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Young people in Hong Kong need more guidance on how to deal with alcohol

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With Christmas and New Year around the corner, young people may find themselves at many parties.

In a society where alcohol is widely accepted and sometimes a highlight in social gatherings, how should we respond to young people drinking?

A study done by Polytechnic University's School of Nursing indicated that local youth started drinking alcohol as early as 10.9 years old.

This raises the question of whether alcohol is too easily accessible in the city, especially with off-premises sites like convenience stores and supermarkets, where little or no restrictions govern young people buying booze.

In two recent studies KELY did, we had teenagers visit over 100 off-premises stores across 12 districts, followed with a survey distributed to young people aged 10 to 24 to study youth's perspectives on drinking and the regulations. Some 78.6 per cent of the underage alcohol-purchase attempts were successful.

From this, we felt it was important to hear what young people think of this issue. How do they view the convenience of getting alcohol and the social norms of drinking?

Over 60 per cent of our 927 respondents believed better regulation of underage access to alcohol is needed. The top two reasons were: easy access to alcohol and concerns over alcohol's effect on health. We hope that retailers take note and reflect on their responsibilities in this matter.

When asked about alternative measures besides regulations, the most popular was "to have more education". Alcohol education today is not mandatory in school, and if it does take place is often one-off and inconsistent.

Alcohol education must not stop at health consequences, but also cover social consequences. Harm reduction methods and reasons why young people may encounter alcohol, like peer influence and stress, ought to be addressed. We need to ensure that young people know what to do in case they find themselves in difficult situations.

Family also plays an important role in youth's well-being. Parents are encouraged to initiate more open discussions on drinking with their children – having mutual understanding about alcohol is perhaps better than avoiding the subject.

There is inadequate information for us to understand the attitude and behaviour of young people towards drinking. As a start, more research or education groups need to collaborate.

Ultimately, we all believe it takes a village to raise a child. We need to do better in providing the best alcohol education for our future generation.

Sky Siu, executive director, KELY Support Group