

## IAS response to Early years healthy development review: call for evidence (Department for Education)

### What outcomes do you think are most important for an early years vision?

Though the early years vision will cover many areas relating child development, we wish to contribute our expertise in one specific area: the impact of parental drinking on children.

Alcohol consumption by parents can have a detrimental effect on children, including alcohol consumed during pregnancy. We therefore recommend that the early years vision include clearer promotion of the Chief Medical Officers' guidelines on alcohol and pregnancy, better support for midwives in communicating the guidelines to women, and guidance for parents on the impact of parental drinking.

#### Alcohol in pregnancy

Alcohol consumption in pregnancy can impair foetal development leading to preterm birth and low birthweight as well as Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), a term which covers a range of neurological and physical development issues.

Due to a lack of evidence of a safe threshold for alcohol consumption in pregnancy the UK Chief Medical Officers published guidance in 2016 advising women not to drink alcohol during pregnancy. However, more than 40% of women in the UK continue to drink during pregnancy and four times more children in the UK suffer alcohol-related birth defects than the global average.(1)

Research published by the Institute of Alcohol Studies found that 97% of midwives reported "always" or "usually" advising women to abstain from drinking alcohol at their booking appointment. However this figure dropped to 38% at subsequent appointments. The research found that 69% of midwives received fewer than four hours of alcohol training with 19% receiving none. The authors noted that "interventions aimed to improve midwives' knowledge, skills and clinical confidence to deliver alcohol advice appropriate for the level of risk of the woman's drinking may facilitate midwives' practices."(2)

Better support for midwives to communicate the CMOs guidelines on alcohol and pregnancy would therefore be good outcomes for the early years vision.

#### Parental drinking

Children begin learning about alcohol when they are very young: by age two and half many can identify it by smell, and by primary school age many have a "sophisticated understanding of the contextual, motivational and normative aspects of alcohol usage."(3) Parental drinking influences children's attitudes to drinking and subsequent drinking behaviour.(4)

Drinking alcohol also affects parents' ability to look after their children. A report by the Children's Commissioner found a strong correlation between harmful parental alcohol or substance use and family conflict and domestic abuse.(5) Children are

affected even at lower levels of alcohol consumption. Though more research is needed on the impact of parental drinking on children in the early years, a study on the impact of non-dependent parental drinking that assessed older children (aged 10-17 years), found that some children reported negative outcomes from their parents' drinking including being put to bed later or receiving less attention from a parent. The study found that a greater proportion of younger children (10-13) reported negative outcomes than the older age group.(4)

We therefore recommend that the Government produce guidance for parents about parental drinking and the impact that it has upon their children.

- (1) Popova S et al. 2017. [Estimation of national, regional, and global prevalence of alcohol use during pregnancy and fetal alcohol syndrome: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#)
- (2) Scholin, Watson, Dyson and Smith (2019) [Alcohol Guidelines for Pregnant Women](#)
- (3) Velleman. (2009. Influences on how children and young people learn about and behave towards alcohol: A review of the literature of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (part one), cited in the Institute for Alcohol Studies, Alcohol and Family Alliance and Alcohol Focus Scotland (2017) [Like Sugar for Adults](#)
- (4) Institute for Alcohol Studies, Alcohol and Family Alliance and Alcohol Focus Scotland (2017) [Like Sugar for Adults](#)
- (5) Children's Commissioner (2012) [Silent Voices](#)
- (6) Bryant, MacKintosh and Bauld (2019) [An Exploration of the Impact of Non-Dependent Parental Drinking on Children](#)