

# Protecting Children and Young People from Alcohol Marketing

October 2023

## Summary

- Exposure to alcohol marketing is a **cause of youth drinking**. It leads young people to start drinking earlier, to drink more if they are already drinking, and to drink at heavy or problematic levels. This can establish drinking patterns that are carried into adulthood.
- Alcohol marketing **influences how children and young people think and feel about alcohol**. It develops brand preferences and positive expectations around alcohol, creating and reinforcing social norms around drinking.
- **Self-regulation fails to protect children and young people** from regular exposure to alcohol marketing, or from content that is appealing to them.
- Children and young people in Scotland recognise how highly visible and heavily marketed alcohol is and have **called for action**.
- The Scottish Government **must restrict alcohol marketing to protect children and young people** from alcohol-related harm.

## Children, young people, and alcohol

Alcohol is an age-restricted, toxic substance that causes over 200 health conditions, diseases and injuries.<sup>1</sup> **Adolescents are more susceptible to the intoxicating effects of alcohol** due to their physical immaturity and lower tolerance levels.<sup>2</sup> Mental wellbeing is particularly affected, with young drinkers experiencing a higher risk of self-harm and suicide attempts.<sup>3 4</sup> Drinking in adolescence also poses **risks to long-term health and wellbeing**: it affects important brain development processes which are still taking place up until the age of 25,<sup>5 6</sup> and establishes drinking patterns that continue into adulthood.<sup>7 8 9</sup> For example, those who start drinking at an earlier age have an increased risk of developing alcohol dependence later in life.<sup>10</sup>

Scotland's young people are drinking alcohol, often from an early age. In 2021-22, **one in three S4 students** (aged 14-16) and **one in ten S2 students** (aged 12-14) reported **drinking alcohol at least once a month**.<sup>11</sup>

## Alcohol marketing causes and drives youth drinking

**The evidence is clear that exposure to alcohol marketing is a cause of youth drinking**.<sup>12</sup> Reviews of decades of research have concluded that alcohol marketing leads young people to start drinking earlier, to drink more if they are already drinking, and to drink at heavy or problematic levels.<sup>13 14</sup>

**Being exposed to and liking adverts** have been associated with drinking behaviours for young people<sup>15 16</sup> and **active participation** – such as 'liking', sharing or creating content online, or owning merchandise – is particularly influential.<sup>17 18</sup> Marketing has a **cumulative effect**: the more channels and content people are exposed to, the more likely they will be influenced. For example, adolescents who drink are aware of more alcohol marketing channels than adolescents who do not.<sup>19 20</sup>

*"We see alcohol every day, up to a few times a day but we are just kind of used to seeing it."*

12-15-year-old

The current self-regulatory approach in the UK is failing to protect children and young people from regular exposure to alcohol marketing. In a UK survey, **82% of 11-17-year-olds reported having seen alcohol advertising in the last month**.<sup>21</sup>

## Building blocks for future behaviour

Alcohol marketing provides the building blocks for current and future behaviour by affecting how adolescents think and feel, by **developing brand preferences and positive expectations around alcohol**, and creating and reinforcing social norms.<sup>22</sup>

Young people exposed to alcohol advertising are **more likely to associate drinking with positive effects**,<sup>23 24</sup> such as believing that alcohol helps you relax, enables you to be more confident, and makes parties more fun. These **positive expectations around alcohol use are strongly associated with drinking behaviour**.<sup>25</sup>



High levels of **brand knowledge and preferences for alcohol brands** have been demonstrated by under-18s even before they have started to drink.<sup>26 27</sup> **90% of under-18s in the UK recognise at least one alcohol brand**<sup>28</sup> and 9 in 10 children in Scotland recognised the beer brand Foster's, a higher recognition rate than for leading brands of crisps, biscuits and ice-cream.<sup>29</sup>

This is not incidental. Market research with children as young as 15 has been used to guide and inform alcohol marketing campaigns, and **new generations are a key target for the alcohol industry**.<sup>30 31</sup> Young people who are more aware of brands, or who have developed brand preferences, are **more likely to drink more alcohol**.<sup>32 33 34</sup>

### International consensus

The World Health Organization (WHO) has highlighted one of the key purposes of marketing restrictions is to **prevent young people from being exposed to marketing**.<sup>35</sup> The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has warned that the marketing of alcohol to children can have a long-term impact on their health, affecting their **right to life, survival and development**.<sup>36</sup>

### Children and young people want change

Children and young people in Scotland recognise how highly visible and heavily marketed alcohol is and are calling for action on marketing.

- In 2019, members of Scotland's **Children's Parliament (aged 9-11)** called for **adverts to be removed so that children cannot see them and for alcohol to be less visible in shops**.<sup>37</sup>
- In 2020, the **Young Scot Health Panel** (aged 14-25) recommended mandatory controls on alcohol marketing, including **restrictions on alcohol advertising** on TV, in cinemas and in public places.<sup>38</sup>
- The **majority of the children and young people** who shared their views in 2022-23 as part of **Children in Scotland's youth engagement project** on alcohol marketing in Scotland **generally supported restricting alcohol advertising**.<sup>39</sup>

*"Children would be better and healthier because when they grow up, they wouldn't think it's cool to drink."*

*Member of Children's Parliament*

### Alcohol Marketing Expert Network Recommendations

To protect children and young people, the Alcohol Marketing Expert Network [recommends](#) that the Scottish Government should **introduce statutory restrictions** on

advertising in **outdoor and public spaces**

**sponsorship** of sports and events

branded **merchandise**

advertising in **print** publications

the **display of alcohol** in shops

These restrictions should cover **all forms of brand marketing**.

### Opportunity for action

In 2022, the Scottish Government committed to introducing alcohol marketing restrictions within the lifetime of this parliament, subject to the outcome of consultation.<sup>40</sup> The alcohol advertising and promotion consultation closed in March 2023, with further consultation and engagement on specific proposals to follow. Restricting alcohol marketing in Scotland offers an opportunity to put children's right to health before company profits. To protect children and young people, the Scottish Government **should bring forward their legislative proposals on alcohol marketing as soon as possible**.

## About Alcohol Focus Scotland

[Alcohol Focus Scotland \(AFS\)](#) is the national charity working to prevent and reduce alcohol harm. We want to see fewer people have their health damaged or lives cut short due to alcohol, fewer children and families suffering as a result of other people's drinking, and communities free from alcohol-related crime and violence.

## References

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*The picture featured was drawn by a member of Children's Parliament as part of their project investigating an alcohol-free childhood in 2019.*

*Unreferenced quotations attributed to a child or young person derive from focus groups facilitated and supported by AFS in late 2021 and 2022.*

<sup>40</sup> Scottish Government (2022). *A Stronger & More Resilient Scotland. The Programme for Government 2022-23*.

*All quotes featured are from people in recovery from surveys, interviews and focus groups facilitated or supported by AFS.*

