



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE
MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Drugs

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Polley, Sen Helen

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Senator POLLEY (Tasmania) (1.42 pm)—I rise today to speak on a matter of public interest: the unhealthy and ever-increasing influence of different classes of drugs on our children. Alcohol and other drugs are, sadly, the largest cause of injury and death in young people. We as a nation of parents, grandparents and guardians need to become more aware of this serious social and health problem and more determined about protecting our children. Research shows that parents and families play a key role in reducing the risk of harmful drug use. I fear that we have become too complacent with the idea that our children face real harm from everyday fixtures such as alcohol, tobacco and cannabis. We somehow see our children as being more adult than they actually are and therefore trick ourselves into believing that they are best left to handle these issues and make decisions for themselves. But these are not adults; these are our children.

They are growing up in a world that is pressing them to believe they are adult, to act as though they are adult and to experiment with concepts that they see as being representative of being an adult. They are saturated by media advertising, entertainment marketing, internet images, peer pressure and the example set by their own parents. All of these seem to give both children and some parents the wrong idea about what children should be doing and dealing with at a certain age. Unfortunately, the consequence is that we relinquish some of our responsibilities as parents and leave children to make often ill-informed decisions about drug use.

I do not agree that some latitude needs to be given to older children as they transition from childhood to adulthood. They need to experiment with making decisions and learning from the consequences of these. We need to allow them to express their individuality and their growing maturity through owning their own decisions and using this as a reflection of who they are, but there also needs to be a line drawn between what are acceptable grounds for learning and things that are far too complex and dangerous for minors to make decisions about. As parents, we must not only exercise our care and control but we—especially those privileged enough to serve in the two chambers of parliament—must demonstrate leadership on these issues.

I recently read a 2005 report by the drug strategy branch of the Department of Health and Ageing and I was disturbed by the statistics it revealed. By the age of 14 approximately 86 per cent of students had tried alcohol. By the age of 17, 70 per cent of students had consumed alcohol in the last month. Put this in perspective by remembering that the legal age for the consumption of alcohol is 18—and that is for very good reason. Young, growing bodies and minds are far more heavily impacted by the effects of alcohol, and its consumption can impede physical and mental development. Young people may not understand the very real consequences of this when they are faced with decisions about alcohol consumption. We as parents can make it clear to our children what these consequences are and that age limits are not arbitrary but instead put in place for the protection of their health and wellbeing.

The report went on to reveal even more alarming statistics. The Australian Alcohol Guidelines recommend against adults drinking more than seven drinks in one day for males, and five for females. However, the report showed that a staggering 30 per cent of 15-year-olds and 44 per cent of 17-year-olds had consumed alcohol at or above these levels in the last week. If these guidelines are designed to protect the health of adults it is disturbing to think how teenagers are being affected by such large quantities of alcohol. It is also disturbing to think that there are parents out there who are either unaware of their children's activities or are complacent or uneducated about how dangerous such behaviour is.

The buck stops with us. We cannot relinquish our duty of care over our children when they reach an age where they start demonstrating a need for independence. Large numbers of children are making ill-informed choices to drink enormous amounts of alcohol and we cannot expect them to be able to make sensible, mature decisions once this has occurred. It is not just the consumption of alcohol that is the poor choice; there are a million other poor choices that can be made after the alcohol is consumed and, as we would all no doubt be aware, the capacity to act responsibly diminishes dramatically when alcohol is involved.

Perhaps the most alarming statistic about alcohol consumption I noted in that report was that parents were the most common source of alcohol for students.

I know many parents would shake their heads and argue that it is better to provide the child with alcohol at home under their supervision than have them do the same outside the home, where perhaps they have no supervision at all. But what message are we sending to our children? Where in that scenario do we teach them the value of not consuming alcohol, of protecting their physical and mental development, of choosing to wait until they are truly ready to handle the effects of something? All we do is condone and even encourage the behaviour and we normalise it for children. Subsequently their attitude towards alcohol is more relaxed than it otherwise might have been.

While alcohol is perhaps the most commonly used drug amongst our young, the effects of over-the-counter and illicit substances can be equally, if not more, damaging to a child. The drug strategy branch conducted parallel studies into drug use and smoking habits and the information contained in those reports was equally startling. Cannabis was the most commonly used illicit substance among secondary students, with 18 per cent of 12- to 17-year-olds having reported using it at some time.

Five per cent of 12-year-olds and 32 per cent of 17-year-olds reported its use. Where is our innocence and our opportunity to enjoy the beauty of childhood when five per cent of 12-year-olds are smoking an illegal mind-altering substance? How does it set those children up for life when such a decision can be made at such a young and fragile age? Why do we insist on seeing cannabis as a harmless drug when the evidence is to the contrary? This attitude simply dupes more young children into thinking cannabis is something they can experiment with in relative safety?

Furthermore, three per cent of all secondary students have tried hallucinogens at some time—being one per cent of 12-year-olds and five per cent of 16-year-olds. By the age of 17, seven per cent of students had reported the use of amphetamines, with three per cent of 14-year-olds reporting having used it in the month prior to the survey. One per cent of students had used cocaine and four per cent had used ecstasy. My greatest concern is that even if these seem like small numbers, they are the tip of the iceberg. These are young children making the decision to experiment with dangerous substances without having sufficient understanding and education about the full ramifications.

These choices can have disastrous consequences and set a child down the path of poor decision making throughout their lifetime. In this nation, if we as parents and guardians educate children, guide them and enforce boundaries, even at their evident displeasure, we can give them the sense they need to see them through their developmental years. We would not let a toddler play with knives or scissors for the simple

reason that they might hurt themselves. Why would we leave it to a 12-year-old to make decisions about drug use? We must make it clear that those decisions are not theirs to be made at their age, and why. And then we must follow through with supervision and enforcement. I warn parents: don't be afraid to poke your nose into your teenagers' business if you suspect they are making or being influenced to make poor decisions. It is your job to poke your nose in. You are the parent and their safety and wellbeing is your paramount concern.

The other major drug used is tobacco. An alarming 140,400 secondary students aged, again, between 12 and 17 are current smokers. School-aged children, combined, smoke approximately 3.5 million cigarettes each week. Two per cent of 12-year-olds are current smokers, rising to 18 per cent of 17-year-olds. We as a nation attempt to limit supply of tobacco to minors through age limits and heavy fines. However, 23 per cent of all current smokers are purchasing those cigarettes themselves. This is indicative of how lax tobacco suppliers have become about the sale of this drug to children. How can we demonstrate the serious consequences of tobacco use when adults appear happy to sell these products to minors? What kind of mockery does it make of cigarette laws and societal expectations? What we need is a change in the mindset. We need to take it seriously and treat it seriously. Our actions as parents, lawmakers, teachers, suppliers and communities need to make it very clear that we do not condone drug use by minors and will not aid or abet it in any way—we will set clear boundaries, we will educate our children about the reasons for those boundaries and we will keep our eyes and ears open rather than turn a blind eye.

One clear and decisive step that has been taken towards limiting the capacity of young people to damage their health with the consumption of drugs was the recent passing of the alcopops legislation. This important piece of legislation increased the cost of pre-mixed spirits, or alcopops, as they are known, by a high enough amount to make them a less attractive and affordable option for younger drinkers. For nearly a year and a half the Rudd government tried to make those opposite see the logic in a simple yet effective financial disincentive for purchasing alcopops. The idea of making something that is harmful more expensive and therefore less attractive is tried and true and there have been signs of a reduction in alcopop consumption by young people since its introduction.

The Labor government has already demonstrated its commitment with a number of programs to help reduce the consumption of alcohol. These commitments and these changes all signify that the Rudd government takes this issue seriously and is prepared to respond

in a very real and very tangible way. We as a nation can continue to build on these sorts of measures through education, both in schools and at home. There is a plethora of invaluable resources out there, with organisations and websites dedicated to showing parents how to teach children to understand the effects of drug use. The information is there and we should make it a priority to utilise it.

I would particularly like to note a presentation I attended last week for the launch of the How to Drug Proof Your Kids program, which is run by Focus on the Family. This program equips parents and communities with all the information and techniques required to inform our children and ourselves about drug use. They should be congratulated on this innovative program. The work of organisations such as this one is a selfless and truly critical grassroots approach to overcoming these kinds of social issues. Nothing is more precious than the wellbeing of our youth, and I am proud of this government's constructive work to tackle the very real issue of drug use amongst our children.

But we as legislators have to join with parents and the community to ensure those education programs are reinforced both within our education system and within the home. I am proud of the fact that this Labor government has taken very positive initiatives and is leading the way and being responsible in our legislation program to assist in decreasing the number of young children that are drawn to the consumption of alcohol, illicit drugs and cigarettes.

Sitting suspended from 1.57 pm to 2.00 pm