

The Effects of Alcohol on the Family

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This January, a Social and Behavioural Sciences Project became only the second in the 51-year history of the competition to win the BT Young Scientist of the Year award. The project, done by Cork students Ian O' Sullivan and Eimear Murphy, focused on alcohol consumption – more specifically, the effect of parental drinking habits on those of their children.

The unusual win highlights the issue of familial drinking in Irish society. Indeed, Judge Prof. Ian Robertson, explaining why the project won, said “this research can help shape family alcohol behaviour in a very positive way”.

The fact that parental drinking habits were studied was a significant factor in the win, he said, which acknowledges an important truth: that alcohol is a family problem.

In a detailed 2006 report published by Turning Point, a charity that aims to restore lives poisoned by substance abuse, the effect of alcohol misuse on children and other family members was studied. *Bottling It Up* found that drinking damages family life by impairing parenting ability, making children take on adult roles and putting minors in unfair positions. The majority of alcoholic parents, the study said, felt that their kids were worried about their habits and were experiencing high levels of stress because of them. Not only does this reveal damage to the children, it also shows guilt on the parents' part, another emotion that can poison families. A third of alcoholic parents, according to the 2011 update of *Bottling It Up*, feel that their children have taken on caretaker roles. Approximately half of these parents felt that they were prioritising alcohol over their children.

According to a 2010 Australian study, alcohol was implicated in a third of child abuse cases. An Irish study showed that approximately 10% of Irish children had been embarrassed, afraid or seen conflict due to their parents' drinking.

There are many ways in which alcohol destroys families. Another Irish study found that more than half of people who died from suicide had alcohol in their blood, especially those under thirty. Alcohol lowers inhibitions and affects self-esteem, with the UK Mental Health Foundation reporting that alcohol is the main factor in suicides, and the World Health Organisation saying that abusing alcohol leads to an eight-fold increase in suicides. Suicide cripples family and relationships.

Living with an alcoholic harms family life in general as it can force the family into secrecy trying to support an alcoholic parent's habit. Children of alcoholics tend to have high stress levels, wet beds, show obsessive perfectionism and become isolated.

Alcohol changes the way you express your personality and may deprive children of a real parent.

Just as abused children often go on to bully and abuse others, alcoholism is highly communicable, almost like a contagious disease (in fact, it has been suggested by research published in *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* that it is one). To add to the problem, susceptibility to alcohol dependence is actually thought by many medical researchers to be genetic. So the problem needs to be caught further back.

Gardaí come to schools in the days before the Junior Certificate results are released to warn students against getting “wasted” on their big night out. But this is largely ineffective because it comes far too late, when the problem has already taken root.

The stereotype of the Irish drink applies not only to the country, but also to each family unit. It’s harmful for Irish children – for whom most media is American – to witness these stereotypes when they don’t know any better. But most of the population here acknowledge that Ireland as a whole has a drinking problem, but don’t think it applies to them.

This denialism is a national problem that mirrors the familial one too. We can see that Ireland’s alcohol problem has well and truly settled in, and will continue to move unless we catch it at the source – the family.

Gardaí let teenagers drink in the presence of their parents when they’re sixteen. But too many parents don’t care enough to properly regulate their child’s drinking, and this inconsistency leads to vicious feedback circles.

Other family problems also come into play. An alcoholic woman is 9 times more likely to be divorced than an alcoholic man. 90% of women will stay with an alcoholic husband, whereas only one in ten men will do the opposite. It’s estimated by SAMHSA that 76% of problem drinkers are men, and the link between alcohol and domestic violence cannot be denied.

Some children don’t even get a chance to be born before alcohol negatively affects them. Babies whose mothers abused alcohol during their pregnancy have a significant chance of developing Foetal Alcohol Syndrome and experiencing developmental delays and impaired health. They also have a higher susceptibility to alcoholism. A recent CDC study in certain parts of America found that 0.03% of 7-9 year olds showed symptoms of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, and that the average cost for someone with FAS over their lifetime is \$2 million.

Irish society has long had a difficult relationship with alcohol, and it hasn’t been getting any better in recent years. Family relationships with alcohol form microcosms reflecting the problem in Irish society as a whole.

We are trying to solve the problem from the outside in, when we need to do the opposite: have the impetus for change come from within the home, consistently from birth. But here a paradox appears, because home environments across Ireland won't change on their own. Some way to kick-start change is needed, because alcohol is poisoning our families and our society and won't stop unless we make it.

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