

CREDIBLE SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

JEFFREY WILKS, Department of Psychology, University of Queensland, St. Lucia, Queensland, 4067

INTRODUCTION

ABSTRACT: In this study, parents considered themselves to be the most credible source of information about alcohol and drinking for their children. However, when information about drugs is sought many parents believe the police and health specialists are more authoritative. Young adults supported parents as a primary source of information about alcohol and drinking, but considered universities, police, and the media to be more important for drugs. These findings and their implications for the development of alcohol and drug education programs are discussed.

Numerous research reports have highlighted the importance of the family as the primary socialising agent for young people in our society. In the area of alcohol and drug education, however, parents have been a largely neglected resource. Since drinking is a widespread and socially accepted behaviour in Australia, most parents experience little difficulty in teaching their children about alcohol. Parental norms for use and the modeling of appropriate behaviours usually occur in the home when the child is quite young. Even during the mid-teen years when drinking with peers becomes more frequent, adolescents still cite parents as the main influence on their ideas about alcohol (Wilks & Callan, 1984a).

In contrast, the use of marijuana, narcotics and solvents presents an entirely different problem. Those parents who find that a child is using these drugs frequently report feelings of anger, helplessness and guilt (Gidley & Gidley, 1979; Stuart, 1982). Professional counselling and support are often sought at these times of crisis (Wilks, 1984).

In the United States, the concerned parent movement has become a nationally coordinated body with more than 4,000 formal parent organizations striving to achieve a drug-free life for your people (see Lindblad, 1983). As Australians become more aware of the growing drug problem in this country, they too will be seeking additional information about various chemical substances. This exploratory study was therefore undertaken to identify those sources of information about alcohol and drugs which parents believe are most credible; and to compare them with the choices made by their children and friends. This comparative analysis appears timely in view of the massive resource commitment the federal government is making as part of its national campaign against drug abuse.

METHOD

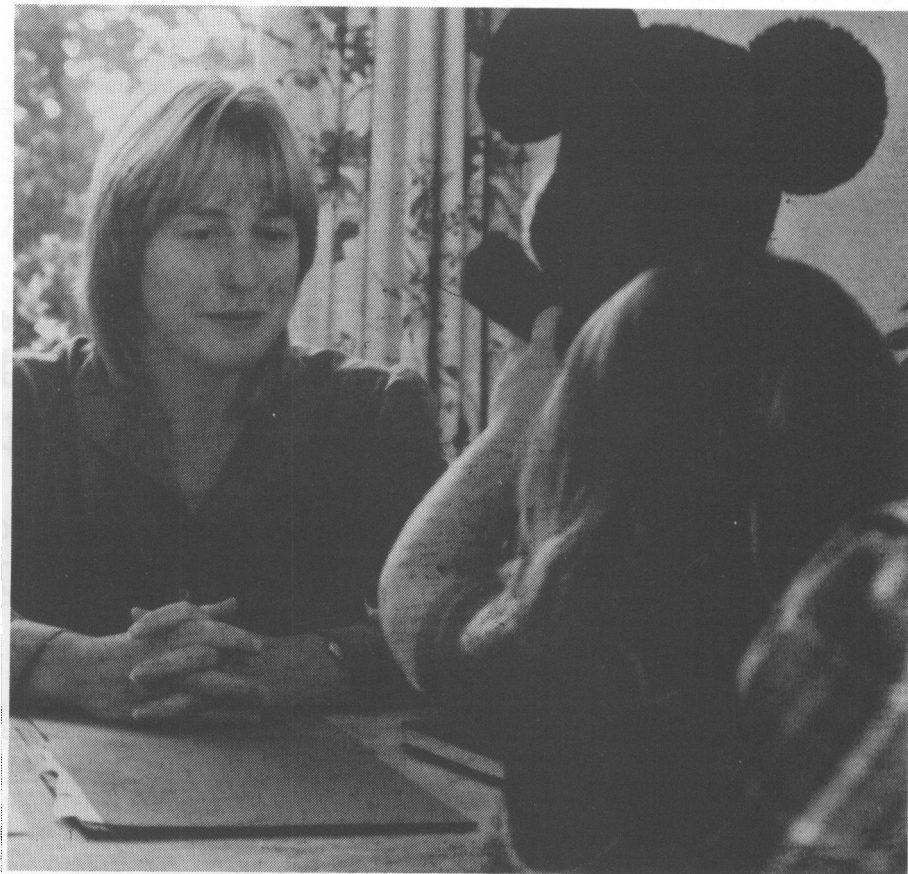
As part of a larger project examining social and cultural influences on young people's drinking behaviour over 1,000 students, their parents and friends were questioned regarding the most credible sources of information about alcohol and drugs. Details of the matched sampling design employed have been presented in an earlier report (Wilks & Callan, 1984b) where first year university students and their parents responded to questions about alcohol and drinking. Two additional studies were conducted during 1984; one extending the previous drinking project, and the second investigating perceptions of legal and illegal drug use in Australia. This report is based on the responses of 700 subjects participating in those two studies.

Subject Characteristics

One hundred and seventy-five family groups, consisting of 83 father-mother-

son triads and 92 father-mother-daughter triads completed confidential questionnaires about family relations and selected activities. The fathers' mean age was 50.5 years and most were employed in professional or managerial positions (67%). Just over half of the mothers reported being involved with full-time home duties (53%), while a further 26% held professional or managerial positions outside the home. Mothers were, on average, 47.3 years of age.

In addition to the family groups, sons and daughters were requested to nominate a close friend of the same sex to participate in the study. Sons and their male friends were similar in age (means of 19.1 and 19.3 years, respectively), as were daughters and their female friends (means of 17.9 and 18.00 years, respectively). Most of these friends were also students, though in a variety of courses and institutions throughout Queensland. Two-thirds of the sons and daughters were still living at home at the time of this study.



RESULTS

Alcohol and Drinking

As Table 1 shows, parents considered themselves to be the most credible source of information about alcohol and drinking for their children. Just over a quarter of sons and their male friends agreed that

parents are the primary source, with universities also considered important. Daughters, on the other hand, were more likely to cite friends, the police and health authorities ahead of parents. While sons and their male friends were fairly similar in their responses, daughters and their

female friends emphasised different groups for their information. An interesting point is that eight percent of parents suggested that the church was an important source of information about drinking; only one young person held this view.

TABLE 1
The Most Credible Source of Information About Alcohol and Drinking:
Parents, Their Children, and Friends, in Percent*

| Most Credible Source | Fathers | Mothers | Sons | Male Friends | Daughters | Female Friends | All Respondents |
|----------------------|---------|---------|------|--------------|-----------|----------------|-----------------|
| Parents | 65 | 62 | 27 | 27 | 12 | 18 | 42 |
| Police | 7 | 10 | 7 | 7 | 18 | 16 | 10 |
| Universities | 2 | 4 | 25 | 16 | 12 | 12 | 10 |
| Friends | 2 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 20 | 10 | 6 |
| Government | 6 | 1 | 9 | 9 | 6 | 10 | 6 |
| Media | 2 | -5 | 9 | 7 | 8 | 12 | 6 |
| Health Authorities | 2 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 16 | 10 | 5 |
| Schools | 3 | 3 | 5 | 7 | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| Church | 8 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| N | 106 | 106 | 56 | 56 | 50 | 50 | 424 |

* Only the main sources cited are presented

Drugs

In contrast to the results for alcohol and drinking, Table 2 indicates that parents are more likely to view the police and health authorities as the most credible source of information about drugs, rather than themselves. A large number of fathers saw the government as most

credible, while mothers highlighted the media. Among the young people, sons again saw parents and universities as important, followed by friends. Their male friends agreed with universities being most reliable, followed by health authorities, the media and siblings. Daughters reported most support for

universities, the police and then the media as sources of information. While daughters gave limited support for parents, their female friends gave none. Instead they saw the police, universities, the media, and to a lesser extent friends, as most credible where drugs are concerned.

TABLE 2
The Most Credible Source of Information About Drugs:
Parents, Their Children, and Friends, in Percentage

| Most Credible Source | Fathers | Mothers | Sons | Male Friends | Daughters | Female Friends | All Respondents |
|----------------------|---------|---------|------|--------------|-----------|----------------|-----------------|
| Police | 25 | 26 | 7 | 7 | 17 | 21 | 20 |
| Health Authorities | 19 | 19 | 11 | 15 | 7 | 14 | 15 |
| Universities | 9 | 10 | 19 | 26 | 19 | 17 | 14 |
| Parents | 19 | 13 | 19 | 11 | 12 | 0 | 13 |
| Government | 28 | 4 | 11 | 11 | 14 | 5 | 12 |
| Media | 0 | 12 | 7 | 15 | 17 | 17 | 10 |
| Friends | 0 | 3 | 15 | 4 | 5 | 12 | 5 |
| Brothers/Sisters | 4 | 6 | 4 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Church | 1 | 4 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| N | 69 | 69 | 27 | 27 | 42 | 42 | 276 |

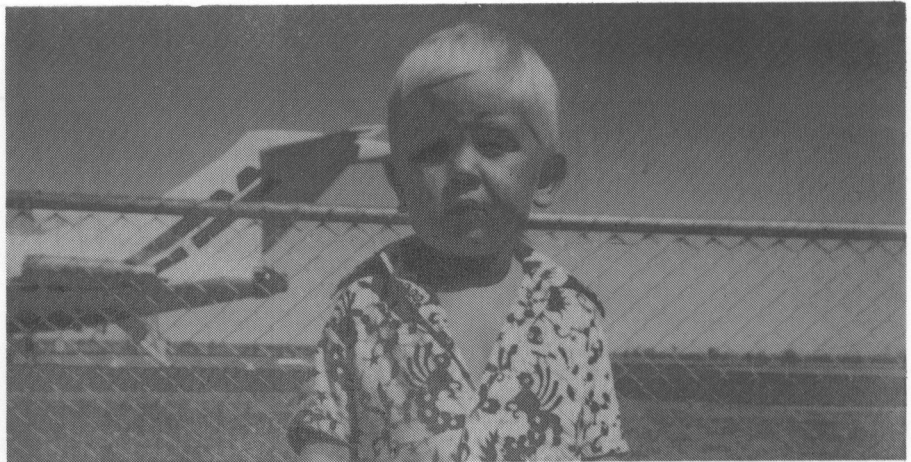
DISCUSSION

Implications for Alcohol and Drug

Education

The identification of agencies and groups that are considered credible in their information about alcohol and drugs is one of the first steps in developing resources aimed at primary prevention of substance misuse. Across cultures, teenagers report that it is their parents who are most influential in the development of their ideas about alcohol (Wilks & Callan, 1984a). This is encouraging, since Table 1 suggests that parents are probably prepared to play a central role in alcohol education for their children. The police and universities were also perceived as important sources of information about alcohol by the young adults in this study. Unfortunately, previous research has also noted that older teenagers beginning their tertiary studies have a poor knowledge of alcohol's effects, even though most of them are drinkers (Wilks, 1985). There is an obvious need for more formal instruction in the "social art" of responsible drinking, especially dispelling common myths about the relationship between excessive drinking, popularity and sophistication. Parents have a particularly important role to play in modelling these responsible drinking behaviours.

Most people do not consider alcohol to be a drug. The term "drug" usually brings to mind images of illegal substances such as marihuana, LSD or heroin. Many parents recognize that they are very naive when it comes to these substances. As Table 2 revealed, parents acknowledge the police, health authorities and universities as being more authoritative in this area. These resources will have to be mobilized and parents, who have until now been a largely untapped social force, encouraged to avail themselves of information from these sources if we are to tackle the growing problem of drug abuse in this country. Drawing on experiences in the



United States, the professional literature contains many suggestions for helping parents become involved in drug abuse prevention (see Cohen, 1982; Garfield &

Gibbs, 1982). In addition to educating themselves so as to legitimately be a credible source of information, parents must also actively promote themselves as the people their children would willingly approach if they need help or advice about drugs. Armed with current knowledge and confident of their own ability, a caring and non-judgmental parent can guide children through a very difficult area of adolescent experience.

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