

Social workers sound alert on young drinkers

Kids are starting to drink alcohol earlier than before and it's worrying, experts say

Danson Cheong

Ben had his first drink of whiskey and cola when he was 13 and in Secondary One. It was with a group of friends, after school at a staircase near his Redhill home.

It was not a big deal, insists Ben (not his real name), now 18. "My older brother was already drinking and my father drank at home all the time," he said.

He is part of a new generation of teenagers who are beginning to drink younger, say social workers concerned about a trend they started noticing about four years ago.

"In the past, most teenagers would start drinking at 15 or 16, but now we are seeing 12- or 13-year-olds," said Dr Carol Balhetchet, senior director for youth services at the Singapore Children's Society.

One of the main reasons is a growing tolerance for social drinking. "Nowadays, it's not uncommon for adults to drink socially in front of children," said Dr Balhetchet.

That was how a seven-year-old girl had her first drink.

"The mother was drinking wine and left it unfinished on the table, the girl just went up and took a sip," she said.

Figures for alcohol abuse among youth are mostly anecdotal, with VWOs saying they deal with between five and 10 cases

each year.

The National Addictions Management Service (NAMS) deals with 10 to 15 cases of problem drinking among youth aged 19 or below each year.

Dr Gomathinayagam Kandasami, a NAMS consultant and head of addiction medicine at the Institute of Mental Health, said that while some teenagers might miss classes because of a drinking binge or argue with their parents, they are unlikely to experience the serious loss in functioning long-time alcoholics grapple with.

"Younger people may not experience the full range of alcohol-related problems," he said.

Many of them only get help for their drinking habits when the law catches up to them for other offences.

For Ben, that was in 2012 when he stole a bottle of blackcurrant-flavoured vodka from a convenience

store.

"I hadn't had a drink in two weeks and I couldn't afford alcohol. I couldn't control myself," said Ben, who is from a single-parent family and currently serving national service. He was caught on the store's CCTV cameras and arrested.

The legal age for buying alcohol is 18, but younger people do not have difficulty getting their drinks, social workers said.

"They can easily get older friends to buy drinks for them," said Ms Lena Teo, assistant director of counselling at the Children-at-Risk Empowerment Association (Care Singapore). "Some buy rice wine from supermarkets, and easily say it is for their mothers to use in cooking."

Ms Sheena Jebal, principal counselling psychologist at NuLife Care and Counselling Services, said teenagers may pour the liquor into

soft drink cans so they can drink undetected in public – under void decks and in parks. "I can say now every youth-at-risk would have experienced drinking at least once," she said.

The problem is worrying because many go on to more serious vices, she noted. "It's thrill-seeking behaviour. One starts with smoking first, then drinking – and if they can smoke and drink and not get caught, they will move on to the next level," she said, adding that some move on to drugs such as Ice and Ecstasy.

This appears to corroborate Central Narcotics Bureau data which shows that drug addicts under 30 now make up two-thirds of new abusers.

Mr Moses Huang, counselling therapist at Ain Society, said the common thread that unites young alcohol abusers tends to be parental neglect. "They can come from low-income families or the super rich. If parents don't spend time with them to educate them about drinking, they can be easily influenced," he added.

The VWOs said a concerted effort is needed to address the problem – with education both in schools and in the home.

The Liquor Control Bill – which bans public consumption of alcohol after 10.30pm, and is expected to come into force in April – will also help, said Ms Sheena.

She said the ban is coming at the right time, and added: "If not, you would see more and more young people wasting their lives away drinking."

ABUSE TAKES TOLL ON THE BRAIN

The dangers of alcohol abuse in adolescents should not be underestimated.

Dr Gomathinayagam Kandasami, head of addiction medicine at the Institute of Mental Health, said heavy exposure to substances like alcohol and drugs could damage the brain, which is still developing during the adolescent years.

"Research has shown that pre-frontal cortex, which is one of the key areas in the brain that helps us to think

logically before arriving at a decision, matures relatively late compared with other areas," said Dr Kandasami.

Excessive alcohol consumption during this time can make one vulnerable to developing addiction and other significant mental health problems later in life, he said.

This is in addition to other conditions, such as liver disease, kidney damage and stomach ulcers.

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