

**Youth and Alcohol
Benchmark Survey of Parental Concern**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

ALAC has extended the focus of its Youth Drinking Campaign to include the parents and caregivers of teenagers. In this regard, a communications programme targeted at the parents of Youth, 14 to 18, was launched on Sunday, April 16 2000.

This report presents the results of a **Benchmark survey** of parents of 14 to 18 year old Youth conducted **prior** to the commencement of the campaign. As such, it provides a baseline for the evaluation of the campaign.

A total of 403 parents of teenagers were interviewed by telephone between 16 March and 5 April 2000, with specific quotas set in terms of ethnicity so that a large enough sample of Māori parents could be interviewed and their results analysed with confidence. At the processing stage, results were weighted in order to ensure they reflected the actual population of parents.

An important output of the Benchmark survey is to establish **key indicators** which will be used to track changes in parents' recognition of, and concern with alcohol as an issue for teenagers, feelings of empowerment in regard to dealing with teenagers and alcohol, and their level of involvement in this aspect of their teenagers' lives. Monitors will be conducted at appropriate intervals to track movement in these key performance indicators.

Key findings

The main findings of the Parents Benchmark survey may be summarised as follows:

Alcohol and teenagers is on parents' agenda in a wider context

When respondents were asked "what is the greatest concern that parents have to deal with when their children become teenagers", more respondents first mentioned other issues (e.g. drugs and peer pressure) than alcohol per se.

However, what is clear is that alcohol is an issue that is considered in the context of wider concerns to do with **safety**; for example, in relation to drink driving, drugs, aggression, etc.

In fact, when considered in this way, alcohol was an issue, on an **unprompted** basis, for just less than one half of respondents (44%).

Few parents are especially concerned with the issue

Despite this, only 16% of respondents expressed any feeling of **real** concern. In fact, twice as many (32%) parents of 14 to 18 year old teenagers were not at all worried, with the great majority falling somewhere in between these two extremes.

Note that for the purposes of analysing this Benchmark survey respondents have been segmented into three groups or segments based on their level of concern; 32% have been classified as "Unconcerned", 27% "Somewhat concerned" and 41% "More concerned". Maori parents tended to be more concerned.

There is a discrepancy between what parents think is happening and what teenagers report is happening

One of the possible reasons why there is such a relatively low level of concern is that a **relatively small proportion** of respondents believed their teenager was drinking to excess.

Although three-quarters (77%) acknowledged that their teenager drank alcohol, only 37% believed they binged. (We know from the ALAC Youth Drinking Monitor, that 64% of Youth report they binge at least once every three months.)

Another reason may be because parents believe they have control of the situation, as they control their teenager's alcohol supply

Two-thirds (64%) of the parents of 14 to 17 year olds who believed their teenager drank alcohol (50% of the parents of all 14 to 17 year olds) reported that they provided their teenager with alcohol and as such, they are their major suppliers. Fewer Maori parents (47%) reported supplying their teenagers with alcohol. As an aside, note that very few (11%) reported giving them money to buy alcohol (9% of the parents of all 14 to 17 year olds).

While this is not necessarily a bad result, given that they may be providing alcohol under quite controlled conditions, what is concerning is that almost one-third (31%) of those who believed their teenager drank (25% of the parents of all 14 to 17 year olds) reported that, on at least one occasion in the last six months, they had given their teenager alcohol to take to a social event they were not attending themselves. Fewer Maori parents were likely to do this (25% cf 31% for non-Maori).

Furthermore, many (49%) of these respondents (11% of the parents of all 14 to 17 year olds) had given them the equivalent of five or more servings on the last occasion they had done this. More Maori parents were likely to supply five or more servings compared with non-Maori parents (59% cf 49%).

Some parents also believe that experiences with alcohol are an important rite of passage

Another reason for the relatively low level of concern may be because there is a small, but not insignificant group of parents who believe that *getting drunk is part of having fun as a teenager* (16%) and that it is in fact *OK for their teenager to get drunk sometimes* (23%).

Parents acknowledge that it is primarily their responsibility

Against this background, it is important to note that, almost without exception, respondents agreed (92%) that the **primary** responsibility for helping teenagers learn how to handle alcohol responsibly belonged to parents.

Parents overstate how well they are managing the situation

However, in comparison to what their teenagers report they do, there is a tendency for parents to **overstate** how they are managing alcohol and their teenagers.

For example, parents claimed they discussed the subject of alcohol with their teenagers, set clear rules and limits, and curfews and discussed their socialising with the parents of their friends, but teenagers report they do this to a much lesser degree.

There is a tendency to 'point the finger' when there are problems

Whereas parents are prepared to accept responsibility for helping their teenagers learn how to handle alcohol responsibly, they are less likely to be accountable for any problems that arise.

As a result, when asked about the problems they might experience when trying to deal with their teenager in relation to alcohol, there was a tendency for respondents to blame other people than themselves; including their teenager, their partner and/or their teenager's friend's parents.

Parents have a limited and fragmented view of the support channels available

Consolidating matters further is the fact that parents have a very **limited and fragmented** view of the support channels and networks that are available to help them deal with alcohol and their teenager.

Either semi-formal sources of support (e.g. school, church, extended family) or formal and perhaps not particularly appropriate sources (e.g. AA, the Police) were most frequently mentioned.

There was only a very limited awareness of the Alcohol Helpline (4%) and ALAC's web page (3%).

There is currently little use of support channels

Parents' actual use of support channels of any nature, informal to formal, was limited with 79% having made no use of any channel whatsoever.

Conclusions

The results of this Benchmark survey of parents supports ALAC's decision to extend the focus of its Youth Drinking Campaign aimed at Youth to include the parents and caregivers of teenagers.

Our key take-out is that there is a concerning proportion of parents who are not engaged with their teenager on the subject in question and that a sense of liberalism permeates the area (also evident in the current ALAC Youth Drinking Monitor).

Therefore, moving forward, key communication objectives/targets need to be:

1. **To increase understanding that binge drinking is a problem that parents should be concerned about and should be taking positive action about.** Acknowledging responsibility is not enough.
2. **To help increase awareness** that bingeing is more prevalent than parents currently think.
3. **To increase the proportion of parents** who place alcohol and teenagers on their agenda (currently 44% on an unprompted basis).
4. **To encourage parents to adopt better management practises** and accept responsibility for more affirmative action in regard to alcohol and their teenagers, and;
 - to not feel they have to overstate they are in control of the situation, and
 - that they are not alone - there are good models to follow and support channels available.
5. **To encourage parents to exercise constraint when supplying alcohol** to their teenagers,
 - specifically in social situations that they will not themselves attend, and
 - that volumes provided should more closely match those that are considered to come within safe limits.

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