communicated? Is non-drinking acknowledged?

For further information or you are interested in more of what I have to say ...

For a PDF copy of this presentation or a list of references and supporting information, please go to my website - www.darta.net.au

Please feel free to contact me by email - p.dillon@darta.net.au or follow me on Facebook or Twitter (Drug and Alcohol Research and Training Australia) or go to my blogs – ‘Doing Drugs with Paul Dillon’ or ‘The Real Deal on Drugs’