

FACTSHEET FOURTEEN

ALCOHOLIC 'SOFT DRINKS' AND YOUNG PEOPLE

It is generally accepted that there is an increasing problem with under-aged drinking within the United Kingdom. This is highlighted by a report of the Royal College of Physicians in 1995. **apas** believes that the advent of the new alcohol 'soft' drinks (alco-pops) exacerbates the situation. These products have an average Alcohol By Volume (ABV) of 5.5%, which is stronger than most beers and lagers.

The producers of these drinks maintain their target audience is the 18 to 25 year old bracket. Undoubtedly, these products appeal to people below the age of 18. The colourful, if not gaudy packaging, with fancy graphics and cartoons, seems to be aimed at the younger market. These products provide an easy introduction to alcohol for young people and for those who have not otherwise acquired a taste for alcohol, since the taste is masked by the cola, lemonade, etc in the container. The sweetness of these products is a stepping-stone to harder alcoholic drinks for the immature palate of young people.

It is known that one in twenty 11 to 15 year old boys and girls drink more than the maximum amount of alcohol recommended for adults. Therefore, attempts to attract young people to consume alcohol are not helpful. **apas** has a serious concern that young people inexperienced in handling alcohol will lead them to drink more in a single session than they would intend, particularly when these products are consumed. There is already evidence to suggest a changing pattern of drinking among young people with a greater emphasis on binge drinking⁽¹⁾. More than one in fifteen 13 year old males and more than one in eight 13 year old females report having been 'very drunk' once or more in the previous year. one thousand children under the age of fifteen are admitted to hospital each year with acute alcohol intoxication⁽²⁾. Cases of alcoholic poisoning have already been reported as a result of the consumption of alcoholic soft-drinks (alco-pops).

The drinks trade defend themselves against the criticism levelled by claiming that such products are aimed at young but not under-aged drinkers and that their labelling clearly contains the word alcohol (or alcoholic). **apas** regards the labelling and marketing of these products as misleading and applauds the action taken by certain local pub chains (e.g. Tynemill) in withdrawing these products from their outlets. Off licences should be

left in no doubt that these drinks should not be sold to under 18's. There is a responsibility for the magistrates to consider the action they might take.

An example is that of Glasgow, where the licensing board have stipulated that alcopops are always displayed with other alcoholic drinks and not adjacent to soft drinks.

It is understood that levels of alcohol can vary considerably between different brands of alcoholic soft drinks. It is therefore important that all drinkers, particularly those who are driving or working machinery, can be clear about how much alcohol they are consuming. The attached list (appendix 1), whilst not exhaustive, is an attempt to provide information on alcoholic content for young people, parents and health and social workers.

Recently, the Portman, a body set up by the big seven drinks producers in the United Kingdom, agreed to draw up a voluntary code of practice to mitigate against alcoholic soft drinks overtly appealing to underage drinkers.

The Portman Group's Code of Practice

Initially it was hoped that the code would seek to ensure that alcoholic soft drinks did not use descriptors which are generic names for soft drinks such as cola or lemonade, so as to draw a clear distinction between alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks. However this aim has been dropped and instead the code states that these terms should be used with the utmost care.

The code states the names of drinks should not encourage irresponsible consumption of alcohol, be more likely to appeal to under 18's than to adults through use of imagery or allusion, nor suggest an association with violent, aggressive, dangerous or anti-social behaviour, or suggest sexual success or prowess.

In terms of packaging, the alcoholic nature and strength of the drink should be clearly marked, although no interpretation of "clearly" is provided in terms of size of lettering and positioning of information. Characters and motifs clearly established as popular with under-18s culture should not be used in designs, and containers should not imply association with anti-social behaviour.

The code urges retailers to ensure that licensing laws are adhered to, that alcoholic products are kept separately from non-alcoholic drinks, and that staff undertake relevant training. It also sets out the mechanisms for administration of the code and lodging a complaint.

While welcoming the code as a step in the right direction, such a code can only be effective if firstly, all producers, distributors and retailers were to sign up to it, and secondly, an independent body was placed in charge of considering complaints and monitoring the code. Ideally the code needs to be set within a statutory framework to

achieve such a level of effectiveness, with scrutiny by an independent body to ensure producers, distributors and retailers are adhering to it.

As it stands, the code has been drawn up by the drinks industry for the drinks industry, and complaints will be heard by the Portman group itself, some of whose members actually produce the alco-pops.

However, an opportunity nevertheless exists for the magistrates, campaigning groups like **apas**, and the Advertising Standards Authority, to take action in partnership against these products. A group of concerned parents has been brought together, following contacts with **apas**, to lobby at a parliamentary and local level.

It remains for parents, youth and community workers and staff in schools to give clear messages to children about alco-pops, and the harm alcohol can cause. **apas** would strongly support a levy on the advertising of all alcoholic products, as is common-place in the United States of America, to fund the programmes that will assist children and teenagers to handle alcohol in a responsible and acceptable manner.

Appendix 2 provides suggestions for specific and productive action for individuals and organisations with major concerns about alco-pops and who want to do something tangible about them.

References:

1. *Newcombe R et al.* A survey of drinking and deviant behaviour among fourteen to fifteen year olds in North West England. *Addiction Research* Vol 2, No 4, pp319-41
2. *Beattie JO et al.* Children intoxicated by alcohol in Nottingham and Glasgow 1973-1984. *British Medical Journal* Vol 292, pp519-21

Appendix 1

Alcoholic "Soft" Drinks: Units and Strengths

Product	ABV	Size	Units
Alcola	4%	330ml	1.3
Aqua V	5%	275ml	1.4
Bacardi Breezer	5.4%	350ml	1.9
Castaway	4.5%	200ml	1
Cisco	15%	750ml	11.3
		187ml	2.8
Cola / Lemon Lips	5%	750ml	3.8
Diamond Zest	5%	275ml btl	1.4
		330ml can	1.7
Hoolahan's	4%	275ml	1.1

Hooper's Hooch	4.7%	330ml	1.6
Hooper's Ginger Brew	4.7%	330ml	1.6
Huckers's Cola	4.9%	-	-
Lemonhead	4.9%	-	-
Mad Macaulay's	5%	275ml	1.4
Max	5%	275ml	1.4
MD 20/20	13.1%	750ml	9.8
		187ml	2.5
Memphis Mist	4.9%	330ml	1.6
Mog	4%	-	-
Mrs McCoys Alcoholic Lemonade	4%	350ml	1.4
Mrs Pucker's Alcoholic Drinks	5.5%	750ml	4.1
		275ml	1.5
Piranha	4.3%	330ml	1.4
Ravers	13%	-	-
Red Raw	5%		
Safari Chiller			
Shock	8.4%	250ml	2.1
Stassen's	4%	750ml	3
Test Tube Cocktails	15%	50ml	1
TNT Dynamite	8.4%	275ml	2.3
Tilt Caribbean Crush	5.5%	330ml	1.8
Tom Foggett's Grog	4%	330ml	1.3
Two Dogs			
Vault	5.3%	-	-
V6	5.5%	275ml	1.5
Woody's	4.7%	330ml	1.6
Zanzebi Sling	5%	-	-

APPENDIX 2

IDEAL FOR LOCAL ACTION TO PROVOKE NATIONAL ACTION ON ALCO-POPS

1. Write to your local MP(s) explaining your concerns and asking him/her to look into them, perhaps by writing to the relevant government departments (Health or the Home Office), by calling for a Government enquiry into alco-pops and the marketing strategies being used by their producers, or by asking Parliamentary Questions. A local MP will always be interested in any local examples of problems with alco-pops or under-18s drinking, but it is also worth pointing out that nationally drinking among 11-15 year olds is on the increase. Phone either the local library or the local council to get the address of your local MP.
2. Submit a complaint to The Portman Group if you think the name, packaging or marketing of an alcoholic drink (whether an alco-pop or any other alcoholic drink) breaches any section of the code as follows :

Names and products descriptors should not:

- Lead to confusion about the alcoholic nature and strength of the product
- Be more likely to appeal to under-18s than adults due to use of imagery or allusion to under-18's culture.
- Encourage immoderate, illegal or irresponsible consumption (e.g.. binge drinking, drunkenness, drink driving, purchase by or sale to under-18's)
- Suggest an association with violent, aggressive, dangerous or anti-social imagery or behaviour, or suggest sexual success or prowess.

Packaging or point of sale materials should ensure that:

- The product's alcoholic nature and strength are clearly communicated by clear indication on the package.
- The alcoholic strength or its relatively high alcoholic content should not be the dominant theme of the packaging.
- Designs and marketing techniques are not based on or resemble existing characters that are established as popular with under-18s.
- Newly created design characters or motifs avoid allusion to or association with icons or imagery established in under-18s cultures.
- There can be no confusion of identity with a non-alcoholic product.
- No personality, 'hero' icon or motif popular with under-18s is used to endorse or promote the product, containers do not mimic containers or shapes associated with anti-social or dangerous behaviour.
- Packaging and point of sales materials do not predominantly appeal to under-18s.

When merchandising products, retailers should ensure that:

- Alcoholic drinks are clearly merchandised as alcoholic products and are not mixed together in merchandising dispensers.
- Complaints should detail the name of the product(s) and the section code you think it is breaching, and sent to:

The Portman Group, 7-10 Chandos Street, Cavendish Square, London W1G 9DQ

It is particularly important that complaints are submitted, otherwise the drinks industry will assume that concerns about alco-pops being designed to appeal to children and teenagers are not widely held and therefore there is little justification for taking action to stop it happening.