

## **Drinking, Adolescent and Education**

SAGE Sociology of Education: An A-to-Z Guide

Alcohol is the most widely used drug in the world. While adults are not immune to its detrimental effects, adolescents are especially at risk. Excessive drinking is known to interfere with educational development. In order to combat adolescent drinking, social scientists research its causes and effects, and educators invest in prevention programs.

### **The Historical Context**

Historically societies did not make the distinction of adolescence, a phase in the lifecycle prior to adulthood but after childhood. Rather, adolescents were considered old enough to enter the workforce and drink alcohol. In the late 19th century a temperance movement began in the US. In 1919 the US government ratified the 18th Amendment, which forbade the sale of alcohol. Following the repeal of the amendment in 1933, age restrictions were placed. The limits fluctuated slightly, until the National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984 forced all states to comply with the age of 21.

Most countries, excepting some Muslim nations where alcohol is prohibited, are content with drinking limits of 16 and 18 years of age. In Europe alcohol consumption is more tolerated, as adolescents are found to drink less than Americans for the sake of intoxication. Depending on the cultural history of drinking, underage alcohol consumption may be more tolerated in some countries despite the legal limits.

### **Problems with Adolescent Drinking**

Alcohol decreases inhibitions, allowing adolescents to fit in easier at parties and other social events. Furthermore, alcohol intoxication can make the individual forget about ongoing problems, providing a temporary refuge for troubled youth. However, alcohol is a dangerous and addictive drug. Besides physiological damage, drinking affects behaviors. Inebriated youth are prone to engage in risky sexual activity, conduct crimes, and hurt themselves and others. Most commonly, youth who engage in excessive drinking will become delinquent and irresponsible. Furthermore, the sheer amount of time spent drinking will impair school performance and career development.

Studies of high-risk adolescents often explore alcoholism in the family. However, there is a growing body of evidence that pinpoints diverse high-risk groups in specific contexts: males, drop-outs, juvenile delinquents, subcultures, college students, etc. Vulnerability to the negative effects of drinking may vary. Certain youth have higher levels of resilience. In general, a combination of social, psychological and emotional problems during adolescence and not alcohol alone lead to a downward spiral of drinking and educational failures, which may progress into adulthood.

## **Research on Adolescence, Drinking, and Education**

Studies most often rely on self-reported school-based surveys. A plethora of such studies have been conducted in the US (Monitoring the Future, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, etc.) and internationally (the European School Survey on Alcohol and other Drugs, the Health Behavior in School-Aged Children survey, etc.).

Findings on the connection between alcohol consumption and education may differ as a result of methodology: 1) how alcohol intake and education are measured, 2) the causation process assumed, and 3) whether additional factors are included in the model. Research often examines types of drinking, such as binge-drinking, or educational expectations, such as college aspirations. Researchers must grapple with the potentially spurious relationship between drinking and education: Drinking can cause school failure, and school failure can cause drinking. Social indicators are often included, such as friends' drinking and parental monitoring.

## **Theories on Adolescent Drinking**

Sociologists of education often investigate how social contexts affect drinking and education. Deviance studies may focus on parent and peer influences. Drinking may relate to problems at home or elsewhere. For example, Social Bonding/Control Theory claims strong ties with others, such as parents and teachers, prevent individuals from becoming delinquent. Theories of peer influences often highlight hedonistic environments. Strain Theory suggests that subcultures, such as punks, drink as a form of rebellion. Differential Association Theory highlights the importance of the type of peer group with whom adolescents associate: Adolescents who hang out with students who drink and fail academically will conform to the values of their deviant peers.

Cognitive theories explain about adolescents' drinking motivations. Tension-reduction theory contends that youth use alcohol to cope with stress from other problems, such as failing in school or dysfunctional homes. Expectation theories associate drinking with pre-conceived notions of the inevitability of becoming a drinker. Labeling Theory claims that certain subgroups perceive that outside society has branded them with stigma associated with low expectations. Economic theories may examine the availability of alcohol and marketing influences, or the perceived gains and losses of drinking. Young people can perceive positive social outcomes from drinking that counteract the negative effects, enabling them to rationally choose to drink.

## **Prevention Programs**

Because legal regulations alone can't redress the problem of adolescent drinking, most schools offer alcohol and drug education programs from elementary to high school age. Despite attempts to curb underage drinking, the problem persists, and the efficacy of in-school alcohol awareness programs has fallen into question. Alcohol prevention can take

a variety of approaches. Many American programs promote abstinence. Frequently, students are warned about the physical dangers of drinking, such as drunk-driving, synergistic reactions, and addiction. The premise of temperance education is that by making adolescents aware of the dangers of alcohol, they will be more reluctant to try it. Instructional methods include encounters with knowledgeable people from the community on alcohol risks. To keep students from succumbing to peer pressure, these programs attempt to counter peer norms that ostracize abstainers, for example, stigmatization of the “straight-edge movement”.

Many European prevention programs teach alcoholism is an endemic disease. Adolescents are instructed about stages of problematic drinking behaviors. Contrary to temperance-style education, these programs differentiate limited alcohol use from abuse. While assuming adolescents will experiment with alcohol, these programs seek to ameliorate the potential danger by encouraging adolescents to wait until they reach a suitable age and then to drink responsibly. Assessing the effectiveness of alcohol education requires an understanding of how intervention will impact not only the students’ current alcohol and education status but their behavior as adults as well. In general, it is believed that educational programs can prevent adolescents from abusing alcohol, stopping the problem before it starts.

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**See Also:** Adolescence, At-risk students, Drug Use and Education, Parental involvement, Youth Cultures and Subcultures

### **Further Readings:**

Bachman, J.G., O'Malley, P.M., Schulenberg, J.E., Johnston, L.D., Freedman-Doan, P., and Messersmith, E.E. “The Education-Drug Use Connection: How Successes and Failures in School Relate to Adolescent Smoking, Drinking, Drug Use, and Delinquency.” Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2008.

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