

Parents' perceptions of normative adolescent behaviours: The 'social clock' concept

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Introduction: The 'social clock' concept in sociology delineates the age at which certain contested behaviours are deemed normative by adults. Prior to that age, engaging in such behaviours may be perceived as deviant. This study explores parents' perceptions on appropriate age for adolescents to engage in alcohol and other drug-related behaviours, and variation by parent and adolescent gender.

Methods: In April-May 2022, we conducted an online cross-sectional survey involving N=1,197 Australian parents of adolescents aged 12-17 years. We ascertained the age at which parents considered it appropriate for adolescents to initiate or engage in five behaviours: "getting drunk at home", or "...at a bar", "smoking a cigarette", "using a vape/e-cigarette", and "trying some marijuana/cannabis". We used two-way ANOVA to compare parents' perceptions of acceptable age for adolescent boys vs girls.

Results: About one-fifth of parents thought getting drunk at home was 'never ok'. Around half described smoking a cigarette, vaping, and trying cannabis as 'never ok'. Among those parents who nominated an acceptable age, rather than report 'never okay', the mean age ranged across behaviours from 15.7 years (vaping) to 17.3 years (getting drunk at a bar). There were no significant differences based on adolescent gender. However, mothers consistently reported higher acceptable ages for all behaviours except vaping, regardless of adolescent gender.

Discussions and Conclusions: Overall, the results suggest a more conservative stance among mothers regarding the age of acceptability of these behaviours. Fathers exhibited more permissive attitudes, generally accepting a lower mean age of adolescent initiation of alcohol and other drug-related behaviours. This suggests fathers may be an important target of education campaigns about underage substance use. By engaging fathers in these efforts, we can potentially foster protective attitudes to safeguard adolescents against early initiation of alcohol and other drug-related behaviours.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Education campaigns targeting fathers' attitudes about acceptable age of initiation/use of alcohol and other drugs should be prioritised in early initiation-focused strategies.

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