

Call to prosecute parents who let children drink at home

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The call has gone out to prosecute parents who give their children alcoholic drinks in the home

Girls as young as 11 are drinking more than a bottle of wine a week, a report has claimed.

According to Alcohol Concern figures, young female drinkers are consuming twice as much alcohol as they were seven years ago.

The shock statistics come as the leading charity recommended parents who give alcohol to under-15s - even with a meal at home - should face prosecution.

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Alcohol Concern made the recommendation as part of a wide-ranging set of proposals to cut child drinking.

It highlighted figures - first published by the NHS - which showed the amount of alcohol consumed by 11 to 13-year-olds has rocketed in recent years.

Girls in this age group admitted consuming an average of about eight units a week in 2006, compared with just under five in 2000.

Boys of the same age admitted drinking an average of 12 units a week last year compared with just eight a week in 2000, the study by the NHS Information Centre showed.

An Alcohol Concern spokesman said: "Currently it is legal to provide children as young as five with alcohol in a private home.

"Raising the age limit to 15 would send a stronger message to parents of the risks associated with letting very young people consume alcohol.

"We hope it would send a message to parents that underage consumption is an important issue, and may help them think about whether they are helping their child drink alcohol."

The Portman Group, set up by drinks producers which together supply the majority of the alcohol sold in the UK, agreed there was a case for raising the drinking age.

But it pointed out that the continent does not suffer from binge-drinking issues and children there are given moderate amounts of alcohol in a controlled way.

Its chief executive David Poley said: "There is a case for raising the drinking age at home from five, but 15 seems too high.

"On the continent, parents give children small amounts of alcohol at home with their meals in a controlled way so they get used to drinking in moderation. They don't suffer from binge-drinking issues."

The Glass Half Empty report was examining the impact of the Government's Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy, which was published three years ago.

The charity's chief executive Srabani Sen said: "Our report shows that we are simply not doing enough to protect our children from alcohol.

"Binge drinking by children can have serious consequences for brain function, significantly raises the risk of alcohol dependency in later life and diminishes their life chances."

The agency called for a 16 per cent increase in alcohol taxes and a ban on brewers or retailers selling alcohol at a loss. The report recommended the law on the sale of alcohol to underage children should be more vigorously enforced.

A recent Home Office-led investigation showed 29 per cent of children were able to buy alcohol in pubs and bars.

Banning alcohol advertising on TV before the watershed time and in cinemas during programmes below the 18 certificate was also recommended.

The charity wants to see alcohol education as part of the school curriculum to teach pupils about the dangers of binge drinking.

The report also found "little current evidence" that extended opening hours introduced by the Government in November 2005 had led to a cut in alcohol-related offences at pub and club closing times.