Between zero tolerance and damage control: Policy and parental strategies concerning teenagers and alcohol

Judith Lind, judith.lind@liu.se
Linköping University, Sweden

This article focuses on the distribution of responsibility between teenagers and parents in relation to teenagers’ alcohol consumption. It does so by contrasting the way in which responsibility is ascribed to parents in public guidelines on underage drinking with parents’ posts made to an online discussion board. In Swedish alcohol policy on underage drinking, to a large extent the replacement of state control over the accessibility of alcohol with individual responsibility translates into parental responsibility. Further, in national information campaigns, parents have been urged to stand their ground and maintain a zero-tolerance stance in order to minimise underage drinking. Like policymakers, parents who engaged in online discussions on teenagers and alcohol were concerned about the effects of underage drinking. But in addition to the national alcohol policy goals of postponing the alcohol debut and minimising underage drinking, parents were also concerned about the effects of their drinking rules on their relationship with their teenagers, and about the long-term effects of their parenting strategies on their children’s later drinking habits as adults. And in contrast to public policy and national information campaigns, not all parents ascribed to themselves the power to influence their teenage children’s drinking.

key words parents • parenting • teenagers • responsibility • alcohol policy • discussion board • online forum

Introduction

A prominent theme in current social science research on family and parenthood is the increasing amount of responsibility that is ascribed to parents, not only for their child’s wellbeing and future life chances, but also for public health and for the nation’s future. As a result, parenting has become a risk management as well as a life-planning task (Shirani et al, 2012), and parents are not only seen as responsible, but they are also held responsible for their child’s development (Oelkers, 2012; see also Gillies, 2008; Koffman, 2008). The modern welfare state requires capable citizens to make adequate choices for themselves and to assume responsibility for their own health and wellbeing (Dahlstedt, 2009; Crawshaw, 2012). In the social investment state, children are regarded as citizens-in-becoming (Lister, 2008), and parents are held responsible for moulding their child into a particular kind of citizen. By using the language of developmental psychology and by presenting itself as neutral and scientific, the current discourse...
on parenting gives the impression that what is regarded as the preferable outcome of parenting is a universal and objective matter (Ramaekers and Suissa, 2012). This discourse also presupposes a causal relationship between certain parenting behaviours and particular ‘outcomes’ for children. The definition of the responsible parent that follows this view is a parent who is primarily concerned with her/his child’s proper development, which involves prioritising this aspect over other aspects of parenting, such as concern for the parent-child relationship (Ramaekers and Suissa, 2012).

In contrast to a one-sided focus on the outcomes or end results of parenting, or the child as a becoming adult citizen, Goodman (2008), in her discussion of the ethics of parental care, argues that parents must deal with the tension between the demands of handling children’s immediate wants and needs and the demands of moulding them into future adult citizens. The complexities of parenting include defining not only the desired outcome, that is, what kind of person the parent wants her/his child to become, but also what kind of relationship s/he wishes to have with the child. The judgements involved in deciding how to act and react in everyday childcare situations are therefore described by Goodman as ‘extraordinary problems of balancing’ (Goodman, 2008: 242). Although the need for parents to find a balance between allowing the child to experience things independently and protecting the child from potentially harmful experiences has been noted previously by, among others, Ruddick (1989), the implications of such an act of balancing have less often been discussed in relation to different phases of parenthood, and the differences between parenting a toddler and parenting a teenager. The aim of this present study is to examine the contrast between the parental act of balancing, on the one hand, and the focus in public discourse on parents’ responsibility for the outcomes of their parenting practices, on the other, focusing on a particular area: teenagers’ consumption of alcohol. This focus on alcohol consumption serves to address the tension between a teenager’s entitlement to autonomy when it comes to decisions concerning her/his own body and life on the one hand, and parents’ responsibility for ensuring the physical wellbeing and socialisation of their child on the other.

Parents’ discussions about teenagers and alcohol must be understood in the context of Swedish alcohol policy and public guidelines. In the following, I therefore first give an account of Swedish alcohol policy and a national campaign that was launched in 2010 and continued until 2012, before I describe the data collection and analysis processes. This campaign, comprising debate articles published in one of Sweden’s major morning newspapers, a website with information on underage drinking aimed at parents and other information material, constitutes an official view of parents’ responsibility for their teenage children’s drinking.

**Swedish policy on teenagers and alcohol**

Swedish legislation, like that in many other European countries, stipulates age limits for the consumption of alcohol. It also prohibits regular stores from selling alcoholic beverages that contain more than 3.5% alcohol by volume. Alcohol can only be purchased legally at retail stores of the government-owned company Systembolaget, and only by those who are aged 20 or older (SFS, 2010:1622, 3 chap. 7§). The age limit for buying beer containing more than 2.25% and less than 3.5% alcohol by volume at regular stores is 18, which is also the minimum age to be served alcoholic beverages in restaurants and pubs (SFS, 2010:1622, 3 chap. 7§). Hence, Swedish alcohol policy
considers 18 to be a reasonable age limit for alcohol consumption. The higher age limit of 20 for purchasing alcohol at a Systembolaget is motivated by the perceived risk of 18-year-olds buying for or sharing alcohol with friends under 18, despite the fact that this is illegal (Government Bill, 2009/10:125). Although Sweden has a long history of restrictive alcohol policy, when it joined the European Union (EU) in 1994 this changed the conditions for Swedish alcohol policies. All state monopolies – except for retail sales – were abolished, alcohol taxes were adjusted to the effect that, for example, beer prices decreased by about 20% in 1997, and the quotas for private importation of alcoholic beverages were increased. According to estimates based on survey data, legal imports of alcohol almost tripled and illegal imports quadrupled between 1996 and 2004, which in turn has led to political pressure to reduce Swedish alcohol taxes. Furthermore, in order to maintain public support for the retail monopoly, the number of alcohol retail stores and their opening hours were increased markedly, making the purchase of alcohol possible during more hours of the week (Nordström and Ramstedt, 2006). In short, these changes illustrate alcohol policy under a neoliberal mode of governance, replacing state control with individual responsibility (Sulkunen et al, 2004). Instead of the state minimising access to alcohol, citizens are expected to be able to responsibly handle its increased availability. Such a policy also resonates well with discourses of health as an individual achievement, in which the pursuit of health is thought to require the characteristics associated with responsible citizenship, such as rationality, self-control and willpower (Crawshaw, 2012).

One recent change in Swedish alcohol legislation concerns serving alcohol to those aged under 18. With the Act on Alcohol 2010 (SFS, 2010:1622), it was made legal to serve ‘a small amount of alcohol’ to someone under the age of 18 ‘under the condition that it is consumed directly, under orderly conditions and that, considering the age and development of the young person and the circumstances in general, it appears justifiable’ (SFS, 2010:1622, 3 kap. 9§, my translation). The legislation hence gives parents the responsibility for judging whether a young person is old or mature enough, and whether the conditions are sufficiently orderly. In public guidelines on teenagers and drinking, parents are also ascribed responsibility for minimising their teenage children’s consumption of alcohol. One general point of departure for guidelines regarding teenagers and alcohol is that teenagers can be expected to want to drink alcohol at some point. As a result, parents who serve alcohol to their teenagers or accept their drinking are positioned as giving in to their children’s desires. Because the primary goal of public policy is to minimise teenagers’ drinking, and parental acceptance is claimed to lead to increased alcohol consumption, the message to parents is that teenagers can be expected to want to drink alcohol at some point. As a result, parents who serve alcohol to their teenagers or accept their drinking are positioned as giving in to their children’s desires. Because the primary goal of public policy is to minimise teenagers’ drinking, and parental acceptance is claimed to lead to increased alcohol consumption, the message to parents is that teenagers can be expected to want to drink alcohol at some point. As a result, parents who serve alcohol to their teenagers or accept their drinking are positioned as giving in to their children’s desires.
child taste alcohol at a dinner or festivity. Thus, increasing parents’ knowledge regarding teenagers and alcohol was considered important, but not sufficient. A further central task identified was ‘to do away with old myths – for instance, the belief that a parent can help her/his teenager become a sound drinker by serving a glass of wine with dinner or buying beer for the teenager’s graduation party’ (Larsson et al, 2010, my translation). Similarly, the belief that parents can make alcohol less exciting and help their children better handle alcohol by serving it at home or otherwise supplying them with alcohol is dismissed on a website that was also part of the campaign, ‘Tänk Om’ (‘Rethink’ or ‘What if’, Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2012), with the specific aim of supplying parents with facts and tips regarding teenagers and alcohol. The website also contains a link to a digital version of a brochure, *Ja eller nej* (‘Yes or no’, Systembolaget, 2012) that is structured around fictional parental quotes that serve to represent common misconceptions or attitudes found among parents about teenagers’ alcohol consumption that the experts comment on.

To sum up, at the same time as state policies have made alcohol increasingly accessible to Swedish teenagers, parents are ascribed responsibility for minimising their teenage children’s drinking and for delaying their drinking debut. The teenagers themselves, on the other hand, are awarded little responsibility. Young people are assumed to want to drink and parents are expected to prevent them from drinking by saying no and maintaining a zero-tolerance stance. As a consequence, parents who readily serve alcohol to their teenagers are described as sorely lacking in knowledge and sound attitudes, and such parents are therefore construed as a significant problem. The desired outcome of parenting activities, which is the main focus in Swedish alcohol policy, and particularly the 2010–12 campaign, is considered to be the immediate prevention of underage drinking, rather than the transferral of responsibility from parents to their almost-adult children. Correspondingly, there is little, or almost no, focus on the responsibility of teenagers, the socialisation of teenagers or the independence of teenagers as they grow up to become adults.

Interestingly, the implications of emphasising parents’ responsibility for their children’s wellbeing and development are seldom discussed in relation to different phases of parenthood or the differences between parenting infants, toddlers, school children and teenagers. As the teenage child approaches adulthood, s/he also approaches the point in time at which it is expected that responsibilities will be transferred from parent to child. After all, from the state’s perspective, the preferred outcome of parenting practices is an adult citizen who is able and willing to assume responsibility for her/his own alcohol consumption.

Perälä-Littunen and Böök (2012) note that the parents in their study described parental responsibility in terms of the right to interfere in their child’s life, and that the right to interfere ends when responsibility ends. One aspect of parenting for responsibility, according to these mothers, is to ‘let go’ of the child who is approaching adulthood (Perälä-Littunen and Böök, 2012). With regard to alcohol consumption, there is a specific date that marks the end of parental control and forces parents to let go. Once a teenager reaches the legal drinking age, the possibilities for parents to control or monitor their child’s consumption of alcohol are minimal. Hence, parents must balance any wish to protect their teenage child against the dangers of drinking alcohol with the goal of handing over the responsibility to their child. Such an act of balancing resembles the question posed by parents in an intervention programme for obese children: whether an immediate stop to the consumption of unhealthy
food items is more important than preparing the child for a future life in which the parents will no longer be able to control or influence her/his eating (Roll Bennet and Bergström, 2015). In this article, the way in which responsibility is ascribed to parents in public guidelines on underage drinking, and the way this responsibility is referred to as ending rather abruptly when the teenager reaches the legal drinking age, forms the background to my analysis of parents’ reasoning concerning their own responsibility and power to influence their teenager’s drinking behaviour.

Data and method

The data used in the study are posts made to the online discussion board on the Swedish website Familjeliv.se. This introduces itself as ‘a website for everyone who is interested in family life’, a place where you can get ‘tips, support and help with anything that concerns children’ (my translation). According to the marketing statistics presented on its website, it has approximately one million unique visitors during any one week, of whom 77% are women. Familjeliv.se states that its visitors are ‘generally well educated and have a high family income’ (see www.familjeliv.se/annonsera).

The posts made to online discussion boards can be viewed as expressions of what engages the thousands of parents who participate in discussions on these boards (Russell, 2012). In contrast to interviews, posts to online discussion boards constitute naturally occurring data, that is, spontaneous utterances concerning subjects initiated by the poster her/himself (Robinson, 2001) or simply parents’ everyday talk (Mungham and Lazard, 2009; Callaghan and Lazard, 2012). The posts are made without parents being specifically asked – in the context of a study on the prevention of teenage drinking or the like – to account for their strategies in relation to teenagers and alcohol, but when they are discussing these matters with other parents on their own initiative.

On the discussion board, parents ask each other for and give advice. Thus they also argue in favour of, or against, a particular parenting behaviour, and often do so by describing their own strategies and choices in similar situations. Therefore, posts to online discussion boards provide excellent data for an analysis of how parents position themselves and others in relation to parenting ideals, and how they reproduce or negotiate these (Mungham and Lazard, 2009).

Twenty-one discussion threads, out of a total of 594 threads started in the discussion group on parents/teenagers between 30 August 2009 and 30 August 2012, concerned alcohol. The threads comprised a total of 519 posts. Nineteen of the opening posts could be identified as being from parents. They either introduced themselves as mothers or fathers or referred to the teenager whom their post concerned as their son or daughter. The remaining two opening posts may very well also be from parents, but they did not explicitly introduce themselves as such in their opening posts. Eight of the opening posters introduced themselves as mothers and one as a father, whereas the gender of the remaining parents was not disclosed in the posts. Although the vast majority of the opening posts served to start a general discussion on teenagers and alcohol, many opening posts (17) began with a description of the situation in their own families. Four of these introduced themselves as parents of a boy and the remaining nine as parents of a girl.

All posts were analysed thematically (Clarke and Braun, 2006; Braun et al, 2014). After the threads had been read and reread, initial codes were generated (parents’
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expressed opinions about buying alcohol for their underage teenager, serving alcohol and teenagers’ consumption of alcohol at parties). In the next stage of the analysis, codes were collated into three preliminary themes: the concerns that parents addressed in their posts, the extent to which they ascribed to themselves the power to influence their teenagers’ drinking, and the strategies they claimed to employ. Thereafter, subcategories for each theme were generated. The concerns of parents included the quantities of alcohol their teenagers consumed, the quality of the alcohol consumed, the risks of becoming intoxicated in an unsafe environment, teenagers’ willingness to ask their parents for help after having consumed alcohol, and the consequences of reaching the legal age for drinking in pubs (age 18) without having any prior experience of alcohol. With regard to parental power, two subcategories were defined: posts in which parents ascribed to themselves considerable power to influence their teenagers’ drinking and posts in which parents described teenagers’ drinking as something that would occur regardless of parental actions. Finally, these subcategories were combined to create three categories of parental strategies – zero tolerance, socialisation, and damage control – that find expression in parents’ posts on the discussion board.

**Ethical considerations**

Posts to online discussion boards are made independently and without the knowledge that they may be used as research data. Indeed, this is one of the major advantages of using them. However, the use of such data also raises questions concerning informed consent. Researchers have made a distinction between discussion boards and chat rooms that are password-protected and to which access is restricted through membership requirements, on the one hand, and discussion boards on which posts are open for anyone to read, on the other (Markham, 2005; Rodham and Gavin, 2006). Whereas participants on password-protected discussion boards have the right to assume that their posts will not be read by anyone outside that particular board’s online community, those posting on open-access boards can be expected to realise that their posts, similar to blog entries or other digitally published material, can be read by anyone. The character of many discussion threads, in which posters make public their opinions about underage drinking and parental responsibility, also makes them more comparable to public debates than to private discussions. Indeed, some of them are read several thousand times. Because the posts made on the discussion boards at Familjeliv.se are public and can be read by anyone, consent has not been sought.

Posters to Familjeliv.se select a pseudonym that appears every time they post to the discussion board. A personal page is linked to each pseudonym, on which posters can disclose more information about themselves if they wish to do so. The information on these pages has not been used for the analysis. Furthermore, in order to protect the anonymity of posters, their pseudonyms are not disclosed. As is the case with all published material, extracts from it can be traced on the internet and thereby linked to a pseudonym (Beaulieu and Estalella, 2012). In a qualitative analysis of discussion board posts, the use of quotations from the posts is difficult to avoid. One explicit aim of this article is to illustrate the ways in which parents’ concerns may differ from the concerns expressed in public guidance on underage drinking (Roberts, 2015). To reproduce parents’ concerns in their own words is therefore important. The traceability of the quotations used in this article, however, is likely to be reduced considerably by the fact that they are translated from the Swedish original into English.
Parents’ posts on teenagers and alcohol: an overview

One of the main topics in the discussion threads on alcohol and teenagers that I studied concerned whether it is acceptable for parents to buy alcohol for those aged under 20, or to serve alcohol to those aged under 18, and how parents should react if they discover that their underage teenager does drink alcohol. Parents seemed to be generally aware of the legislation and must in one way or another relate to it when they decide what to do when their 17-year-old asks them to buy a bottle of wine for them, when their 15-year-old frequents parties at which they know alcohol will be available or asks to have a beer at the family barbecue. The tone in the online discussions on alcohol was generally, but not always, respectful, and posters acknowledged that there might be different views on how to best protect a teenager from engaging in harmful drinking. At the same time, they appeared to be eager to explain the reasons for their own strategies and standpoints, and to let others know whether they were missing the point. Below, I briefly summarise the various lines of argument that occurred concerning parents buying and serving alcohol to underage teenagers, and their acceptance of teenagers’ drinking.

One recurring question in five of the opening posts on alcohol concerned whether it is acceptable to buy alcohol for those aged under 20. The Swedish phrase used is köpa ut, which literally means ‘to buy out’, indicating that the person who ‘buys out’ does not pay for the alcohol, but simply agrees to make the purchase for the underage person. One example is the opening post with the heading ‘Buy out!?’ (‘Köpa ut!?’, 5 June 2012, read 1,279 times, 54 replies), which invited others to participate in a poll on what they would have done if their 15-to 19-year-old had asked them to ‘buy out’ alcohol for her/him. Contradicting the opinion of the person who wrote the opening post, 78% of those who participated in the poll ticked ‘No’ and only 22% stated that they would buy alcohol for their teenager.

Parents also discussed whether it is acceptable to serve alcohol to those aged under 18 in the home. Overall, posters in these threads claimed to be more willing to serve alcohol at home than to buy it for their teenagers. Another question under debate is what kind of stance a parent should take on an underage teenager’s drinking with friends. Here, too, opinions varied. Whereas some claimed to maintain a zero-tolerance stance, others digitally shrugged their shoulders, suggesting that there are other things for the parents of a teenager to worry about than alcohol and partying. Although many of those posting to the board referred to legislation and public guidelines concerning teenagers and drinking, some offered standpoints contradicting these guidelines. Hence, not all agreed that teenagers under 18 should not be allowed to drink. But even among those who did claim to worry about drinking, there was great variation in their views on what parents can and should do.

On the online discussion board under study, parents discussed with each other not only where to draw the line between potentially harmful and harmless behaviours, what to allow and what not to allow, but also how to act to reduce harm or the risk of harm. Taken together, the posts made to the discussion board form a web of considerations and standpoints that is far more complex than the ignorance and belief in myths that are attributed to parents in the national campaign during 2010–12.
Between zero tolerance and damage control: parents’ strategies

One common point of departure for discussions on teenagers and alcohol on the discussion board under study was that teenagers could be expected to want to drink alcohol at some point (see, for example, 17 December 2009). One question that posters discussed was whether it is possible for parents to influence whether or how much their teenager drinks. According to a 2012 Public Health Agency of Sweden survey, based on telephone interviews with 2,100 parents, 37% of participating parents did not believe it would make any difference to their teenager’s drinking if they allowed her/him to taste alcohol, for instance, at dinner, and 29% did not believe it would make any difference if they told their teenager consistently that s/he was not allowed to drink. Hence, according to this survey, approximately one-third of parents did not believe they could influence their teenagers’ drinking (Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2012). Based on these survey results, I discuss below how posters discussed their role as parents.

Zero tolerance

In general, posters who argued for a zero-tolerance stance on alcohol urged other parents to assume their parental responsibility by making sure that their teenager did not drink. In line with public guidelines, the good parent was portrayed as a person who stands her/his ground and is not afraid of enforcing unpopular rules or ensuring that any transgressions have tangible consequences. Parents who are not prepared to do so were described as lax and as taking the easy way out by avoiding conflict. Parents were ascribed not only a great deal of responsibility, but also a great potential to influence their teenagers’ behaviour. There are many examples in which parents stated that they had simply forbidden their children to drink:<quote>My teenage children are not allowed to go to parties where there will be alcohol. (28 December 2011, #3)</quote>

<quote>As long as they are underage they should not drink and as long as they are not 18 I am the one who decides. (28 December 2011, #4)</quote>

<quote>I (we) are very strict when it comes to parties where there is liquor. I guess our daughters may experience that as tiresome but they know what our standpoint is and accept it. (28 March 2010, #13)</quote>

These parents also claimed that their children adhered to their rules and did not drink. Hence, they thought it possible to prevent a teenager from drinking simply by telling her/him to refrain from it. All of the three above posts, most clearly the last, imply that the teenagers themselves would like to drink alcohol and thus cannot be allowed to decide for themselves on this matter. Those who argued that they did not accept any drinking also argued, much like the public guidelines, that parental acceptance would convey the message that it was acceptable to drink, which would lead to increased drinking:
… what is most important for us parents is to show where we stand, what we think is right for them and what is not. Parents who think it’s ok for teenagers to drink at parties also have children who drink alcohol at parties more often. Parents who say no, refuse to buy out, do not accept that their children drink, etc, also have children who drink considerably less. It’s important to realise that we parents have a lot of power to influence our children’s drinking. (28 December 2011, #9)

This is another manner of ascribing responsibility to oneself as a parent. In addition to an explicit prohibition on drinking, and the consequences that a breach of such a parental rule may have, parents, according to those like the above, also have a responsibility for the ways in which the messages they send by accepting or not accepting drinking influence their teenagers’ behaviour.

Hence, the above parents posting ascribed a great deal of power to themselves and parents in general, and described their role as important. It is because parents say no that some teenagers do not drink, not because they voluntarily refrain from drinking. Hence, for these parents it goes without saying that it is their responsibility as parents to prevent their teenagers from drinking, which also implies that their teenage children cannot be made responsible for refraining from drinking. These parents have assumed the responsibility that has been ascribed to the individual through the liberalisation of Swedish alcohol policy. In lieu of state control, they exercise parental control over the accessibility of alcohol.

**Socialisation**

In line with the public guidelines on teenagers and alcohol, many were concerned about how to delay their teenagers’ drinking debut and minimise drinking as much as possible. They also, however, touched on the long-term goals of their parenting strategies regarding drinking, although such goals were seldom made explicit. One exception is the post below:

I have no wish for my children to become teetotallers, although I would not object of course if they did, as long as their attitude towards alcohol is similar to mine and that they’d rather drink wine and beer than hard liquor.

(11 August 2009, #18)

What this parent seems to envision for her/his children in the future is what s/he considers a sound relationship to alcohol rather than total abstinence. Parents like those above seem to assume that their teenager will, at some point, begin to drink alcohol. Consumption of alcoholic beverages is thus regarded as part of adult life, something that will inevitably occur in the lives of their children. For some, this meant that their responsibility as a parent was to prepare their teenager for something that they were expected to be able to handle later in life. The poster below gave a firm ‘No’ in response to an opening poster’s question about whether parents should buy alcohol for their teenager. ‘However,’ s/he continues:
I think it is quite all right to serve them a glass at home – if the teenager asks for it – if you want to build a foundation for sound habits and common sense concerning alcohol. (4 June 2012, #13)

One aspect of being prepared for turning 18 and becoming legally entitled to consume alcohol, some argued, is understanding the intoxicating effects of alcohol. The parents below stated that s/he would never buy liquor for her/his teenager:

… but I would let them taste a few sips and then increase some more on a few occasions with for example cider or beer at home, so that they get to know their body’s reaction under the influence of alcohol. (4 June 2012, #14)

Like the above, the poster below argued that s/he would not buy alcohol for her/ his children, but is prepared to offer them alcohol at home:

If you are 17, you are hopefully mature enough to decide on those matters by yourself, if you are not I’d be worried at the prospect of her turning 18 when she is legally entitled to decide about her alcohol consumption by herself. (11 August 2009, #14)

According to this person, if teenagers are not allowed to experience the effects of alcohol, they will not be prepared for the day when they are actually allowed to drink. The issue that seems to be at stake here is when parental responsibility ends. Instead of discussing how to minimise alcohol consumption before the age of 18, these parents were concerned about the drinking that would occur after their child reached the legal age for alcohol consumption, thus gaining access to alcohol beyond the control of the parents.

In one sense, these parents reproduced the ‘myth’ referred to in the national campaign, that is, the belief that parents can teach their children how to handle alcohol by serving it to them. However, while such a strategy is referred to as a myth on the basis that it increases, rather than reduces, teenagers’ immediate consumption of alcohol, what the above were concerned about was not primarily their teenager’s drinking here and now, but their children’s future alcohol consumption as adults. In contrast to those who maintained a zero-tolerance stance, the above ascribed responsibility not only to themselves but also to their teenage children as future adult citizens. Therefore, they did not view their responsibility as parents to merely entail preventing their teenagers from drinking, but rather to prepare them for being legally entitled to drink without restrictions, and for handling that entitlement responsibly. Hence, they were more concerned about when their responsibility and power to influence their teenagers’ behaviour ended. Instead of restricting access, they strove to prepare their children for the accessibility of alcohol.

‘Damage control’

In all of the posts cited above, parents ascribed considerable power to themselves to influence their children’s current and future alcohol consumption and drinking habits. In other posts, however, it was considered unrealistic to expect parents to be able to prevent drinking before the age of 18. Teenagers in these posts are ascribed a greater
amount of independence. As a result, some of those who argued for limited parental intervention in and regulation of the lives of their teenagers saw this limitation not as a strategy as such, but rather as a necessary adjustment to the difficulties involved in controlling teenagers’ behaviour. ‘Teenagers will drink alcohol regardless of what their parents say’, is the overall message in these posts. The good parent accepts this and strives to minimise the damage by creating as safe an environment as possible for these activities. In these posts, parents who claimed they could prevent potentially harmful behaviours by simply forbidding them were called naive and were seen as out of touch with their teenagers’ lives. Instead of preventing drinking, they claimed that the primary responsibility of parents was to try to reduce the harmful effects of alcohol consumption. One aspect of such harm reduction was to minimise the risk of the teenager drinking moonshine by supplying her/him with better quality alcohol:

We live in a small town in Norrland where all the teenagers drink regardless of whether their parents like it or not. I’d rather see my daughter drinking a bottle of sparkling wine from Systemet [short for Systembolaget] than the moonshine that most of the others drink. (18 April 2011, #45)

In addition to the harmful effects that alcohol, and in particular illicitly distilled alcohol, may have on the teenage body, the parents were also concerned about potentially dangerous situations that could arise as a result of intoxication. Hence, whereas the first of these dangers is associated with all teen consumption of alcohol, regardless of where it takes places, the second may be reduced by attempting to control the circumstances under which drinking takes place. The parent below claimed to be willing to serve alcohol to his/her children at home in order to reduce some of the risks associated with drinking:

I’d rather let my children taste and learn what happens in their body than let them tumble out from some drunken party where they’ve had smuggled or bad liquor and cannot handle it and get into trouble. (4 June 2012, #14)

This person thus raised various concerns: the risk of consuming alcohol of inferior quality as well as the risk of becoming intoxicated in a possibly unsafe environment. On their path from childhood to adulthood, teenagers in posts like the above are ascribed a great deal of independence. They are described as uncontrollable, and therefore parents cannot assume responsibility for their behaviour. Instead, the responsibility of parents lies in reducing the risks that may be associated with the teenager’s drinking behaviour. In another post, the writer seemed to believe that locking up her/his daughter was the only means to prevent her from drinking:

I am totally aware that I cannot prevent her from drinking by doing anything less than locking her up. And that is not allowed, so I’ve heard :) Therefore we opt for damage control ... simply try to minimize risks and damage as best we can. Do not buy out, always pick her up after a party. She is not allowed to go on the night bus, not allowed to sleep over after a party. (18 April 2011, #7)
What is important here is that posters like the above, although they accept their teenagers’ drinking, position themselves as parents who do not take the easy route. The above person claims to have several rules for the circumstances under which her/his daughter’s drinking is allowed to occur, and portrays her/himself as someone who is prepared to sacrifice her/his own comfort by collecting the daughter after parties late at night.

Another means of damage control that was mentioned on the discussion board was for parents to assume the role of a non-judgemental back-up person. In these posts, parents were indeed ascribed the power to prevent underage drinking by forbidding it. However, the claim was that good parents refrain from doing so in order to safeguard their relationship and open communication with their teenage children. Again, teenagers are portrayed as wanting to drink, and also as capable of finding a way to do so despite parental rules that forbid drinking. In order to avoid the consequences of breaching these rules, teenagers were claimed by some to conceal their drinking. The risk associated with strict enforcement of parental rules, as it was described in these posts, is that it may make the teenager afraid to seek parental help and support when s/he needs it the most:

I’d rather be a parent who can talk to her/his child and that the child doesn’t need to have lots of secrets and can call on the weekend if something has happened. (11 August 2009, #21)

I don’t want my boy to have to lie to me or feel that he doesn’t dare come home because he’s drunk, so I’ve chosen a pragmatic way where I accept that teenagers party and drink sometimes. I did too when I was that age. (28 December 2011, #22)

I prefer that my children tell me what they are up to and that they contact me in case something happens, rather than making up a lot of rules that you know they will break and then are afraid to call home and tell me, because they are afraid. (3 August 2009, #55)

But is it good to be strict, to have zero tolerance, like what should you say when your teenager comes home and smells of alcohol? (3 August 2009, #3)

Although some argued that a zero-tolerance stance on alcohol does not necessarily stand in the way of open communication between parent and child, some acknowledged that they do face a dilemma. On the one hand, they want to make it clear to their teenager that they do not want him/her to drink, while on the other hand, they want their teenager to turn to them should s/he be in trouble or need help after having drunk alcohol. The following quotes illustrate how some tried to balance these two goals:

I was very strict regarding alcohol for my daughter before she turned 18. Never bought out, never served a drop at home. Of course I knew that she drank anyway … nothing I had forbidden perhaps or introduced threats or punishments against … but it wasn’t ok. (24 September 2011, #6)
I do not condone it [the drinking], but realize that they, like most other teenagers, do it anyway. (28 December 2011, #20)

To handle this dilemma, some admitted to being aware that their teenager drinks without having confronted her/him with that fact. They claimed that they did not want to issue any sort of punishment out of fear that their teenager would not dare to call them if s/he was in trouble, but still they did not want to accept the drinking explicitly. As a means of balancing these two goals, some parents resorted to silent acceptance of their teenage children’s drinking:

She is responsible and has never got herself into trouble, but I’d be stupid if I did not realize that she drinks occasionally with friends on the weekend (I have been 17 myself). It is, however, a very silent agreement, that as long as she handles it well, she is allowed to stay out late and we will not interfere more than necessary. (11 August 2009, #3)

In the above post, the daughter is referred to as ‘responsible’. The responsibility that she is ascribed, however, is related to the way in which she handles her drinking, that is, not getting herself ‘into trouble’, rather than refraining from drinking. Balancing her/his daughter’s independence and her/his own responsibility as a parent to ensure her safety, this parent argues that there is no need to intervene as a parent.

Conclusions

In Swedish alcohol policy on underage drinking, the replacement of state control over the accessibility of alcohol with individual responsibility translates, to a large extent, into parental responsibility. In national information campaigns, parents have been urged to stand their ground and maintain a zero-tolerance stance in order to minimise underage drinking. Referring to research indicating that teenagers who are served alcohol at home tend to drink more than others, parents’ belief that they can teach their children sensible drinking habits by serving alcohol is dismissed as a myth. Yet parents, as opposed to the information campaigns of 2010 and 2012, are not only concerned with their teenagers’ level of alcohol consumption before they turn 18, but they are also concerned with their children’s adult drinking patterns. By failing to acknowledge the complexity of parents’ concerns, official policy and information campaigns on teenagers and drinking are at risk of missing the mark when addressing parents.

Like policy-makers, parents who engaged in discussions on teenagers and alcohol on the Swedish website FamiljeLiv.se were concerned about the effects of underage drinking. But in addition to the national alcohol policy goals of postponing the alcohol debut and minimising underage drinking, they were also concerned about the effects of their drinking rules on their relationship with their teenagers, and about the long-term effects of their parenting strategies on their children’s later drinking habits as adults. And in contrast to public policy and national information campaigns, not all seemed to believe that they had the power to influence their teenage children’s drinking.

This doesn’t mean that they were not willing to assume responsibility as parents. What they assumed responsibility for, however, extends beyond limiting access to
alcohol. Whereas some, in line with the message of the national campaign on underage drinking, saw their main responsibility as preventing their teenagers’ drinking as such, others referred to their responsibility to prepare their children for the accessibility of alcohol that their future adult lives entailed. To the extent that parents ascribed to themselves the power to influence their teenagers’ drinking, they saw a definite end to this influence when the teenager was old enough to drink and purchase alcohol legally. Several made a point of assuming responsibility for preparing their teenager for this entitlement, and for handling it responsibly.

Yet another way in which parents posting online assumed responsibility was to express concern for the safety of their teenagers after having drunk alcohol. Instead of attempting to prevent drinking, they claimed that their goal was to prevent any harm resulting from being intoxicated, particularly in a public space. To do so they were prepared, for instance, to pick up their teenager after late-night parties. Another important aspect of this type of damage control is the nurturing of the teenager’s trust. These parents argued that they wanted their son/daughter to feel able to call if s/he needed help, without having to worry about the consequences of having broken any rules. In this way, not maintaining a stance of zero tolerance becomes a safety measure. It also indicates that what constitutes the preferred outcome of parenting in this respect is not given and not limited to restricting alcohol consumption as such, but concerns the parent–child relationship in a broader sense.

Hence, the parents related the preferred outcome of their parenting strategies to current Swedish alcohol policy in various ways. Whereas those who claimed to maintain a zero-tolerance stance exerted control over the accessibility of alcohol in lieu of state control, the goal of others was to mould their teenager into an individual capable of handling the accessibility of alcohol responsibly, while yet others strove to reduce the risks that resulted from the accessibility of alcohol.

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