

# Developing Culturally Sensitive Alcohol Education Resources

A Briefing Paper for Drug Education Practitioners  
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## Purpose of Briefing

This briefing looks at the cultural sensitivities around alcohol education for young people and provides an understanding of the issues to be considered when providing alcohol education or when developing resource materials for culturally diverse groups. The review looks at ways that alcohol education resources can be made more sensitive to the needs of the young people.

## Who is the briefing for?

The briefing will be of particular relevance to people working directly with culturally diverse groups and include;

- Practitioners looking to develop material that is culturally sensitive;
- Teachers and staff delivering drug education to specific cultural groups;
- Those with responsibility for training teachers, youth workers and others in alcohol education

## Introduction

Alcohol is readily available and its use is socially acceptable in the UK. It has a deeply rooted place in British culture, being positively associated with socialising, celebration and relaxation. Drugs: Guidance for schools (DfES 2004) stresses that 'Given its prevalence and the increased vulnerability of young people to the impact of alcohol misuse and changes in drinking behaviours, educating pupils about the effects of alcohol and how to reduce alcohol related harm is an important priority for all schools.'

However, the guidance does also acknowledge that this may not be the case for all cultural groups in the UK. The UK encompasses a very diverse range of cultural groups, some of which place restrictions on the use of alcohol.

## Defining culture

Culture is a term that is used in many different ways in different contexts. In the general sense it has been used to mean a community's overall way of life. "It

recognises that different social groupings are held together by shared values, beliefs and ways of relating which are characteristics of them, and which distinguish them from others.” (National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) 1999). Most people now belong to many different cultural groups, for example defined by ethnicity, linguistic background, community, legal status, country of origin, parental country of origin, religious background, age, shared tradition, common history and shared customs. Each has its sense of identity, which is expressed and maintained in its pattern of behaviour and organisation.

Culture is dynamic and ever changing. “Culture is not a simple or unitary concept; it is dynamic, responding to changes over time. It is a defining feature of every person’s identity contributing to how they see themselves and the groups with which they identify.” (New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSWDET) 2001).

At the heart of culture is the concept of values: ideas, beliefs, attitudes, which are considered worthy and important and held common as a group. These are influenced by changes in knowledge, understanding and experience.

### **Culture and identity**

An individual’s identity becomes more complex over time as they develop relationships with different groups, all of which influence their values, attitudes and behaviours.

However, individuals who have migrated from one country to another over time also tend to take up a variety of aspects of the culture of the country or place they are living. A person’s understanding of their own and other’s cultural identity develops over time and is shaped by the values and attitudes prevalent at home and in the surrounding community. Therefore although certain cultures place restrictions on the use and misuse of alcohol, living in Britain will influence how alcohol is perceived and used as part of their lifestyle. This can lead to very complex patterns of use of alcohol in a multi cultural society.

Not all individuals who identify as having a particular cultural background share the same values, attitudes and behaviours about alcohol use. Family members and members of communities do not necessarily share common values, attitudes and behaviours. The diversity of attitudes and behaviours within groups may be as great as differences between groups as people also belong to subcultures based on a variety of groupings. For instance, drug and alcohol use may be perceived by some young people to be part of youth culture and therefore normal behaviour even though the cultural group to which they belong places restrictions on alcohol use.

Young people from different cultural groups growing up in Britain may be operating in within their parents’ cultural background, and also the local culture,

therefore they may have views and develop attitudes and behaviours around alcohol use that are different to that are held by their parents and families.

“For example, a young person may identify with the cultural values and practices of his or her family, but also be influenced by the values and practices of his or her peer group. If alcohol use is a common behaviour with the young person’s peer group, a high level of cultural identification may not stop this young person from drinking with his or her friends, even if the use of alcohol is not an accepted practice within the culture.” (NSWDET 2001).

### **Patterns of drinking**

Although culture is not defined by ethnicity alone the focus of much available research on the prevalence of alcohol use is defined by ethnicity. In some cases they will be intertwined with further categories of generational, religious background, linguistic background and gender. Therefore it is important to be aware that any discussion on the understanding of prevalence patterns has its limitations and must take into consideration the complexity of issues in its definitions.

The concept of ethnicity has no universal or fixed definition; it has different meanings across time, place and people. There is a distinction between ethnicity as an identity and ethnicity as a category.

As an identity, “ethnicity is described as a process by which people create an identity to distinguish themselves from others. Ethnicity is frequently associated with country of origin and/or skin colour. However, individual ethnic identities may be informed by a range of factors including country of origin, religious and political belief systems, language, skin colour, social circumstances and so on.” (*Acquire*, Alcohol Concern 2003).

As a category, “ethnicity is described as the process by which external categories are created and imposed by others and with which people so categorised may not identify” (*Acquire*, Alcohol Concern 2003). For example South Asian as a category encompasses four different countries, numerous languages, a diverse range of religions and belief systems.

- Generally there is a lower level of alcohol use among Black (including people of African and Caribbean origin) or Asian people than the British population as a whole (McKeigue and Karmi, 1993; Johnson and Carroll, 1995)
- Men and women from all minority ethnic groups, apart from the Irish, are less likely to drink alcohol than the general population. Overall they drink smaller quantities and all minority groups report drinking less frequently than the general population, except for the Irish, who drink as frequently (*Health of minority ethnic groups* (1999)).
- The study of drinking patterns in ‘second and subsequent generation Black and Asian communities in the English Midlands’ indicates that

alcohol consumption appears to be relatively low in South Asian groups. However non drinking was noted to be unevenly spread across the different groups in this category. The majority of Hindu (66%) Pakistani (85%) Bengali (76%) and Sikh (75%) women were non drinkers as were (66%) Hindu, (85%) Pakistani and Bengali (76%) men, while nearly three-quarters of Sikh men drink and nearly nine in ten Black men drink (Purser et al, 2001; Orford et al.,2004; cited in Heim et al (2004).

- Among 11-15 year old adolescents from ethnic groups, 82% from Asian communities said they never drank, as did 56% of those from Black groups. However, 18% of Asian and 44% of Black adolescents did say they had tried alcohol compared to 66% of White adolescents (*Health of minority ethnic groups* (1999).
- Alcohol consumption in a sample of Pakistani, Indian and Chinese young people aged 16-25 years remains lower than the general population. However, compared to alcohol consumption in older populations, slightly higher levels of alcohol consumption amongst young Pakistani, Indian and male Chinese individuals were found (Heim et al 2004).

### **Vulnerable young people**

There are a number of risk factors that can make a young person vulnerable to developing problematic drug use, which can be applied to misuse/problematic use of alcohol. These include:

- Chaotic home environment
- Parents who misuse drugs or suffer from mental illness
- Behavioural disorders
- Lack of parental nurturing
- Inappropriate and/or aggressive classroom behaviour
- School failure
- Poor coping skills
- Low commitment to school
- Friendship with deviant peers
- Low socio-economic status
- Early age of first drug use
- Being labelled as a drug misuser

(The Right Responses- Managing and making policy for drug related incidents in schools (DrugScope 1999)

Vulnerability to problematic use has been shown to increase as the number of risk factors increases.

There are a number of additional potential risk factors that should be considered when working with young people from different cultural groups. These include:

- *Intergenerational conflict*

Family members from different generations may hold different views about a number of social issues, including the use/misuse of alcohol. This can become a source of conflict, which can lead to isolation for both parents and children and young people. This conflict 'can be more acute in minority ethnic groups where it is often a clash of two generations and two cultures.' (Alcohol Concern, 2003).

- *Transition and resettlement*

Periods of transition, such as change of country, community or school can be times of increased risk for some young people. This can include, for example young people who have migrated to Britain. "Stress and uncertainty arising from transition and resettlement associated with the migration process can impact in families over a period of several years, not just in the initial resettlement period." (NSWDET, 2001).

Young refugees and others who have experienced war and conflict in their countries of origin may also suffer stress caused by interrupted schooling, homelessness, loss of a family member and physical and emotional problems related to trauma and displacement. Such experiences may also add to their vulnerability to misuse/problematic use of alcohol.

A 2004 report on young refugees and asylum seekers in Greater London concludes that this group is 'highly vulnerable to future drug use' with risk factors including barriers to accessing and achieving in education; depression, loneliness and isolation; vulnerability to racially motivated crime and bullying; inadequate housing (including being placed in hostels with problematic drug or alcohol users); and social and economic exclusion. (Centre for Ethnicity and Health, University of Central Lancashire 2004, *Young refugees and asylum seekers in Greater London: vulnerability to problematic drug use*, Mayor of London/GLADA.)

Additionally, another example could be young people from the travelling community who are trying to settle in to their new environment. Derrington and Kendall (2005) have highlighted how the school system still needs to make huge strides in the inclusion of children from the Gypsy Traveller community. From their study sample of Gypsy Traveller students, they found they were more likely to be excluded from school or more likely to drop out of school by the end of key stage 3.

- *Racism*

Racism is a significant risk factor for alcohol misuse (*Acquire*, Alcohol Concern 2003). Young people from black and minority ethnic groups can be the subject of harassment or racism. Shaikh and Naz (2000) point to

the problem of internalised racism affecting succeeding generations resulting in poor self-esteem or self-hatred. These can lead to mental distress, poor relationships, self-harm, parasuicide and substance misuse, including excess drinking.

Derrington and Kendall (2005) found that young people from the Gypsy Travelling community received a variety of racism and abuse from other fellow students, and in many cases provided a scapegoat function.

- *Cultural identity*

The establishment of cultural identity in young people cannot be separated from the process of adolescent development. Developmental psychologists suggest that the 'task' of adolescence is to establish a coherent identity (Erikson, 1968) and as we have seen an individual's sense of identity is grounded in one's own cultural group and the dominant culture of the country in which they are living. Young people from different cultures may find it difficult to establish a coherent sense of identity and in a diverse society like Britain, individuals may have several identities depending on the prevailing group, community or sub-cultural group allegiances. This can be particularly difficult and stressful for some young people.

- *Social inequality*

It is widely acknowledged that there is an association between social inequality and substance misuse. "A higher proportion of Black and minority ethnic groups experience social inequality in the form of unemployment, poor housing, poor access to decent education and health services." (Alcohol Concern, 2003).

- *Men and women react differently to social and cultural pressures*

Analysis of drinking predictors by Purser et al (1999) has shown how differently men and women react to social and cultural influences or pressures. Purser et al (1999) found that for men from Black and Asian communities in the English Midlands, one clear predictor for problem drinking was lack of religious identification. For women problem drinking was more complex and most closely linked with a reduction in their own cultural (including religious) network and lack of social networks overall. Significant predictors of problem drinking amongst Black and Asian women included; being more qualified, being employed, being single, fewer people living at home, being less closely identified with their religion, weaker identity with ethnic group, and fewer friends from their own ethnic group.

Furthermore, in some Asian sub groups, women in particular are subject to additional pressures....."Western and Asian expectations of women can lead to confusion and strain". (Alcohol Concern, 2003).

- Within some cultural groups, religious restrictions can lead to hidden drinking or heavy drinking sessions at home alone (Alcohol Concern, 2003).
- Pakistani young people felt that their community, in particular older Pakistanis, ignored problematic levels of alcohol consumption. (Heim et al., 2004). This can prevent young people from seeking advice and support from their parents as well as from support agencies.

### *Parental alcohol use*

Non drinking as well as heavy drinking are both risk factors which increase the likelihood of young people's misuse of alcohol (Lowe et al, 1993).

### **Protective factors**

According to Wright, (1999)

Four family socialisation factors - support, control, models and parental attitudes, are independently and additively related to adolescent drinking behaviour, with young people's perception of parental attitudes being the most salient point. The optimal family life for producing sensible drinking among young people seems to be a family that offers moderate levels of support and control, attitudes that support sensible drinking by young people and a model of sensible parental drinking.

Other protective factors include:

- Strong family bonds
- Experience of strong parental monitoring with clear family rules
- Family involvement in the lives of children
- Successful school experiences
- Strong bonds with local community activities
- A caring relationship with at least one adult

(The Right Responses- Managing and making policy for drug related incidents in schools (DrugScope 1999).

The first three protective factors are features of authoritative, rather than authoritarian, parenting styles (Berk, 1996)

Additional protective factors that could be of relevance to young people from different cultural groups include:

- Parenting practices used by some parents from language backgrounds other than English, such as high care and high protection, may protect against early drug use (NSWDET 2001).
- Patterns of prevalence (as indicated above) do indicate lower levels of alcohol consumption in certain ethnic minority groups.
- Religious identification appears to be a significant factor in whether second generation ethnic minority group members in England drink or not. For men this is more important than other social or cultural factors. Religious identity is also associated with less risky drinking among those who drink. (Purser et al., 2001).

### **Religion and alcohol**

(Use of bullet points isn't consistent and needs to be reviewed)

Some religious beliefs prohibit the use of alcohol, whereas others advocate drinking in moderation. For example:

- Some Christian denominations choose never to drink alcohol (Salvation Army, Methodists) whereas other Christians enjoy drinking alcohol and accept it as part of God's good creation and advocate drinking in moderation. Some use wine in Holy Communion.
- In Islam, the use of alcohol is 'haram' or forbidden as it causes people to lose control over their minds and bodies.
- In Sikhism, drinking alcohol clouds the mind and damages the body, which contradicts fundamental Sikh principles.
- Judaism does not ban the use of intoxicating substances. Wine has a prominent symbolic function with the Jewish tradition; Again use is one of moderation. "But there are certain occasions when we (Jews) are permitted (indeed commanded) to drink at a level which is likely to lead to intoxication. In the Pesach or Passover celebrations, for example, we are commanded to drink.... and on the festival of Purim, over-drinking is jocularly encouraged" (Velleman 2002).
- Hinduism accepts moderate use of alcohol, and some Hindus abstain from alcohol use.

### **Developing culturally sensitive alcohol educational resources**

#### Alcohol education

DfES (2004) highlights alcohol as a drug of a particular significance. It states "Alcohol education should start at primary school before drinking patterns become established and should be revisited as pupils' understanding and experience increases." It goes on to state the aim of alcohol education should be to reduce the risks associated with pupils' own and others' drinking by taking a

harm reduction approach. It outlines that this approach “accepts that many, although not all people drink, and seeks to enhance pupil’s abilities to identify and manage risks and make responsible and healthy decisions. It should not suggest that alcohol misuse is acceptable or that all young people drink.”

### Culturally sensitive alcohol education

DfES guidance further suggests that alcohol education can include the culture around alcohol consumption by considering society’s views and family values.

*Alcohol support and guidance for schools* (Alcohol Concern, 2001) stresses the importance of alcohol education in a community that forbids use of alcohol, “All children and young people in Britain will have access to alcohol, whether we think it is right to drink it or not. Therefore all are at risk from harm associated with their own and other people’s alcohol use.”

Resources and teaching methods when delivering alcohol education should reflect cultural diversity. Section 3.5 and Appendix 4: Checklist for selecting resources in *Drugs: Guidance for schools* (DfES 2004) provides a checklist for selecting appropriate drug education, which also applies to alcohol education.

There is a lack of alcohol education resource materials that is culturally sensitive or specific to particular cultural groups. Practitioners looking to develop material that is culturally sensitive should take into consideration the following points:

- *Start where young people are in their knowledge and understanding about alcohol and alcohol use through:*
  - Needs assessment  
It is vital that the resource allows for the opportunity to ascertain the diverse needs and understanding of the group it targets. This can make the alcohol education resource more sensitive to the needs of the young people, more credible, and more likely to engage young people.
  - Use young people as a source for cultural knowledge.
- *Include peer education as a means of delivering alcohol education.*  
Although peer education requires a high level of professional support Dhillon (2001); GMBA (1995); Ram (2000) and Sangster and Mistry (1997) stress the value of peer education projects, particularly amongst young people and women from Black and Minority Ethnic groups.
- *Ensure cultural sensitivities are addressed:*

- Base information provided on an appreciation of diverse cultural attitudes around alcohol use.
  - Involve local cultural groups for the development of resources.
  - Include parents and wider community groups
  - Sangster et al (2002) highlighted that it is vital that drug and alcohol education does not occur in isolation from the wider community group and parents.
  - Bashford et al (2000) point out that the appropriateness of the literature taken home from school by children must take into account the cultural beliefs of parents. However, it is important to remain aware of the entitlement of all young people to clear information about the risks of alcohol.
- It is important to recognise abstention from alcohol as an approach as this may be part of cultural and religious beliefs. Harm reduction interventions may conflict with cultural beliefs and should be placed in this context.
- *Enable young people to draw on popular cultural role models where appropriate.*
  - *Draw on the many different cultural contexts in which alcohol is used; for example, the way alcohol is used, mainly in moderation, in different religious ceremonies, or using scenarios relevant to the young person's experience.*
- *Visual components*
    - It is helpful to have a strong visual component to extend alcohol education to those with basic literacy skills, especially where English is not the first language.
    - Include culturally diverse visual images. However it will never be possible to represent every cultural group in every image. Some visual images can also provide an opportunity to challenge stereotypes across and within cultures.
    - Some colours differ in significance across religious and cultural groups. For more information on use of colour, see FRANK toolkit.
  - *Diversity of languages*
    - It could be helpful to have alcohol education materials translated to different community languages, especially where information is to involve parents and wider community. Any translations need to be done by specialists who can combine a working knowledge of cultural issues as well as interpretative skills.

- Where material is translated, it is suggested that dual-language material (where translated text is printed alongside the English version) are best (FRANK toolkit 2004).
- *Use resources which encourage interactive activities, enabling participants to contribute their own experience and understanding.*  
Resources should provide opportunities for young people to have discussions and explore their own, and others, attitudes towards alcohol. Interactive strategies which are effective in drug education generally, may also be especially effective in classrooms with young people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They facilitate sharing of life experience and teachers are then able to clarify perceptions and myths'. However, more didactic approaches may be appropriate in some cultures for example story telling is an important part of Gypsy culture. 'Pictures, stories, video and tapes may be more effective to deliver drug education messages than other classroom based strategies. (DrugScope and DH,2004).
- *Avoid stereotyping and making generalisations* by being open to the religious and cultural needs of groups. This will enable a flexible response. Closed ended and didactic materials and approaches are more likely to lead to unintentional mistakes.  
It is important to make sure that any resource does not stereotype and make assumptions on alcohol use or attitudes towards alcohol. Young people's experiences and attitudes will vary.  
Ground rules or group agreement may help minimise the possibility of stereotyping during alcohol education activities.
- *Be aware of sensitivities around combining alcohol education with sex and relationship education*, while recognising the entitlement of all young people to sex and relationship education  
Although this may be deemed as good practice for the majority of young people, it may not be seen as appropriate for some cultural groups.

The following case study describes a training event for youth workers employed by Islamic Youth in a London Borough. The example shows how both planning for the religious and cultural needs of the group, as well as openness and sensitivity led to a very positive learning experience for all concerned, including the trainer. The case study includes the trainer's personal reflections on the experience.

## **Culturally Sensitive Alcohol Education**

### **Case Study:**

A one-day training session on substances and working with young people, provided in November 2004, for a mixed gendered group of youth workers employed by Islamic Youth, Battersea, London Borough of Wandsworth.

Preparation took specific account of the cultural needs of the group:

- Lunch provided by a restaurant with a Halal kitchen
- Liaison with Islamic Youth leader to determine whether the group would have any particular needs (such as time-out to pray)

The training schedule for the day was designed for use with all youth workers in Wandsworth Integrated Youth Services and had support from the youth service and local DAT. Its design was intended to reflect a number of factors:

- Issues identified in a borough wide needs-assessment of drug training requirements for local youth workers that took account of included culture(s)
- The diverse nature of youth workers within a single project in terms of age, education, professional and personal experience, professional seniority and cultural background
- Participation by projects in the training was voluntary and time-out from face to face work with young people is difficult to arrange
- A lot needed to be crammed into one day's training, necessitating prioritisation and a careful balance between: knowledge/information, policy/practice issues, skills and space for reflection

In terms of cultural sensitivity and diversity of need/outlook, the underlying assumption behind the design of the training was that the information being imparted and the issues being addressed were adaptable to whatever participants brought with them on the day; the watchwords being flexibility and receptivity. However, intrinsic to this was the experience, confidence and knowledge of the person who designed and delivered the training. The training schedule was intended as a structure through which a series of universally relevant questions could be asked and answered:

- What is a substance?
- What effects do different substances have and how can these be categorised?
- What are the drug laws and how do these work in reality?
- What are the legal constraints and pastoral opportunities when actually dealing with specific instances of young people's substance use?
- What role do personal attitudes, institutional and politico-historical contexts play in our work with young people and substances?

Because the training was participatory and based on discussion, challenges around blind spots, oversights and assumptions were actively elicited throughout the day and were key to making the training meaningful and relevant to the participants. In other words, whilst the basic training schedule can be used for all groups, no two days training are ever the same. The training offered is not closed and static; it moulds to the knowledge and experience of the group whilst retaining its basis in objective facts around effects, risks, laws, policy and contexts. Because of this there was no requirement to second-guess what the needs of the group would be, other than to observe obvious courtesies. What is more, it was assumed that each group trained would have diverse needs and views and that dissonance between facts and opinions, levels of knowledge, cultural experience inform the discussion and enrich the training experience. This means that the training is contingent on the preparedness of participants to engage in robust analysis and to challenge themselves and each other.

This is illustrated by an exercise with the group of Islamic youth workers. I made a faux pas by personally placing stickers on the back of the female participants. I was taken to one side and gently advised by one of the male workers that this was an uncomfortable form of intimacy for the women present. I was not expected to be in possession of this knowledge prior to the training. No offence was taken and nobody took the view that I had not prepared myself well enough for receiving the group. One view of this situation could be that I had made a serious error, caused grievous offence and undermined the training. However, this was not the case and is based on a rather pessimistic view of people's readiness to accommodate and tolerate culturally derived acts of misunderstanding. Throughout the day, where necessary, the group took responsibility for arranging themselves in ways that accorded with cultural and religious strictures. My job was to be alert to this and to adapt accordingly.

The part of the training devoted to more philosophical issues/attitudes was also instructive. Where one might – on the basis of membership of an identifiable, visible cultural group – have expected some unanimity in terms of positions taken, there was real diversity and controversy, cutting across and dividing along ethnic, gender, class and generational lines.

The feedback at the end of the training was very positive. A training schedule that had been used with very different cultural groups had proved itself easily adaptable to the needs of this particular group.

Patrick Turner  
Senior Drug Education Worker  
Wandsworth Integrated Youth Service  
Coordinator of the Wandsworth Young People's Virtual Drug Team

\*The views expressed above are personal to the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Wandsworth Borough Council.

## Conclusion

There is need for culturally sensitive alcohol education materials. This paper has summarised and clarified the meaning of culture and how this differs from ethnicity and religious groupings. Young people who are establishing an identity for themselves within a multicultural society may find that some resources are irrelevant to their lives because they do not acknowledge complex needs. Materials which begin by exploring young people's needs, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours are most likely to address these complex issues.

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**Alcohol Concern**

32-36 Loman St

London

SE1 0EE

Tel: 020 7928 7377

Fax: 020 7928 4644

Website: [www.alcoholconcern.org.uk](http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk)

**DrugScope**

32-36 Loman St

London

SE1 0EE

Tel: 020 7928 1211

Fax: 020 7922 8780/928 1771

Website: [www.drugscope.org.uk](http://www.drugscope.org.uk)

For more information on this briefing paper, contact [ed&prev@drugscope.org.uk](mailto:ed&prev@drugscope.org.uk)

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