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## Youth and Alcohol – How to Handle the Situation

Nowadays parents meet the problem of alcohol consumption of the youth at a very early stage, when their children grow up. A ten-year-old may come home drunk. Who is responsible for the alcohol education of the youth and for the youngster as an individual? This is an often asked question. In this article, I will discuss the matter in the light of some examples.

### Coming Home Drunk at Ten O'Clock

A youngster comes home tottering supported by his pals and the key does not seem to fit in the keyhole. In the end, the door only opens when his mother graciously opens it for her son. The boy stumbles inside and cannot even take off his shoes before he throws up on the carpet. At this stage, tears stand in the mother's eyes – can this be true? Who has made our son drunk? He is only 13 years old. In vain

the mother tries to get some answers, since the boy only burbles something indistinct. The mother's only task is to take the boy to bed and after that to start working with a cleaning cloth. The boy's glasses are lost and the trousers have a hole at the knee. The drinking bout turned out to be expensive, since even after a thorough search, the boy's elder brother must return empty-handed – the glasses are lost for good.

Such harms, economical and others, caused by alcohol are very typical for both adults and youngsters (see Bennett et al. 1993, 525-527; Fitzgerald & Mulford 1993, 323). But how should the mother view the situation? It is not likely that this was the first time the boy tried drinking alcohol, although he may say so. Luckily, the boy has some intelligent friends, who did not leave him alone to pass out on some park bench in the cold, but they bring him to the only sensible place: to his home. In the morning, the mother should talk with her son about his use of alcohol. It is not worth while to start blaming him or shouting at him (see Valli 1998b, 158-163). Now it is time for a good discussion on moderate use, correct ways of behaviour, and responsibility. The young person must also understand that his own body is not ready to accept alcohol in the same way as that of the adults or his older friends. Of course, it would be best to make the youngster stop the use of alcohol completely, but as this in most cases is just an utopian dream, the parents should be able limit and control the children's use of alcohol otherwise, together with the youngsters. A common agreement on a non-alcoholic month or some other period of time is appropriate. At the beginning, the control may be more rigorous, but at the last stage, you must let the young themselves to take responsibility. Taking responsibility and feeling trusted are the basic conditions for the young one's autonomy later in life as well, since it is not possible that the mother always controls her son's drinking habits.

## **Home Made Brew in the Corner Cupboard in the Garage**

There has been a strange smell in the garage for quite a while – the mother suspects that mould has gained access into the structures of

the garage that was built in the 70's. Before ordering all the expensive tests to be taken, the mother decides to clean the cupboards that have stayed uncleaned for a long time – if the smell comes from there anyhow. They have not been touched with a cloth for at least five years, so it is about time. The father of the family, however, is against the operation, since the order he has created between the things for such a long time will disappear in the cleaning and soon he won't be able to find anything. At the third cupboard the mother's eyebrows curl in amazement – what on earth is this bucket which smells so strange. Luckily, the father is able to point out that the 20-liter canister contains a strong home made brew. The guesses on the owner of the substance are few when the father does not confess to making it. The truth is revealed when the eldest son (16 years) comes home after a school day in the upper secondary school. "Bogey", as the boy says himself, had been made. It was meant for the boy and Jussi from next door, who had participated in making it, for the parties next summer. But the mother demands that the liquid be destroyed and supervises herself as it is drained down the toilet. Now the boys will have to think of a dry alternative, or else use all their allowance for getting the ten bears and find somebody to buy them.

Youngsters think that alcohol is a part of parties and carousing in the same way as adults do (Joki & Valli 1994, 36-38). The mother's decision was the correct one, as it probably – at least temporarily – reduced the alcohol consumption of these boys. But it was not a long-term solution. It is essential that the boy can understand the mother's point of view. Addiction to alcohol is created surprisingly easily, and a habit gained during the summer of drinking a couple times of week will easily be maintained in the autumn, when the school starts. This may later even generate an alcohol addiction, so it is advisable that the mother and father seriously discuss the matter. It must also be remembered that the parents set an example on the adult alcohol consumption for their youngsters. One motive for the young people to use alcohol may be to prove their adulthood (Valli 1998b, 76-82). It is not too late yet to reduce their own weekly alcohol consumption; the example might at least still

work on the younger son.

## Wrong ID

Ville Valo and HIM are played loudly on the background, when the boy leans swaggeringly on the bar waiting for the waiter to notice him. But before the waiter, Leila from next door, his best pal's mother, who is also a teacher, sees him.

She thinks for a few moments on the boy's age and then points at the door; "start walking". But the boy answers with shaking his head. To this Leila nods clearly and repeats the sign, so the boy has to leave although against his will. He not only did not get the beer, but can only hope that his father and mother will not hear about this. At least, he must not lose the passport he got from a friend who is twenty years old; it is an excellent key to any restaurant.

At this stage, the alcohol consumption is rather regular, almost weekly. One should be worried about it. Although alcohol is not a poison in itself, it is not healthy when excessively used, and this is an easy road to excessive use. Although the parents often feel powerless in connection to the children's use of alcohol, it must be taken more than seriously. Discussions between the parents and the children must be open, respecting the point of view of the young person, and accepting the thing as a fact already occurred. Together, however, they should find the reasons why the youngster uses alcohol, and how to reduce the consumption; if any other interests could be found instead of drinking.

## Who Is Responsible

Horton (1992) says that if we fail in the alcohol education with the young people, all other functions lose their purpose. I believe that all parties close to the youngster are responsible for the youngster, and they should take action as the situation requires on the youngster's use of alcohol, in the same way as the teacher from

next door felt her responsibility. All too often we tend to look the other way thinking that this isn't really my business. We should get rid of that attitude; only then could we really affect the increasing use of alcohol among the young. Of course, the greatest responsibility lies in the home in the alcohol education as well as in offering a model. The home is responsible for the child/the youngster as an individual. The school, on the other hand, must take responsibility on observing the social environment. At school, youngsters can learn how to function in a group and how to say no to alcohol among other youngsters. This is a task that the teachers should allot more time to. At the moment, it is too often that nobody is taking responsibility of this. I think that it is most clearly the task of the health education teacher (Valli 1998c). Also in the lower secondary school, the PE teacher should discuss this in the health education classes. Nowadays, an increasing need for alcohol education in the primary school can be seen, and it is there that the teaching is at its most varied kind (Karekivi 2000, 18-19).

The longer the youngsters can be made to abstain from trying alcohol, the better. It must, however, be remembered that before the age of 18 almost everybody has at least tasted alcohol, and most have not only tasted, but are using it. For instance, 66% of the 17-years old youngsters in the town of Pietarsaari used alcohol more or less regularly (Valli 1998b, 130). Getting alcohol is easy for the minors (see, Valli 1998a, 172). There is always someone who will go to buy alcohol for them. Getting medium strength beer or cider is the easiest. And it can even be bought by themselves, if only the minor looks a little as if he/she were eighteen years old, since the seller thinks of his/her own sales margins and monthly sales proceeds. The most popular alcohol product among the young is the medium strength beer (Valli 1998a 171; Hibell et al. 1997, 192-200). Since alcohol is available and the youngster at some point normally use it, it must also be decided at which point the youngster should be taught the correct manners, when she/he is allowed to taste and try alcohol. It can also be considered, is it a good alternative to test alcohol under supervised conditions. It may, on the one hand, lower the threshold for the next time, so the correct timing is very important in this. On the other hand, it creates a safer environment, and thus some regrettable consequences and ill effects can more easily be avoided.

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