

## Parents 'need to drink less' in front of their kids

### Behind the Headlines

Monday December 10 2012



An estimated 2.5 million children live with a hazardous drinker

A study into the impact of parental drinking habits was in the papers today, with the Independent reporting that parents “should drink alcohol less in front of the children” and the Daily Mail claiming that women drinkers “pass on bad habits to their teenage children”.

The study was published by the think-tank [Demos](#). Demos states that its work is driven by “the goal of a society populated by free, capable, secure and powerful citizens”.

The study, entitled ‘Feeling the Effects’, was carried out to assess whether there were alcohol-related harms occurring, to quote the report, ‘behind the headlines’.

City-centre fights and A&E admissions, fuelled by alcohol misuse, make for high profile media stories. But there are other effects of alcohol misuse, which happen ‘behind closed doors’, that have an influence on family life.

The researchers make the case that there is a connection between three factors:

- parental drinking
- parenting style
- how likely it is that children grow up to misuse alcohol on a regular basis – i.e. binge drink

They found that the more a parent drank, the less likely they were to employ what is known as a ‘tough love’ parenting style. This approach combines a high level of emotional warmth with a high level of behavioural discipline. The report found that children not brought up with the tough love parenting style were more likely to begin drinking hazarously themselves.

The authors argue that helping parents address their drinking habits would be a better way to protect children against hazardous drinking than ‘one size fits all’ approaches such as minimum pricing for alcohol.

### Who produced the report?

The report, called Feeling the Effects, has been produced by Demos, an independent think-tank that undertakes research on key social and political issues. The organisation says it challenges the traditional, ‘ivory tower’ model of policymaking by ‘giving a voice to people and communities’.

The authors of the report are Jonathan Birdwell, Emma Vandore and Bryanna Hahn.

### What evidence does the report look at?

The report is based on evidence from two separate pieces of research. The first of these is the Birth Cohort Study (BCS), a [cohort study](#) of more than 17,000 people born in England, Scotland and Wales in a single week during 1970. Over the course of the cohort-members’ lives, the BCS has collected information on many factors including alcohol consumption and family life. The current study used information collected from follow-up in 1980 (when the cohort members were aged 10), in 1986 (when they were aged 16) and in 2004/05 (when they were aged 34).

For this study, researchers looked at parental alcohol consumption, based on children’s perception of how often or how much their parents drank. The responses ranged from ‘never’, ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ to ‘always’.

They also categorised four parenting styles based on a range of questions asked of both parents and children about levels of behavioural discipline and emotional affection. These were:

- disengaged – low discipline, low affection
- laissez-faire – low discipline, high affection (laissez-faire is a French term the literal translation of which is “leave it be”)
- authoritarian – high discipline, low affection
- ‘tough love’ – high discipline, high affection

The researchers then looked at whether parenting styles had any association with children’s drinking levels at 16 and 34 years of age.

The second piece of research involved in-depth interviews with 50 families across the UK where at least one parent was accessing alcohol support services for being a ‘harmful’ or problematic drinker. Most of the parents were single mothers, many of whom had started drinking at a very young age.

### Are you drinking too much?

It can be very easy to fall into a pattern of excessive alcohol consumption without realising it. Use the [drinking self-assessment tool](#) to find out if you're drinking too much.

The tool will help you to assess the effects of your drinking and, if you are drinking too much, suggest ways of cutting down.

If you have an iPhone or iPod touch you can download the [drinks tracker](#) from the iTunes app store for free.

The app allows you to calculate units in your drinks, track your drinking over months and get personalised feedback.

There is also a [desktop tracker](#) available for both Windows and Mac.

## What are the main findings of the report?

Demos says that its previous research has shown that 'tough love' parenting – combining high levels of affection with consistent discipline – is the most effective parenting style for protecting children from drinking hazardously as teenagers and adults. In this latest research, they wanted to explore how parental alcohol consumption affected parenting style and also how parental alcohol consumption affected the risk of children drinking hazardously as teenagers and adults.

They found that:

- Parents whose children described them as drinking 'always' were significantly less likely to be 'tough love' parents. Mothers who drank 'always' were 2.6 times less likely and fathers who drank 'always' two times less likely to be 'tough love' parents compared with those who drank 'sometimes'.
- The report found that mothers who drank 'always' were more likely to have children who drank at hazardous levels in adulthood. The report found that 16-year-olds who perceived their mother to drink 'always' were 1.7 times more likely to drink hazardously themselves at the age of 34 than those who reported their mothers drank 'sometimes'. The father's drinking behaviour did not have any association with children's later drinking levels

The researchers also explored the effectiveness of support to help families struggling with alcohol to address their issues, be better parents and prevent alcohol problems from occurring across the parent and child generations. They found that:

- Very few people self-refer to support services, which only become involved after incidents involving police, social services or schools.
- Many parents find it difficult to access appropriate support when they are struggling and "the system only kicks in when things are desperate". Some found there was a long waiting list to get help and other problems included transport costs to meetings, lack of childcare and lack of follow-up care.
- Family-based interventions can make parents aware of the impact drinking is having on their children and is enough to make some parents try to change their behaviour.

## What recommendations and conclusions does the report make?

The report says that helping parents address their alcohol misuse and become 'better parents' is critical to breaking the cycle of alcohol abuse. Their recommendations are aimed at a wide range of different agencies including national and local government and health professionals. The report recommends:

- Information campaigns targeted at parents to increase their awareness of the effect of drinking on parenting and to encourage 'tough love' parenting to protect their children from drinking at hazardous levels.
- Identification and brief advice (IBA) interventions, for example in hospitals and GP surgeries, to get parents to think about their alcohol consumption levels and to modify their behaviour.
- Early identification of and support for parents who may have a drinking problem, while their children are still young.
- High quality family-based support for parents who are 'harmful' drinkers.
- Alcohol support initiatives to include 'parent-child engagement sessions' to give children a voice.
- Alcohol support programmes to focus on parenting and advise on parenting techniques.
- Individually tailored support for families with alcohol problems to help tackle issues such as mental health and unemployment.
- Co-ordination with those working on the government's 'troubled families' agenda.

## How accurate was the media's coverage of the report?

The media reports appear to be primarily based on information in a press release issued by Demos.

Coverage was fair, although there was little coverage of the report's recommendations on services to support parents with drinking problems.

The reporting seemed to be more interested in the problems highlighted by the study than the solutions proposed.

**Analysis by [Bazian](#). Edited by [NHS Choices](#). Follow [Behind the Headlines on Twitter](#).**

## Links to the headlines

[Parents 'should drink alcohol less in front of their children' says report](#). The Independent, December 10 2012

[Women drinkers 'pass on bad habits to their teenage children'](#). Daily Mail, December 10 2012

## Further reading

Demos. [Feeling the Effects](#). Published online December 7 2012

Analysis by [Bazian](#).

Edited by **NHS Choices**