5 Young People, Social Scene and Popular Culture

Introduction

Teenagers and young adults experience physical and psychological changes as a part of ordinary growth and development. In addition, they take their meaning and identity from relating positively and negatively to different groups, including school, family, interest and peer groups. This used to be seen as a linear development, with the teenager gradually going through the stages of maturity and letting go of the family in exchange for a new family and so on. Post-modern times (Connor 1989) suggest two things. First, there have been many social changes, including greater mobility and increasing breakdown of traditional social patterns, such as the nuclear family. Second, there has been an increase in ethical, social and cultural pluralism. This has led to questioning of the meta-narratives that seemed to give direction to social and moral meaning up to the middle of the twentieth century. For the developing child, this sets up a potentially confusing set of expectations and experiences. The issue of acceptable alcohol consumption emerges for the young person in such a social context, requiring both clear social frameworks for practice and the development of mature moral reflection that begin to handle the many different social messages.

There are minimum age regulations in European countries for when young people can buy alcohol from a licensed venue. For example, purchasing beer or wine off-premises in the UK this is generally 18-years-old, in Germany it is 16-years-old end in Denmark it is 15 (World Health Organization 2004). However, there are many subconscious signals sent to young people about the social acceptability of alcohol consumption, the 'rights of passage' and the rituals of alcohol consumption. Therefore, young people receive many messages that indicate, both socially
and psychologically, it is acceptable to consume alcohol is a part of growing up. However, global problems are increasing. These do not necessarily involve more young people drinking. Indeed, the number of 16–24-year-olds and 11–15-year-olds consuming alcohol in Great Britain is decreasing (Office for National Statistics 2006). The major problem, as reported by governments, social and health campaigners, is that the amount of alcohol drunk on each occasion by young people who do drink is increasing. Because of this, the terms ‘binge drinking’ and ‘extreme drinking’ have entered our vocabulary.

This chapter will be split into two sections. The first section will consider European drinking lifestyles, The European Youth Forum (YFJ) Positional Paper and the UK’s drinking behaviour. Many young people are subconsciously and consciously motivated to take up drinking, as they want to feel part of their community, enjoy alcohol at social gatherings, meet new people and relax (Kenyon 2009a). What they drink and how often they drink it differs from country to country, and this will be discussed. Additionally, there are many other motivations for drinking, and these will also be evaluated towards the end of this chapter. Drinking more on each occasion and drinking beyond ‘acceptable limits’ has led to an increased amount of research, and a raft of shocking statistics.

To address these, it is argued that young people need to develop their understanding of alcohol, so that it can be part of their lives in a positive way rather than in a way that causes harm socially or to their long-term health. This chapter, therefore, presents the many educationally driven strategies aimed at young people. It will also consider the role of the family in helping to establish the right balance between freedom and health risks associated with ‘risky drinking’. Running through the chapter are references to the World Health Organization’s report on alcohol strategies, the European strategies and local initiatives for alcohol related education. All of these strategies or initiatives have the same goal – to protect young people from alcohol related harm.

The second section will discuss how alcohol is part of a young person’s social scene, their ‘right of passage’ into adulthood, their motivations and the camaraderie, felt when taking part in recreational drinking. Youth, teenagers, adolescents, whatever name is given, have always pushed boundaries, of themselves and those around them. Heavy and episodic drinking has been ‘the norm’ on and off throughout history for a minority, as shown in Chapter 1. Therefore, are young people only conforming to this norm? Or, have 24-hour news, a better understanding of psychological issues and addictive tendencies, and a greater knowledge of the long-term consequences of drinking over the ‘acceptable limit’ begun to define and assert behavioural boundaries? This section will