

Parents encourage underage drinking

December 3 2009

Half of Australian adults and 63 per cent of Australians on a higher income believe 15 to 17 year olds should be allowed to consume alcohol under parental supervision at home, according to the latest MBF Healthwatch survey.

Bupa Australia Chief Medical Officer, Dr Christine Bennett, said these statistics were both surprising and of concern given [alcohol](#) can have long-term implications for young adult brains that are not yet fully developed.

"Our survey suggests many Australians believe it's acceptable to buy alcohol for teenagers and allow them to drink under parental supervision at home," Dr Bennett said.

"Some parents may think this is harmless; some may see this approach as a way to teach their teenage children about socially responsible drinking. But we want parents to understand that early exposure may actually be doing them damage.

"Evidence suggests that the earlier the age that alcohol is introduced, the greater the risk of long-term alcohol related health problems.

"Binge drinking in young people is on the rise. Too much alcohol impairs young people's judgement which can lead to violence, injury and build a pattern of use that leads to lifetime dependence.

"It's shocking to think that one teenager a week dies of [alcohol abuse](#).

We teach children about the harmful effects of smoking, unsafe sex and taking [illicit drugs](#), but we also need to teach them about the damage that alcohol can do," she said.

The MBF Healthwatch survey results also showed that people's acceptance of supervised underage drinking was closely linked to their incomes:

- 63 per cent of people earning more than \$100,000 supported supervised drinking, followed by
- 53 per cent of people earning between \$70,001 to \$100,000
- 48 per cent of people earning \$40,001 to \$70,000.

Professor Ian Hickie, Executive Director of the Brain and Mind Research Institute, reaffirmed Dr Bennett's concerns.

"It's concerning that one in two adults believes it's acceptable to allow underage drinking, especially in light of the latest alcohol guidelines released by the National Health and Medical Research Council, which are based on current international medical evidence," Hickie said.

"These statistics highlight the gap between best medical evidence and parental actions, while also challenging the belief parents are well placed to assist their children avoid alcohol during the critical years of brain development.

"Parents need to understand that early exposure to alcohol can disturb a wide range of key brain functions, with the long-term ramifications potentially causing permanent disruption to some of the brain's most important integrative functions."

Adults in Western Australia were the biggest supporters of underage drinking, with 59 per cent stating it was acceptable under parental supervision. In contrast, only 46 per cent of adults residing in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory approved of it.

The practice was also supported by 52 per cent of adults living in Tasmania, 51 per cent in Queensland and Victoria, and 49 per cent in South Australia and the Northern Territory.

"Given that social drinking is a common part of the Australian culture, our challenge is to help our young people learn how to enjoy alcohol in a socially responsible way and protect them from harm now and in the long-term," Dr Bennett said.

"That will mean educating [young people](#) about the risks of [underage drinking](#) and, as parents and a community, being good role models."

Source: Research Australia ([news](#) : [web](#))

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