

Young People's Views on Alcohol, Narcotics and Tobacco

Annual Report 2004 by the Children's Ombudsman. Summary in English.

The Office of the Children's Ombudsman is a government authority charged with representing the rights and interests of children and young people on the basis of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, promoting the implementation of the convention, and monitoring adherence to it. The Office of the Children's Ombudsman was instituted in 1993 and its activities are regulated in specific legislation.

The Children's Ombudsman must by law submit a report to the Government every year. This annual report must not only reflect the year's work but also bring to the fore issues and problems where the Children's Ombudsman wishes to propose changes, for example in legislation. The report must also highlight issues that are of immediate interest to children and young people or which the authority feels are important. The 2004 report has drugs as its main theme and we asked children and young people for their own views on alcohol, narcotics, and tobacco.

The reason for choosing drugs as the main theme is that many young people have taken up the subject in the course of our dialogues with them. Tobacco, alcohol and narcotics are issues that often come up when I meet young people, for example at meetings of our own youth council. Many young people are worried about friends who drink or smoke, others think that it is difficult to handle/resist peer pressure to have a taste, while others are curious and want to know more.

Many young people tell us how easy it is to get hold of alcohol and narcotics. On my trips around Sweden, they have told me how easy and cheap it is for people of their age to procure smuggled liquor, moonshine, and narcotics. All it takes is a phone call and the bootlegger or pusher arrives at the door with the order. It's cheap and no one checks the age of the buyer. In some places, I even heard that young people gather together just to drink moonshine.

Adults, too, often discuss young people's view of alcohol and narcotics. Both adults and young people think that young people test or use drugs more than is actually the case. Many abstain from smoking or drinking alcohol and only a small group try narcotics. Nonetheless, tobacco, alcohol, and narcotics constitute a very serious problem in our young people's world. My impression is that we adults have not really kept pace with the rapid development that has taken place.

The alcohol and narcotics situation is very different today to what it was a few years ago. New regulations for personal imports, lower prices, greater availability and an increase in adults' consumption of alcohol mean that we risk creating a situation where young people increase their alcohol abuse.

The situation as regards drugs is also different; they are easier to handle in ways that do not put our young people off. The Internet has become a common way of buying and selling drugs of all kinds. The measures currently in force for counteracting the use of drugs among young people will probably not be sufficient to hold drug abuse back.

The problem is not only greater availability, but also the fact that the preventive measures in place to counteract abuse are limited. In many places in Sweden, youth recreation centres or other activities do not exist to the extent they once did. The children of the baby boom era in the early 1990s are now reaching their teens, and this means that we have a relatively large group of teenagers for whom clubs, sports associations, and youth recreation centres must be able to offer activities.

The old policy on alcohol and narcotics was to try to alleviate the effects of the drugs by means of limiting their availability, early intervention to counteract abuse, and proper courses of treatment to help those who did turn into addicts. Sweden's restrictive stance – making possession of narcotics an offence – is also an important, unambiguous signal that drugs are unacceptable in our society.

Against a background of greater availability, increasing globalisation, and limited resources for both preventive measures and treatment programmes, we need stronger action on the part of society and new ways of dealing with the problems. Our starting point must be young people's own experience and the things that are important and significant to them.

To find out what children and young people's own views on tobacco, alcohol and drugs are, we conducted a survey among our contact classes. 771 children and young people around the country filled in the questionnaire.

It is quite clear that campaigns against alcohol, narcotics, and tobacco pay off. In recent years, we have seen a great many campaigns and discussions on smoking-related diseases. The message about the negative consequences of smoking has evidently reached our young people. Smoking is considered to be more dangerous than alcohol and narcotics, according to our contact classes.

When we asked young people about their own views on drugs, we found there was a great awareness of the dangers of tobacco and narcotics. As regards alcohol, more young people are of the opinion that it is up to the individual if he or she wants to drink. There is also a relatively widespread misconception on the subject of alcohol. Young people believe that more people have been drinking and that people drink more than is in fact the case. This might lead young people to think that they have to try it in order to be like everyone else. In light of this, it's important that children and young people know that there are many others who have not tried alcohol or do not drink to get drunk.

Our survey confirmed that there is a definite misunderstanding among our children about how much everyone else smokes and drinks. They believe that there are many others who have tried tobacco and alcohol even if I have not, and that everyone else drinks a lot more than they in fact do.

In our surveys

Parents naturally play a crucial role in children's and young people's attitude to tobacco, alcohol, and narcotics: What young people expect of us as parents is that we shall care about them and they are willing to allow us to set limits. Quite naturally, they also think that we must think about our own attitudes towards drugs, and that we know what the situation with regard to drugs looks like in their day-to-day life.

Children and young people think that as parents we should not offer children alcohol but they can accept us drinking as long as we don't get drunk. If parents maintain a restrictive view with regard to teenagers' contact with alcohol, this may delay children's starting and thereby reduce abuse. But many parents feel at a loss as to how they should react and where they can find help. There is a pressing need to organise support for parents who do not know what to do.

In my opinion, it is high time for us parents to start thinking about how we can give young people and their parents better information about alcohol, narcotics, and tobacco. With the development we have as regards availability, both families and society need to start acting in new ways. Parents are important to influence children's behaviour, but so are their friends.

Even earlier surveys that we conducted among young people showed that teaching about tobacco, alcohol, and narcotics in school needs to improve. It needs to be repeated several times and must take up society, relations to others, and what happens in the body. Many young people complain that alcohol, narcotics, and tobacco are often just a theme for a day or a short project.

Appealing alcohol-free activities are another thing that young people themselves are looking for. In many places, there is nowhere for young people who are not interested in alcohol to meet. Youth recreation centres, sports and leisure time activities are important in counteracting drinking. Children and young people have their own motive force and desire to plan fun drug-free activities. We must give them the scope to do so but we adults must also give them the prerequisites for taking their own initiatives.

A little more about our concrete proposals.....

It is especially important that we take alcohol and narcotics problems seriously in these times when mental ill-health appears to be on the increase among our young people.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children and young people have the right to a drug-free environment to grow up in. We do not live up to these rights in Sweden.

Lena Nyberg

The Children's Ombudsman in Sweden