

DRINKAWARE



Parents, COVID-19 and Alcohol: A qualitative study

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Background & Objectives



RESEARCH BACKGROUND

- Successive annual national surveys, show weekly drinking is on the rise, from 44% (Drinkaware Index, 2019) to 55% (Drinkaware Barometer 2021). The *“Families, Alcohol & COVID-19 - A detailed analysis of the drinking practices of adults in households with children during the ongoing pandemic”* paper from the Drinkaware Barometer Research Series revealed family make-up as a new and additional determinant of alcohol consumption.
- These studies collectively signposted the need to better understand parental behaviour and attitudes towards alcohol, in the context of lived family experiences of COVID-19
- Drinkaware was therefore interested in exploring:
 - ▶ The nature of alcohol use in the home
 - ▶ Beliefs around alcohol
 - ▶ Parental practices and approaches
 - ▶ The situations where this might tip into harm and misuse
 - ▶ The impact COVID-19 had on these behaviour shifts
- The project took a qualitative research approach to better understand these issues in depth as qualitative research is better placed to unpack complexities and nuance, and to invite confiding of difficult subjects. The study involved a range of parents, covering pre-schoolers, 5-12 years, and early teens (up to age 15 years). Everyone who was spoken to was a weekly drinker who increased their consumption during the Pandemic.

"Little things, like not having to get up in the morning. In normal times there's no way I would have risked a hangover in work but during the pandemic there was nothing to stop me. You can turn off the camera in a Zoom meeting" Parent, teenager

"We won't fully understand what we've been through and the impact it had on us for years and years. At the time, maybe it didn't feel so bad and yet I look back and think, we were kept from ordinary contact with other humans for how long?" Parent Pre-School

"I'm not saying it was great, but it is what it is. You have to acknowledge the pressure, we needed to do something to cope" Parent, pre-school

We would overindulge on the weekend, for sure, a bottle or two of wine, beers, maybe even post dinner stuff, there'd be a fair amount there, but we only drink at the weekend so it's not something I'd be worried about. Parent, Teenager

"I started this little routine, at 5 I'd power down, stick the kids in front of the TV, start making dinner and I'd pour myself a wine or a beer then, it was just a nice way to switch off from the stress of the day" Parent, primary school

We would have a glass of wine with our dinner, most nights, not all but most, but that would be it, a glass, maybe two. Parent, Primary school

"Drinking at home is not something we would have done, a complete rarity for us, but the pubs were shut, so what were we going to do? A few of those Zoom get-togethers and we were in the way of it, I was making martinis and everything" Parent, primary school

Context of
COVID-19
pandemic and
Government
restrictions



CONTEXT

- We have been dealing with a huge amount of anxiety around COVID-19 itself, along with the increasing and protracted impact of restrictions and economic fallout, for longer than we initially imagined.
- Some of the things we've had to do in our attempt to limit the spread of COVID-19 have gone against our regular human needs.
- We've been isolated, kept from our loved ones, separated from our regular routines, kept within our own home, prevented from working, working in difficult conditions, haven't been able to mark milestones, etc.
- Even if our anxiety around COVID-19 has lessened somewhat, the cost-of-living crisis and the war in Ukraine has ensured that levels remain high.
- We have no sense of closure. Few feel we've put this crisis period decisively behind us.
- Our experience of the pandemic was completely unprecedented. There has been nothing even like this during our lifetimes.

DURING THE RESTRICTIONS, MANY PARENTS FELT THAT THEY WERE PUT UNDER DISPROPORTIONATE PRESSURE WITH LITTLE TO NO SUPPORT

- Their children were cut off from all their regular routines and outlets, leaving parents 100% responsible for them 24/7
- Many parents had to hold down jobs or lost employment on top of this, or scabble around for childcare while working in essential roles
- There was the significant pressure of home schooling
- With no access to their normal support networks on top of all of this
- The pressure to keep it together for the kids throughout, meant parents had to keep their own anxieties in check
- Most parents we spoke to felt that they hadn't been adequately supported during the pandemic - that they were expected to shoulder an enormous amount with no one engaging with their challenges.

"There was SO much pressure on parents, it was unfair on us, on the kids. I had 3 kids to home school, with a partner who was an essential worker so out of the house, plus my own job to keep down. I honestly don't know how I did it" Parent, primary school

LOCKDOWN 1 VERSUS LOCKDOWN 2

We see significant differences in our reflections on...

Lockdown 1 (Mar-Jun 2020)

Looked back on with some nostalgia

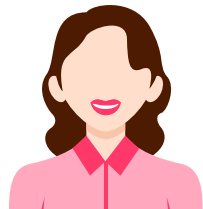
Still a sense of novelty

Weather was beautiful

We felt it was a temporary situation

Parents were more able to enjoy family time.

"The early days were a novelty, it was weird and worrying, but some aspects were fun. We had some nice family times back then" Parent, Primary School



Lockdown 2 (Jan-May 2021)

Talked about a lot less, just too hard

We were well worn down at that stage

Memories of freezing parks, mud, rain

Nearly a year in and it felt like it lasted forever

The pressures of home schooling became very significant.

The additional stress element is presented and that is also a motivating factor for using alcohol as a coping mechanism and a de-stressor.

"I don't want to think about January 2021, I might actually cry" Parent, Teenager



Exploration of parental drinking habits during lockdown



ALCOHOL BECAME AN EASY ANSWER TO THE LOCKDOWN ISSUES PARENTS FACED

One of the biggest issues was how lockdown conditions disrupted all our usual routines, focal points, transition points for the week. Parents had to construct these all anew, for themselves, with very little resource. In order to do so, they leaned on the few things they could do. Alcohol became an easy answer to the many issues faced.

- Feeling bored
- Being overwhelmed by stress & anxiety
- Needing a bit of a buzz/lift
- Looking for a focal point to look forward to during the day/week
- Trying to make an occasion more enjoyable/special
- Wanting to mark a transition between the working day and personal time
- Dealing with a stressful relationship
- Struggling to switch off from it all.

"When was it, April, May 2020, the weather was gorgeous, we had the barbie out, the deckchairs, it was a bit like being on holiday, so it was the most natural thing to open a beer" - Parent, teenager

ALCOHOL WAS BOTH AN ACCOMPANIMENT, AND AN ACTIVITY ITSELF

Alcohol at this time also became an accompaniment to some of the activities people turned to during lockdown.

- Zoom quizzes and other online meet ups
- Online gambling
- Barbeques
- Netflix binging
- Takeaways
- Family movie drinks

At the same time, alcohol consumption, preparation and trivia became the activity for many during lockdown, driven by its availability and accessibility throughout the period, when other activities were restricted.

- The cocktail making craze
- Discovering wine and other alcoholic beverages
- Getting into cooking
- Netflix binge drinks
- Preparing dinner drinks
- Afternoon drinks

"There was so little else to do, so it just became this go to. I'd nothing to do in the evenings but watch TV. There was no other way to give myself that lift" - Parent, pre-school



MAYBE NOT THE BEST DISTRACTION/DE-STRESSOR, BUT AN EASY AND TO-HAND OPTION

- Parents acknowledged that there are better and healthier ways to deal with the stress/boredom/need for buzz and things to look forward to
- Some people turned to yoga, hobbies, running, meditation, reading, online workouts - and to a greater or lesser degree many parents did, at least for a while
- But many of the alternatives required a degree of concentration, time and focus that parents didn't have in abundance during this stressful period
- Alcohol was a very easy way to switch off, create diversion, relax, mark a distinction between one period and another. 'One sip and you're away' as someone put it
- Equally Netflix watching doesn't have to be accompanied by a beer or a glass of wine, but it can make it a more enjoyable and elevated experience, which parents were looking for at the time.

"We all tried to be good, I know I did, I signed up for an online exercise class and I know I should have done more of that kind of stuff, but in all honesty, I didn't always have the resolve"

Parent, primary school

Because as normal routines fell
away, "... tried to be good"... but...

PARENTS WERE AT HOME EVERY SINGLE EVENING

Whereas pre-Covid parents would have been out at least some of the time, ferrying kids to activities, doing hobbies themselves, popping into family, working (particularly school age kids/teenagers).

The temptation/opportunity to drink during weeknights increased.

THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN WEEKENDS AND WEEKDAYS BLURRED

Depending on working patterns, a Tuesday didn't necessarily feel very different to a Saturday.

Clear boundaries between weekends and weekdays with regards to drinking didn't seem so important

THE PRESSURE TO BE UP IN THE MORNING ABATED

For those not working or working from home, particularly during the first lockdown. Parents who had previously had to get up for work, the school run, the gym, suddenly didn't have to be.

Hangovers became easier to manage and less of a disincentive

PARENTS WERE MORE AT LIBERTY TO STRUCTURE THEIR DAY HOW THEY LIKED

Without having to be in an office, commuting in and out, there was more flexibility as to when work was done.

Having a gin in the garden on a sunny Friday afternoon became a possibility in the way it had never been before.

'everyone is doing it'

**This made it feel like a normal and
expected response to the pandemic
situation**

(at least in the short term) .

INCREASED DRINKING NORMALIZED DURING LOCKDOWN, & THE EVIDENCE WAS VISIBLE

- All the activity at the bottle bank
- Trolleys piled high in the supermarket
- The 'wine o'clock' memes being shared around WhatsApp groups and jokey references by friends and family
- Visible presence of alcohol on Zoom quizzes
- References to it in the media
- The prevalent 'evidence' created a self-legitimacy and expectation to people's consumption

"We all saw the chaos at the bottle bank. Everyone was in the same boat. The sat nav in my car had that as the default as I barely went anywhere else" - Parent, pre-school

Everyone's in the **same boat**, but....

WE DID SEE SOME SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AT DIFFERENT LIFE STAGES

Pre-schoolers	Primary school	Teenagers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sheer relentlessness of having to keep this age group going really took its toll (particularly if parents were supposed to be working from home at the same time)• This improved a bit in lockdown 2 as there were more opportunities to take them out and many nurseries were operating• Evening time, after toddlers went to bed became an important time to try and wind down and alcohol often became an important part of that process, sometimes across weekdays as well as weekends.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Again, difficult to keep such young children occupied throughout, but lockdown 1 had its advantages for a lot of this group, with things like family cycles/walks/movie nights• At that point, increased drinking for fun/celebratory reasons was in evidence• Lockdown 2 and the pressures of home-schooling equalled a much more difficult situation and there were overt references to drinking as a way of managing the stress around this, particularly the very early days of the second lockdown.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• For parents, the pressures of having teenagers during lockdown were more about the mental load and worrying about their mental health and isolation than having to keep them occupied.• Some households became quite siloed, with teens disappearing off on screens for large periods of the day and parents turning to drink out of boredom rather than anything else.

"It had to stop, it had gone too far for both of us, so we really tried to wind it way down, towards the end of the first lockdown. I put on a stone and a big proportion of that was the drink, no doubt about it " - **Parent, pre-school**



DRINKING PEAKED IN LOCKDOWN 1 BUT WAS REACTIVE & PARENTS PULLED BACK

- Most report the worst period being early in lockdown 1
- The excesses that were reached then generally weren't reached again
- Though another smaller peak was reported early in lockdown 2 (Jan 2021)
- Most consciously pulled back after realising that their drinking had reached levels, they weren't happy with
- There have been ebbs and flows across the period, some report temporary periods of abstinence, now drinking levels don't feel excessive to most people
- The majority agree that increased drinking isn't good, but they feel that it was part of their response to an extraordinary and traumatic event
- It wasn't an unusual response either, many of their friends and family were doing the same thing
- As we're now quite far from the worst excesses of alcohol consumption during lockdown, the majority feel like they're in a relatively good place
- Upon reflecting on their drinking, how new habits may prevail or how they may have had an impact on other members of the household (incl. children) didn't feature

For the majority of the sample, their drinking hasn't gone back to pre-COVID-19 routines. At least some habits established during the lockdown period have remained.

Parents'
reflections on
their drinking
levels during the
pandemic



MOST FEEL THE IMPACT OF INCREASED ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION PRIMARILY IMPACTED THEMSELVES

- Suffering slightly more with hangovers
- Gaining weight and losing fitness
- Poor sleep
- Impact on digestion
- Feeling groggier during the day
- Exacerbating stress/anxiety rather than helping it (a small proportion)

Fathers reported more of these impacts than Mothers, which suggests that they indulged to a greater extent.

"It's a funny one, how do you know if you're dependent. I think I could stop if I wanted to, but I don't see a reason to" Parent, pre-school

Recognising problematic levels of drinking



WHILE OUR SAMPLE ARE ALL WEEKLY DRINKERS, THERE IS A LARGE AMOUNT OF VARIATION WITHIN THIS



The majority of our sample didn't feel that their drinking was at problematic levels.

Many pointed to what they don't do, as reassurance of this.

“It’s a funny one, how do you know if you’re dependent. I think I could stop if I wanted to, but I don’t see a reason to”

Parent, pre-school



“We would overindulge on the weekend, for sure, a bottle or two of wine, beers, maybe even post dinner stuff, there's be a fair amount there, but we only drink at the weekend so it's not something I'd be worried about”

Parent, teenager

THERE IS LIMITED AWARENESS OF HSE LOW-RISK GUIDELINES OR ANY OTHER OFFICIAL ADVICE

- Almost no one knew what the HSE advice is
- The concept of 'units' is talked about (in Ireland we use 'standard drinks' not 'units'), but no detailed understanding of this was in evidence
- One or two quoted the units limit (UK) but were hazier on what an actual unit was
- There's also a view that official advice doesn't differentiate for size/weight/tolerance levels/if it's consumed with food
- The lack of awareness of or attention to official advice could be deliberate as legitimising consumption levels
- Feeling 'dependent' on alcohol is a warning sign for many
- It's possible to get caught in a reasoning loop that goes something like 'I feel like I could give up, but I don't want to give up' - and then wondering if choosing not to give up means that you can't. Is that dependency?
- Which is why a lot of people do challenge themselves to periods of abstinence, dry January and so on. Several of our sample did use this as a means of putting a stop to lockdown levels of drinking that they weren't happy with.

PARENTS' PREFERRED MODERATION TECHNIQUES

- Having X alcohol free days a week, is an easily absorbed and followed approach and felt like good common sense
- But we didn't see much evidence of things like using smaller glasses and when prompted, there was a feeling that this may not help much as people would feel free to fill them more
- Understanding of 'units'/drinks/limits isn't high, so this is less useful in helping people cut back
- It is easier to limit beer or spirit consumption (though obviously size of measure is important)
- Wine is much more problematic from this point of view. Most people are not disciplined about limiting themselves to a certain number of glasses and keep topping up rather than having a clear sense of what's consumed. They often don't know how much they've drunk until they've finished and look to the wine bottle(s) for evidence.

Respondents said linking drinking to specific 'rules' or protocols works well for them - things like don't start before X o'clock or stop drinking when you've finished eating.

TOOLS & TECHNIQUES TO MODERATE DRINKING

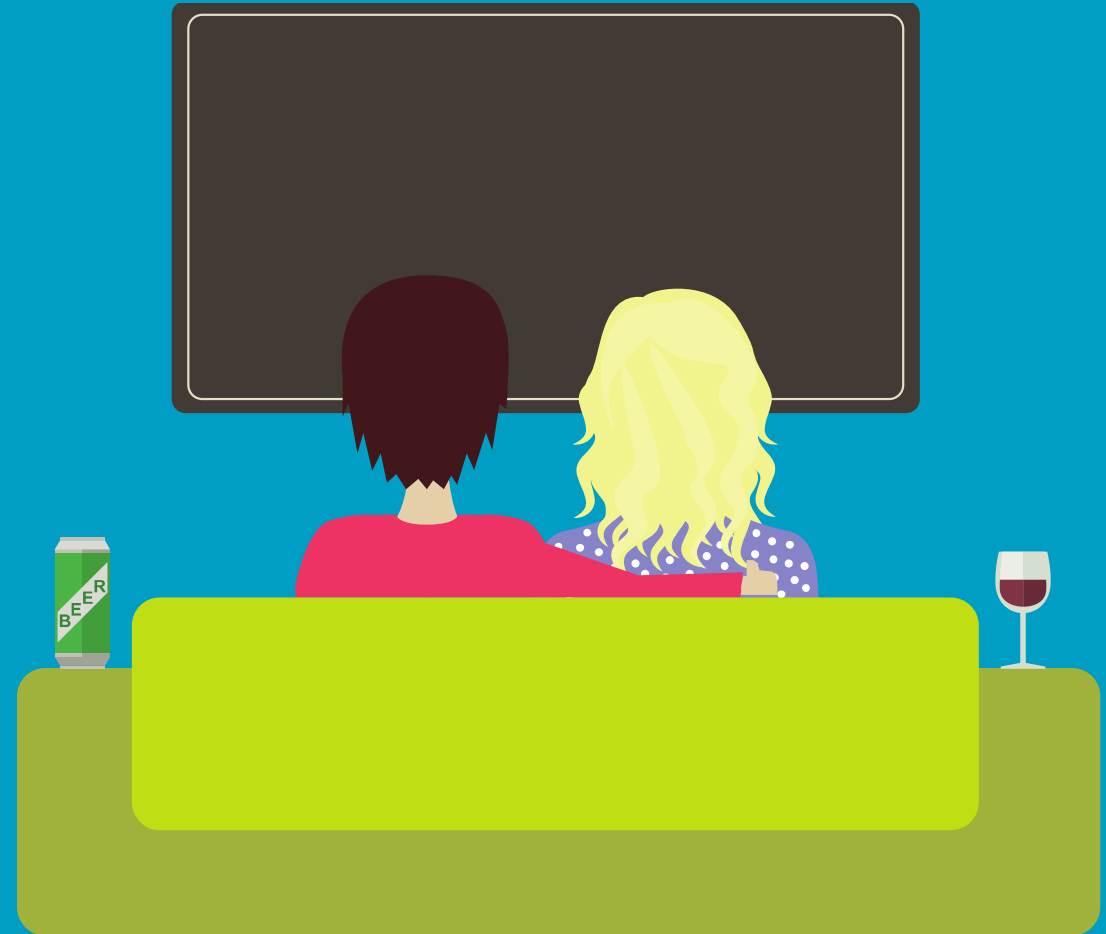
Clear information on what is meant by a standard drink & the maximum number an adult should drink in one week (low-risk weekly guidelines)	31%
Nothing, just my own efforts	30%
A drinks calculator	26%
An app to monitor drinking	24%
A measuring cup which indicates what is meant by a standard drink	24%
A device to monitor blood alcohol levels	23%
A public health information campaign	22%
Signage on HSE low-risk weekly guidelines at retail outlets at point of purchase	21%
Digitally accessible/online resources & information	13%
Information booklets containing advice & tips on cutting down	12%
A pen/paper drink diary	5%
Other (please specify)	2%

Findings from Barometer 2021 (Drinkaware, B&A 2021).

PARENTS ACCEPTED DIFFERENT LEVELS OF DRINKING WITHIN PARTNERSHIPS

- Though generally it was the man who drinks at a higher rate than the woman
- There was acknowledgement that people's tolerance levels, enjoyment levels, body weight, etc will be different
- **Partners became concerned over lockdown levels of drinking, not as a result of amounts usually, but new behaviours that they hadn't seen before.** For example, one respondent talked about finding her husband asleep in front of Netflix at 3 in the morning with a couple of empty bottles of wine beside him and that being a wakeup call
- Individual habits formed during the pandemic seemed to be more apparent to those outside of them. So, if one of a couple's drinking has become more problematic it's usually possible for their partner to recognise this and to draw attention to that in the context of a loving/trusting relationship. It would be more difficult for a couple who have both changed their habits to recognise this.

Parental drinking and children



PARENTS KNOW THAT GROWING UP IN IRELAND, THEIR CHILDREN WILL BE EXPOSED TO A CERTAIN LEVEL OF DRINKING FROM QUITE A YOUNG AGE

- That's something parents were relatively okay with. It is part of our social backdrop
- But it is important to note that the parents' position comes from a place of love and protection and the wish to shield their children from harm
- What they are keen to shield their children from is public drunkenness (in real life / in the media) as they don't want to normalise this for them
- A categorisation element of sorts was evident where drinking as "loss of control and loud behaviour" is depicted as stereotypical drunkenness, while other forms of drinking such as with a meal or with wine is seen as "socially acceptable"
- And the specific negative effects of heavy drinking - violence, aggression, loss of control, shouting/swearing
- Most of our sample have some people they know in real life (usually family members) that they don't want their children to witness drinking, because they know the type of behaviour that might follow

PARENTS WEREN'T HIDING THEIR OWN DRINKING FROM THEIR CHILDREN BUT HAD SPECIFIC PERSONAL RULES REGARDING IT

Parents tended not to have a problem with their children knowing that they drink or seeing that they drink but almost all parents have some arbitrary rules regarding alcohol. Examples include...

- ▶ Happy for the children to see them drinking outside but not inside
- ▶ Two drinks could be drunk in front of children, but they had to be in bed before they could have a third
- ▶ Fine with the children seeing them have a drink, but didn't want them to see parents drunk
- ▶ Fine for children to see them drink on a Saturday night or Sunday lunch, but not outside of those times
- ▶ Happy for children to see them drink wine, but not spirits

Interestingly, the need for boundaries and control of the narrative stayed relatively strong.

- ▶ The amount of visible drinking done in front of children during lockdown increased by a small amount, whereas the amount drinking kept from children increased by a much bigger amount
- ▶ Though some of this is simply down to a lot of the increase being evening drinking.

Clearly parents desired to control the narrative about their drinking, to present themselves in a positive light to their children, to convey that some kinds of drinking are more acceptable than others.

PRE-TEEN IS THE GROUP THAT PARENTS ARE MOST WORRIED ABOUT WHEN IT COMES TO OBSERVING PARENTAL DRINKING

Pre-schoolers	Primary school kids	Teenagers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Probably wouldn't have a good understanding or awareness of what's going on• Plus, there's not much fun in drinking while in charge of a toddler, so less temptation for parents, better to wait until they're in bed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• At the younger end, similar situation to pre-school children• But as they get to 9, 10, 11 they're much more aware and impressionable, but not so capable of discussion about it as teens	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There are concerns about what parents are normalising for teenagers who are close to drinking age themselves• But equally, parents can have conversations with teenagers about social drinking and acceptable limits

Parents usually want to model good 'social drinking' habits for their children, some of which sound rather ambitious, even as they vocalise them - able to enjoy a few drinks socially, without going too far, equally able to enjoy themselves without drinking, avoiding problematic or dependent drinking. Impact of drinking on their children's mental health is a big concern for them.

Conclusions & Recommendations



CONCLUSIONS

The study elucidates parents lived experience of using alcohol as a coping tool in a crisis

It is important because we have not yet closed the door on the COVID-19 crisis, or indeed on the arising crises regarding mental health, cost-of-living,

1. Several determinants of alcohol's usage as a coping tool

- Parents were under stress, with little support => deficit of alternative stress releases
- Alcohol is an easy go-to*.
- Drinking deemed acceptable* and visibly normalised for stress relief => gave parents an implicit permission to drink

2. Parents recognised when their drinking was excessive, and had a negative impact

This meant they pulled back from heavier drinking. However for many some excessive drinking continued as new habits became entrenched**

3. Parents' definitions of problem drinking were subjective

- Having a problem => *needing* as opposed to *wanting* a drink
- Fact-based definitions not mentioned
- Most saw no need to scrutinise their drinking/apply Low-Risk Weekly Guidelines.
- Re-assured by the absence of extreme negative scenarios such as being visibly intoxicated, drinking every day or during the day, not being able to function.

4. Moderation for parents involves personal rules but not health guidelines

Rules included: drink only when eating, not before x o'clock, only on x days, etc.
But did not necessarily include number/measures of drinks, or any following (or knowledge) of the Low-Risk Weekly Guidelines

5. Subjective 'rules' also re. their children's exposure to alcohol

Clear parental desire to promote healthy relationships with alcohol for their children

Rules cited were often arbitrary regarding the occasion, the timing, the location of when children can and cannot be exposed to alcohol.

6. Parents were genuinely concerned about the impact of drinking on their children's mental health

But of note is its impact on parents' own mental health was not raised.

*Same finding in Drinkaware's pre-Covid "At-Home Drinking" (2019)

**Same findings in Drinkaware's Barometer 2020 & 2021: COVID Years

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Apply the insights in this study to the production and delivery of an informative alcohol education Parents Pack and Parents Workshop. (Summer 2022 Parents campaign in progress)
2. Use Quantitative research to further explore the 'rules' that parents use and therefore ones they may be open to regarding role modelling. (Included in the Barometer 2022 and more options for 2023)
3. A national alcohol education public information and awareness campaign to address the disconnect that exists between individuals wanting to drink less and understanding what harmful, hazardous, and dependent drinking means.
4. Share these findings with relevant stakeholders for additional analysis and discussion to explore collaborations for sustained positive change.
5. Further study on the gendered aspect of alcohol-specific role modelling, and dynamic of parental influence on adolescent alcohol behaviours within the Irish context.
6. Further research and analysis is needed on understanding parental communication strategies to their children to support the determination of the most effective alcohol-specific communication. Cross-referencing this data with other related findings - including Maynooth University's Evaluation of Drinkaware's Junior Cycle Alcohol Education Programme (2018-2020).

DRINKAWARE

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