

# Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center

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## **Alcohol Advertising Does Not Promote Underage Drinking**

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**Source Database:** Current Controversies: Alcoholism

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As a psychiatrist, scientist, and former architect of the national effort to prevent alcohol problems, it was my job to seek out the best science, both biomedical and behavioral. Today, a heated debate swirls around the issue of restricting alcohol advertising on TV. Assorted opponents who argue that advertising contributes to alcohol-related problems--especially among young people--are way off base.

### **Where Is the Evidence?**

When I consider the pros and cons of alcohol advertising and its alleged effect on problem drinking, I find myself asking the crucial question: Where in the name of science is there proof that alcohol advertising is bad for society? Shouldn't there be some science to say it's so?

In 1996, I was asked to write a review for the *New England Journal of Medicine* on how advertising affects alcohol use. I did not find *any* studies that credibly connect advertising to increases in alcohol use (or abuse) or to young persons taking up drinking. The prevalence of reckless misinterpretation and misapplication of science allows advocacy groups and the media to stretch research findings to suit their preconceived positions.

For example, one study showed that adolescents who drank alcohol could remember alcohol ads better than adolescents who did not drink. But what does that prove? If

researchers found that green-colored automobiles had more accidents than cars of other colors, would that prove the color green causes accidents?

Another study, supported by the Center on Alcohol Advertising, purportedly showed that people who knew about the federal guidelines on moderate drinking drank less than people who didn't know. Poppycock! The many variables that affect behavior and define moderate drinking are scientifically uncontrollable. Anyone with any scientific knowledge knows the study is nonsense.

## **The Zealotry of Protecting Youth**

But the issue of whether alcohol advertising should be restricted goes beyond what I have noted. Nowhere is this emotional issue more conspicuous than in the zealotry of protecting youth. A recent newspaper editorial reflects the hypocrisy at work here. The editorial advised banning TV alcohol advertising to protect young people. Yet I know of no newspaper publisher ready to forgo alcohol-ad revenue. Members of the print media rationalize this hypocrisy by calling television the medium that reaches most minors. The adage that it's easy to give advice one needn't take applies here.

Deaf to advice and blind to facts, anti-alcohol advocacy groups continue their mission to protect young people from the dissoluteness of the adult world. And they amass statistics on all kinds of problems to increase their power. During our adolescent years we tested me world by taking risks, and we made it. So will the present generation of teenagers. But there endures a sturdy, albeit insecure, band of believers dedicated to the idyllic dream of the innocent, sheltered child.

The results of a national survey of high-school students belie this perfect-child fantasy. In the study, researchers with the Addiction Research Foundation in Ontario, Canada, found that 76 percent of twelfth graders and 69 percent of tenth graders in the United States drank alcohol in 1996. State surveys have shown even higher rates of consumption by young people: An analysis of four large surveys of eleventh graders in Ohio showed that 87 percent of the boys and 82 percent of the girls drank alcohol.

A book from England, *The Normal and the Abnormal in Adolescent Drinking*, provides a realistic picture of alcohol and adolescence. The authors contend that adolescent drinking is a normal part of the socialization process, wherein teenagers experiment with and acquire adult behavior. The high incidence of adolescent drinking buttresses this argument. But the authors further contend that adolescent *abstinence* is as deviant as excessive drinking. I agree with their position. Abstinence and excessive drinking are unhealthy extremes. Neither behavior should be encouraged, for in the real world drinking alcohol in moderation is socially acceptable.

The idea of considering teenage abstinence abnormal will shock most Americans. But evidence that most tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders in the United States drank some alcohol last year suggests that abstinence is indeed abnormal in this age group. Thus, the goal of abstinence for adolescents is unrealistic. It is common worldwide to view both

abstinence and excessive drinking as abnormal. Experts in many countries do not make abstinence the only acceptable treatment goal for people recovering from alcoholism. The Puritans held that temptation was to be avoided at all costs, since it would surely lead one down the road to perdition. Are America's all-or-nothing principles part of their legacy?

## **Young People Do Not Mindlessly Obey Advertisements**

The U.S. Supreme Court made a telling point when it decided to overturn the Rhode Island ban on advertising alcoholic-beverage prices: "Keeping users of a product ignorant [in order] to manipulate their choices just doesn't work." The time has come for us to reexamine our attitudes toward teenage drinking. Teaching adolescents how to drink sensibly is a good way to begin.

Advocacy groups claim, without evidence, that alcohol advertising encourages young people to drink. With such an easy target as alcoholic beverages, evidence seems unnecessary. And the lust to blame something or someone for youthful waywardness is so intense that parents can be held legally responsible for their children's wanton acts.

Trying to lend young people a helping hand is, in itself, exemplary. But in their zeal, child-protection advocates may be contributing to the problems they work so hard to prevent. The cult of expertise has made parents feel incapable of raising their children. But as a parent and a psychiatrist, I trust the instincts of parents more than I do the hubris of child-protection experts.

Advertising has long been an accepted part of our daily lives. And because marketing tools are ubiquitous, some people attribute an omnipotence of sorts to Madison Avenue. Money spent on advertising a product is well spent when the advertising is directed to people inclined to purchase that product. But advertising money is wasted when the aim is to induce people to behave contrary to their wishes.

In *Advertising, Alcohol Consumption, and Abuse*, Joseph C. Fisher states: "I have developed a profound respect for consumers. They are not vulnerable, gullible, or easily malleable, but rather know their own minds and act accordingly." Critics claim that advertising influences young people to use "forbidden" products. They cite young people's rote responses as proof that they have been seduced. But such arguments imply that young people are like animals that respond mindlessly to stimuli.

Advocacy groups claim that alcohol advertising seduces young people to drink before they "know better," predisposing them to physiological and psychological addiction in adulthood and making freedom of choice moot. But the claim that advertising can lead anyone down the bottle-strewn garden path not only to drink alcohol but to abuse it, is pure hokum.

And reckless warnings can increase the allure of a product to people with self-destructive tendencies. According to some studies, putting warning labels on products can have the opposite effect.

## Paternalism Tends to Backfire

Marion Winik's description of her youth in *First Comes Love* illustrates how anti-alcohol efforts can backfire: "The minute someone said I shouldn't do something or couldn't have something, this is not allowed, don't go there, stay away, every cell in my body rushed toward it, every synapse in my brain started firing. I had to turn that 'no' into a 'yes' or die trying."

This natural tendency to "go against the grain" is a reality of teenage life. Risk is part of growing up. Young people are not robotic anonyms and should not be regarded as such. They are human individuals and have an ancient, instinctive need to experiment. Paternalism dampens the spirit, fosters resentment, and perpetuates itself.

Events in the former Soviet Union cast doubt on the assertion that alcohol advertising causes undesirable behavior: In an attempt to stem serious nationwide alcohol-abuse problems, the Communist government banned all promotion of alcoholic beverages--after which intemperance increased and Russia arguably became the world leader in drinking problems.

And so, beware! If we invoke science to dress prejudice as policy, we do not merely pervert science: We demean policy and the laws we live by as well.

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