

# The Findings 2013

## The Role Of Parents

An investigation by London Youth Involvement Project Youth Advisors into young people's perceived role of parents in alcohol and drug prevention.

## SAFER AT HOME

Mentor's three-year London Youth Involvement Project allows young people to help improve drug and alcohol prevention in the city by building their confidence, skills and knowledge to share their research, views and expertise with policy makers and influencers.

During Autumn 2012, the volunteer Youth Advisors hosted focus groups with their peers to explore the views of young Londoners around the role of parents and the police in alcohol and drug prevention. Their views were captured via audio recordings and scribing, then transcribed and analysed. Youth Advisors helped devise the questions, led the focus groups and contributed to analysis of transcripts to identify emerging themes and recommendations.

This paper reports their findings around the role of parents.

In October and November 2012, Youth Advisors hosted focus groups with peers to find out their views on the role of parents in preventing alcohol and drug harms to their children.

They met youth councils in Merton, Lewisham, Southwark and Hammersmith and Fulham.

More than 70 young people were involved, aged between 12 and 18.

## Recommendations

- Parents must play a part in educating their children about drugs and alcohol.
- Parents should have opportunities to improve their knowledge about alcohol and drugs, perhaps in a school setting. This should give parents the opportunity to work together to determine their roles and responsibilities.
- Parents should aim for conversations to be recurrent, relaxed and open.
- Conversations should begin before children are teenagers.
- Parents should be authoritative but not authoritarian.

*“Children have a right to know that their parents are looking out for them”*

## Messages from the focus groups

1. Parents have an important role to play in providing drug and alcohol education to their children;
2. There are a number of barriers that prevent parents from talking to their children about this;
3. When and how parents talk to their children about alcohol and drugs is important; and
4. Appropriate parental boundary-setting is a key aspect of protecting young people from alcohol and drug harms.

### The role of parents in drug education

The young Londoners we spoke believe overwhelmingly that parents do have a role in educating their children about drugs and alcohol. Basic knowledge, together with clear messages about decision-making, are considered important.

“Their children have the right to know that their parents are looking out for them. The fact that they do say something about it sort of shows that they do take responsibility.”

Young people believe that parents’ responsibility for drug education should be seen as one aspect of a well-rounded approach which includes school and the wider community, “from schools to government to extra-curricular activities to parents.”

Parents’ responsibility for drug education should be one aspect of a well-rounded approach

The young people did not expect parents to have a comprehensive knowledge of drugs and alcohol. However, the majority did believe that they should at least have a basic knowledge and were clear that simply saying ‘no’ is not enough.

“Being youth, you’re more intrigued to know about everything.”

Saying ‘no’ is not enough  
— young people want to know why

Some young people spoke of a contradiction between a non-negotiable ‘no’ message coupled with scare tactics from parents and the experiences they saw for themselves at parties or with friends. Unless there is a more rounded discussion, children are more likely to ignore the parental message – given the yawning gulf between what parents tell them and what they actually see.

Young people are also concerned that without enough knowledge, parents may give them wrong information.

“I don’t believe that parents always give the right advice because they might not always be, like, fluent in the sort of stuff.”

## Why parents don't talk about drugs and alcohol

Many young people told us they do not talk to their parents about alcohol and drugs. They suggested a number of reasons for this. The first was lack of knowledge.

“They don't want to say anything just in case they say something wrong and mess it up”

They also identified cultural barriers.:

“[Parents from some cultures], shy away from it or don't mention it at all, 'cause you're taught it's wrong. Full stop.”

*“You just know culture-wise... I've never had that conversation, but it's just one of those things — you don't.”*

Some parents were unwilling to acknowledge that alcohol and drugs could ever be an issue for their children.

“Maybe they know, but they just don't wanna believe it, 'No, my child's not taking drugs' sort of thing. They just don't want to talk about it because they do think it's an awkward situation.”

Some young people said parents were uncomfortable even having a conversation about alcohol and drugs.

“Not a lot of parents feel comfortable to actually talk about it”

“It depends on what kind of parents people have. Some people are comfortable talking to their parents and some people are not.”

## When & how parents should talk about alcohol & drugs

Young people were clear that talking about alcohol to your children should start early. The majority suggested that conversations should begin before children become teenagers, either at the end of primary school or the beginning of secondary school. Young people clarified that conversations often only occur too late or “after the event” and believed parents have a role in pre-empting this.

“I think sometimes, the younger age, people tend not to think about it but by the time they do decide that they're going to talk about it, there's been a lot of outside influences.”

Overwhelmingly, participants said conversations should be open, relaxed and recurrent. ‘Sit down’ talks were considered awkward. This would be much easier for some parents than others. Where relationships with children were already open, openness would carry through to conversations around alcohol and drugs.

Young people also spoke about using stimuli in order to begin conversations, in particular responding to news stories, documentaries or other television programmes.

*“It should just be brought up casually and not really made a big deal 'cause otherwise it will just feel really weird afterwards.”*

## Setting boundaries

Many young people think that parents who adopt an authoritative as opposed to authoritarian parenting style are in a good position to help prevent young people from using alcohol and drugs. Young people are not opposed to boundaries being put in place by their parents, but they did want them to be reasonable and to be open to discussion.

“I understand why they give you a curfew and at this point I don't really mind.”

“If you don't set boundaries then you have no boundaries.”

There was, however, a strong view that overly-strict parenting led to rebellion.

“They're more sneaky if their parents are more strict.”

“They're more likely to rebound due to those boundaries because they feel suppressed.”

Parents should know that discussing alcohol and drugs with their children can protect them from harm.

Mentor is the UK's leading charity dedicated to protecting young people from alcohol and drug harms. We review research from around the world, test promising approaches and work to translate best policy and practice into evidence based national and local services.

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## Discussion

The majority of young people we spoke to believed parents have a role in keeping them safe from harms caused by alcohol and drugs. They felt that parents should be educated enough in terms of drugs and alcohol prevention to be able confidently to provide accurate information which their children may ask for. Whilst parents do not need a comprehensive knowledge of drugs and alcohol, they should know enough to be able to explain why drugs and alcohol can cause harm.

Some parents' lack of knowledge around alcohol, and especially drugs, is perceived by young people as a barrier to delivering drug education to their children. This suggests that there is a need for parental alcohol and drug education so that they in turn can support their children. Parental education programmes should include how best to talk to children about alcohol and drugs. Our findings suggest this would be by holding open and regular conversations around the topic, perhaps using stimuli such as TV programmes.

Our findings on the importance of parents setting boundaries echo those of previous research. Any attempts to help children stay safe around alcohol and drugs must consider how parents can be encouraged and supported in talking to their children about these issues and how they can be given confidence in setting appropriate boundaries.

