

# ”They must be 18 years old ... really”. Alcohol debut discourses at parent meetings within alcohol prevention programmes in school

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## ABSTRACT

**AIMS** – This article analyses how parents discuss norms of youth alcohol debut at meetings of alcohol prevention programmes in schools. The focus is on how different ways of argumentation can help to deal with dilemmas between what parents perceive to be the right age of debut, what they describe as common, and what they consider is possible to realise. **METHODS AND DATA** – The data mainly consists of audio recordings of conversations at parent meetings arranged by an alcohol prevention programme in the eighth grade at four schools in four different locations in Norway. The study takes its inspiration from discourse analysis. **RESULTS** – The analysis identifies three different patterns of parent discussions about alcohol debut. This information is used to construct three discourses of norms for alcohol debut, namely, a traditional discourse, a discourse of modern upbringing and a discourse of legalisation. Both the traditional opinions, which centre on the significance of the confirmation age, and the modern individualised norms are challenged by arguments for an 18-year limit in these discussions. **CONCLUSION** – The legal age limit of 18 years seemed implicitly or explicitly to be a strong resource of argumentation for formulating common norms for alcohol debut. In the parents’ discussions, too, the consensus seems to be moving towards the 18-year age limit.

**KEY WORDS** – alcohol debut, norms, prevention, parents, youth.

Submitted 23.03.2012

Final version accepted 10.09.2012

## Introduction

Parental co-operation has in recent years become increasingly important in alcohol prevention strategies for children and young people. This includes both preventive strategies aimed at particular problems with vulnerable children, young people and parents (Henggeler et al. 1998; Patterson et al. 2002) and universal strategies to reduce the risk of problem development (Koutakis et al. 2008). The universal strategies are mainly rooted in school as an institutional framework. Parent meetings and collaboration between school and

parents is an essential part of this strategy (Ferrer-Wrede et al. 2005; Nordahl et al. 2006). This is why many alcohol prevention programmes have been designed for use in schools and why parent meetings are a vital component. In many countries, such programmes constitute an important part of public policy to delay alcohol debut and reduce substance abuse problems.

Delaying the age of alcohol debut is a key objective in all these programmes. There is well-documented correlation between low debut age, high consumption

of alcohol and high risk for developing substance abuse problems (Pedersen 1991; Pedersen & Skrondal 1998). It is also well-established that young people who receive alcohol from their parents have significantly higher consumption than other youths (Pedersen 1990). Furthermore, we know that parents with restrictive norms on their children's alcohol use create expectations of a delayed age of alcohol debut, and this also has an impact on the adolescents' actual alcohol use (Willhelmsen 1997; Koutakis et al. 2008). Parental attitudes and norms on their children's use of alcohol are therefore among the central subjects at school–parent meetings.

There are also many dilemmas associated with this subject. In Norway, the legal age for buying alcohol is 18, but the average age of alcohol debut is 15 (Vedøy & Skretting 2009). A considerable gap thus exists between the legislative recommended age of debut and what is culturally accepted. This can also be understood as different frames of reference for attitudes and norms concerning alcohol debut. For many parents, this is concretely expressed by creating a great distance between the attitudes and norms they ideally want to realise, what they believe is common among most people and what they therefore regard as possible to realise.

In this article, I will discuss how parents deal with the dilemma in conversations with other parents as part of a discussion on alcohol debut at parent meetings in alcohol prevention programmes. Particularly interesting are the different frames of reference and discursive resources the parents use, and furthermore, how these resources contribute to handling the parents' dilemmas. The main objective of

the study is to develop basic and detailed knowledge about how parents communicate within the framework of the prevention programme rather than evaluating such programmes themselves. Indirectly, this will still enable insights into strengthening the parental role in preventive work. The analysis is based on a study of parent meetings during the alcohol prevention programme Youth & Alcohol, which is a universal alcohol prevention programme in school for eighth graders (aged 13–14) and their parents. Run by a public centre of competence in the field of alcohol and drugs associated with The Norwegian Directorate of Health, the programme is being used by 80 schools in Norway. Parental involvement in the programme includes two meetings: only parents participate in one of the meetings, while both parents and their children take part in the other. Both meetings start with an introduction, often by the teacher responsible for leading the meeting. It continues with group discussions on specific issues, and ends up with a summary in a plenary session. Both meetings aim to formulate a set of shared attitudes on which both parents and young people agree. The aim is communicated to the parents in the invitation to the meetings, the introduction given at the meetings and in the final summary of the discussions. Youth & Alcohol also includes an educational programme for the pupils. This section was carried out between the two parent meetings. In 2009, 50% of Norwegian schools arranged parent meetings within different prevention programmes that included discussions between the participants (The Norwegian Directorate of Health: [www.settergrenser.no](http://www.settergrenser.no)).

Much previous research exists on the importance of alcohol debut for later substance abuse, the cultural meaning of alcohol debut and the importance of parental attitudes. However, after a systematic search of five research databases (Eric, Pubmed, Sage, Scopus and Web of Knowledge) with different keyword combinations, it was not possible to find previous studies of parental discussions of alcohol debut conducted at meetings in prevention programmes.

### Norms for alcohol debut

The use of alcohol and drugs has always been a distinct normative field of action (Hauge 2009). There are rules about which substances can be used, who can use them, when and how they can be used and how to behave when they are used. Some norms are expressed explicitly because the use of alcohol and drugs is also highly regulated by law, while others are implicit and sometimes achieve a more aesthetic expression in what we think is worthy and beautiful, or unworthy and disgusting. The norm that *alcohol is not for children* is strong in the Nordic alcohol culture. In Norway, the age limit for the use of alcohol is a norm expressed both explicitly in the Alcohol Act (§ 1.5) and also implicitly in the culture.

Parents' conversations on the age of debut are thus conversations about norms. The concept of 'norm' is closely linked to notions of the normal (Hylland Eriksen & Breivik 2006). In the sociological analysis of the normal, a distinction is often made between two different dimensions: *the right* and *the common* (Grue 2006; Hydén 2006). *The right* expresses the ideal and moral aspects of normality, whereas *the*

*common* articulates statistical normality. There may therefore be a considerable gap between perceptions of the right age for alcohol debut and what is common. This gap cannot just be described as a difference because tensions and dilemmas are related to this difference. In this article, I have chosen to include a third dimension that can be linked to perceptions of the normal, namely, *the possible*. This is particularly relevant in an analysis of alcohol debut norms, as they are norms that challenge parents over time. In my analysis, *the possible* is a dimension oriented towards the future, always present in these conversations.

The strong normative significance of the debut age can be understood through alcohol being a central symbol of adulthood in our culture. Alcohol debut is a focal marker of the transition from childhood to adulthood. This basic meaning aspect of alcohol use is documented in many studies (Douglas 1987; Henriksen & Sande 1995; Pedersen 1991/2006). However, what causes problems in discussions about the age of debut in modern society is that there is no longer a clear, common and shared understanding of when childhood ends. Whereas this transition was previously connected to a common ritual and regulation through confirmation, it has now become an issue of negotiation between parents and children in each family. This further implies that discussions about the age of debut have become both more important and more difficult. They are more important because the mediation of norms between parents and children in modern society is primarily based on verbal communication, and they are more difficult because the framework for discus-

sions on norms in modern society is often described as fragmented, individualised and liquid (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Bauman 2000).

Against this background it could be assumed that the parents' conversations about the age of alcohol debut are not about right and wrong within a common frame of reference. They would rather be about the right age of the debut and the frame of reference that applies to an issue on the right age of debut. Various frames can be defined as different discourses regarding the age of debut, in different ways providing a resource for parents' argumentation in the conversations going on at these meetings. The term discourse is generally understood as 'a particular way of speaking about and understanding the world (or a section of the world)' (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2008, 9). How different discourses about the age of debut become a frame of reference and a resource for parents' discussions is thus not a question of how well-documented and politically-recommended knowledge on the significance of the age of debut impacts on parental attitudes. What is considered to be an acceptable and reasonable age of debut has changed over time and varies between countries and cultures.

## Method and data

The data used in this analysis consists of audio recordings of discussions held at parent meetings at four different schools. As a supplement, the data also consists of observation notes from the parts of the meetings unavailable for audio recordings, interviews with those who led the meetings, as well as documents used in the meetings such as invitations, introduc-

tions, formulated issues for the discussion and the minutes. The analysis here is primarily based on actual verbal utterances and conversation sequences in the parental discussion of the first meeting.

The four schools are located in different types of communities in Norway. One school is in a northern Norwegian municipality centre (A), another in a mid-Norwegian village (B), and two schools are located in Oslo, one in 'eastern Oslo' (C) and the other in 'western Oslo' (D). The selection of schools was motivated by geographical, social and cultural diversity. What is common for all schools is that that they have conducted parent meetings arranged within the prevention programme Youth & Alcohol, that the use of the programme is mandatory by local decision and that all four schools have used the programme for several years (from three to seven years). All parents received written information of the study along with the invitation, and consent for participation was given on the basis of oral information at the start of the meetings. I participated in all the meetings and also completed all data collection.

The audio recording from the meetings provides access to the conversations between the participants. I do not claim that this type of data is more 'real or true'. Rather, the strength of the data lies in its being closer to the setting that is the subject of analysis: conversations between parents in the meetings (Silverman 2006). Recordings of the meetings were transcribed verbatim. (Overall, 123 transcribed pages from the first meeting). I identified and formulated different subjects in the conversation as questions for analysis both during the listening of audio recordings and during the transcription. Norms for alcohol

School	Number of participants and groups	Organising of the meeting.	Presentation of current topics	Data from audio recordings
A	40 5 groups	Municipal social worker and school teacher lead and summarise the meeting. A police officer holds an introductory presentation.	Written on a piece of paper to each group	Group discussion and summary in plenary.
B	20 3 groups	School principal leads and summarises the meeting	Oral presentation during the introduction	Group discussion and summary in plenary.
C	Approx. 100 5 classrooms No groups	Two police officers give an introduction in a plenary session. A teacher leads the discussion in the classroom.	No presentation of the topics.	Discussion in one classroom.
D	Approx. 75 4 classrooms 2 groups	Two teachers give an introduction in plenary. An elected parental representative leads and summarises the discussion in the classroom	Oral presentation through the parents' representative.	Discussion in one group and summary in one classroom

**Figure 1:** Number of participants and groups; organisation of the meetings; and audio recordings from four schools.

debut instantly proved to be the most *frequent and extensive* conversation topic in the entire material. In the further analysis for this article, all conversation sequences on this subject were marked. I first sought to distinguish between different patterns in the parents' arguments on the right age of debut. Second, I noted how dilemmas related to the issue were handled within the different patterns of argumentation, and third how they contributed to forming the meeting's conclusions about common rules for the school.

## Results

In the following, I will analyse conversation sequences that are most common and typical of the parents' discussions about the age of alcohol debut in these meetings.

### *The boy who has been confirmed*

At a school in the mid-Norwegian village, five parents are sitting around a table, discussing when it would be acceptable for young people to begin to taste alcohol.

After the conversation has lasted a good while, a father utters the following:

Example 1:

**Father:** But if he.... if I were to drink a tiny glass of cognac ... if I said to the boy who has been confirmed that he will get a taste ... to know what it is. I don't think that is wrong, because I mean that is to prepare him for something in a safe environment.

This statement should not only be understood as the presentation of an attitude. It is part of a discussion between various positions and has a facility as a response as well as a defence of an attitude related to the alcohol debut of one's own children. A characteristic feature of this parent meeting was a distinction between a majority of parents with a clear connection to the village and a minority of immigrant parents. In the audio recording, this can be partly identified through different dialects, partly because the parents themselves provide

this information through their utterances, and partly through the subsequent interview with the school's principal. This distinction marks the group conversation, too: three parents from the village take part as well as an immigrant couple. These different groups of parents represent quite disparate attitudes to the age of alcohol debut. Parents from the village argue that confirmation implies a transition to a time of preparation and adaptation to alcohol use. The immigrant parents think this is still a point of delaying alcohol use.

The mid-Norwegian school is located in a village where Christian confirmation still holds a meaningful place: it continues to mark the transition between childhood and adulthood. In the village, public parties are held where all confirmed persons are allowed and where alcohol is served. Based on the summary of a plenary session, there seemed to be a collective opinion among the parents in the village taking part in the meeting that confirmation is the age limit for alcohol debut. But even if this attitude was distinct in the meeting, it is important to notice the way of the parents' argumentation. Confirmation is an important transition, but it is not in itself a sufficient argument to legitimate alcohol debut. This is not the case in confrontation with a different attitude and a different frame of reference represented by the immigrant parents in the conversation. The father of the immigrant family makes this clear in the following:

Example 2:

**Father:** It is clear that.... that in our judgement, it is certainly desirable that they stay away until they are 18 years old.

The legal age limit is the frame of reference for this utterance, even if the arguments do not relate directly to the law, but are instead privatised to 'our judgement'. The conversation must be understood as a conflict between different frames of reference, which also contributes to one's not being able to take the confirmation age as the norm for alcohol debut for granted. That 'the boy is confirmed' is thus not a sufficient argument for alcohol debut in the opening utterances. The debut age is legitimised as 'to prepare him for something in a safe environment'. There is no question of childhood being over and young people becoming adults who as independent persons can choose to drink alcohol, and how they will do this. The legitimisation is still connected to a context of a parenting relationship in which the young people have to 'know what it is'. Such an argument can be associated with the rationale of driving practice towards final certification at the age of 18. The difference is that it is not an offensive argumentation for alcohol habituation being very good. The argument is of a more defensive nature in that to let young people taste alcohol 'is not wrong', which underlines the defensive character of the utterances.

#### *Children who are inner-directed*

At a school in western Oslo, five mothers are gathered for a group conversation. The age of alcohol debut is the central subject in this conversation, too. One of the mothers says the following:

Example 3:

**Mother 1:** So, I hope that I have a child who is inner-directed. Thus inner-directed vs. outer-directed people...

So they have learned in a way to take responsibility for themselves. All the way up. From this they learn to put on their cap when it's cold. So that I have given them enough confidence that I can try to think that they must take care of themselves. At various levels of age. So that it becomes their own project to take care of themselves now. For now they will be entirely responsible for themselves when they turn 18... but that there has been a process all the way up. So that they sort of are inner-directed as a person.

This school has elected parent representatives who are responsible for leading parent meetings in the individual classes. The parents' representative participates in this group, initiating the conversation to explain the purpose of the meeting and defining that the central subject of the group conversation is 'zero tolerance of alcohol use until the child is 18'. This can be seen as a premise for the conversation. No participants in the conversation oppose this and there are no utterances indicating that the 18-year limit for alcohol debut is undesirable. There are, on the other hand, many utterances indicating that it is not common:

Example 4:

**Mother 2:** ... right, they start earlier. They start to taste. Then you might deal with that.

The central issue of this conversation becomes the possibility of realising the 18-year limit. The core expression in the introductory remark is 'inner-directed', described as an ideal and the main purpose

of upbringing. Parents want independent, reflexive, sensible children – 'inner-directed' children who make good choices. This utterance describes an attitude to upbringing and mediation of norms in which the close relationship between parents and children are central. Parents' relationships with their children are tremendously important and at the core of the process leading to 'inner-directed' children. This utterance contains a close connection between 'confidence that I can try to think that they must take care of themselves' and a recognition that young people 'will be entirely responsible for themselves when they turn 18'. Norms are developed and realised through trust rather than through discipline and sanctions.

The study material is pervaded by statements about raising children through trust, that alcohol debut is a choice and that the parents do not believe that norm violations should be punished. In the conversation between the mothers in this case, no one argues that parents can or should deal with their child's relationship with alcohol by allowing him/her to drink at home. At the same time, there does not necessarily appear a contradiction between the idea of preparation through drinking alcohol at home and the ideal of inner self-directed children. On the other hand, there is no contradiction between such upbringing ideals and the desire to postpone alcohol debut until the age of 18. One of the other mothers expresses this clearly:

Example 5:

**Mother 3:** I think that there is zero tolerance of alcohol until they are old enough to do it. And if my daughter asks: Can I do this and that? Yes, when

you turn 18, I say. Then you can do whatever you want. Thus tacitly understood, until then my rules apply. As long as you live at home, you'll have to stick to the rules that apply in our home.

While the legal age is the frame of reference here, it still does not represent an explicit resource of argumentation. The legitimacy of the 18-year age limit is to be found in the close relationship between parents and children. Here it is 'my rules', which apply 'in our home'.

#### *End of discussion*

At a school in a municipal centre in northern Norway, the parents' group discussions are carried out in five different groups, summarised in plenary sessions, where a father remarks:

Example 6:

**Father:** It's very easy, as *Stein* [another father] says, to comply with the limits the law defines, because then there is in a way no point in having this discussion at home, because this you are not allowed to do before you are 18. This is... the end of the discussion.

**Chair:** Yes, that's actually the reason why there is such an age limit...

**Father:** And so it is not like ... do as I say and not as I do. I'm a little bit conscious of this. It is very clearly not allowed, either to give them alcohol or serve them at home, although of course this will not be detected.

The father refers to another father in the group, Stein, who is a police officer. He contributed with an introduction at the

beginning of the parent meeting, declaring that it was illegal to buy and serve alcohol to under-age people. This is an example of professional references, which serve as a resource contributing to discussions at the meetings. This is a general point, but a police officer still speaks with a very distinct voice. The key point in the father's remark is that the law is both a frame of reference and that it is recommended as a resource in parents' discussions with their children at home. And the main argument is that it helps to end all other discussions on the delay of alcohol debut. 'There is no point having the discussion at home', because the knowledge of what is legal helps to ensure the 'end of discussion'. A possible interpretation of the background for this argument is the parents' perception of a complex dilemma: conflicts between what we say and what we do. In conversations about alcohol use between parents and children, parents commonly justify the limits of their own children's use of alcohol by resorting to knowledge of substances as harmful and dangerous. But in doing so, many parents face a dilemma about justifying their own alcohol use (Henriksen 2000). A limit that is defined by what is allowed and what is not allowed represents a resource to solving the dilemma, because it makes a clear distinction between the norms which apply to children and those which apply to adults. The limit defined by law should therefore constitute the parents' norms.

There is a great distance in Norway between the legal age limit for buying alcohol and the culturally accepted limit to start drinking. The question of what is legal has not traditionally been a central resource for argumentation on alcohol debut. It is a



different story with drug use: what is legal often lies at the centre of argumentation. Parents do not need to decide whether cannabis is more or less dangerous than alcohol, because the use of cannabis is 'very clearly not allowed'. With alcohol debut, the knowledge of what is prohibited is obviously less clear to Norwegian parents. The remark above is, however, a good example of the law becoming a resource of argumentation for delayed debut. There are few utterances in the material in which the law is mentioned in as specific terms as here, but the definition of the legal age indirectly works as a frame of reference in all discussions. The explicit use of the law as a resource of argumentation in the school in northern Norway is a focal point which contributes to the 'end of discussion' at the parent meeting.

## Discussion

The context for the conversations analysed in this article are parent meetings within an alcohol prevention programme aimed at eighth graders. This setting makes the initiation of alcohol use both implicitly and explicitly the central topic of conversation. It is implicit in that the parents' contributions to delaying alcohol use and preventing substance abuse is the very purpose of the meeting, and it is explicit in that the issue of alcohol debut *is on the table* as a topic for group discussions at all these meetings. It is also a setting which takes place within a modern society where both the cultural and structural framework of normative discussion can be described as fragmented and fluid. This, then, is a description of a society without a firm normative order on the issue of right and wrong. The theoretical point here is not,

however, that this leads to a situation of norm resolution or absence of moral issues, but that it provides a more fragmented framework for the discussing of norms. Although there is in sociology, both theoretically and empirically, a debate about modernity (Krange & Øia 2010), most agree that this is a fundamental characteristic of modern society, both in general and in the specific Norwegian society.

### *Three discourses on the age of debut*

On the basis of the analysis, it is possible to define three different discourses that serve as a frame of reference for parents' discussions on the age of debut. First, there is what I choose to designate as a *traditional discourse* in which confirmation age is still an important marker for the end of childhood. Second, we have a *modern discourse of upbringing* with a focus on individuality, the children's self-reflection and independent choices. And third, there is a *discourse of legalisation* in which the provisions of the law on age limits are the decisive frame of reference. These three discourses are constructed from the data as a whole and they are included in varying degrees as resources of argumentation in all the meetings. It is therefore not possible to compare the different schools on the basis of which discourse frames the conversation. It is, however, fair to conclude that an explicit argumentation on the significance of confirmation is only present in the school in mid-Norway. What is here defined as a modern discourse of upbringing is a central resource of argumentation throughout the data. This also applies to the age limit of 18 years, both with an implicit and explicit reference to the legal age limit.

*The right, the common and the possible*

As already mentioned, parents' discussions about norms for alcohol debut have various dimensions and dilemmas that need to be handled. They are present in all the conversations across the different discourses that are a frame of reference for the discussion. How do the different discourses represent a resource, then, which help to deal with the dilemmas? The different dimensions can be linked to a theoretical analysis of the concept of norms and normality, but they are primarily defined empirically based on how parents express themselves on this issue. Some utterances articulate what parents think *is right*, some express views about what *is common* and yet others voice views about what it *is possible* to realise.

*The right* communicates the individual parent's position. This is in many ways an ideal, and the utterances are often implicit, sometimes explicit, framed by formulations such as: *The best thing would be ...* It can also be interpreted as a special feature of these utterances that they are formulated to explore uncertainty in relation to the other participants. Parents basically only know their own thoughts, expressing attitudes that apply *in our home*, or they clarify that this is *in our thoughts*. In most meetings, especially early on in the conversations, it is clear that parents express their own attitudes without knowing what the others think or whether there is any agreement. In principle, these must be understood as utterances between strangers, the individual and the others. A third part, understood as a collective frame of reference, is only weakly present. However, what is present is a common definition of the setting that the conversations take

place within the frame of an alcohol prevention programme. There is thus reason to believe that a preventive objective of increasing debut age contributes to forming the parents' remarks.

*The common* age of debut is a completely different type of utterance, referring to various types of knowledge about what young people do. There are no references to research-based knowledge or statistics about the average age of debut, and the remarks almost never refer to the parents' own children. These are utterances about *what most people* do, or what *the other* does. And there may be stories of how it used to be when *we were growing up*, as compared to what is normal now. There are no references to the age of adolescents' alcohol debut having increased in Norway, on the contrary. The only utterances about this assume that *they become younger and younger*. Most discourses hence have a dilemma between *the common* and *the right*.

Large chunks of the conversations between parents focus on what norms for age of debut *are possible* to realise. Unlike opinions of what is common, the discourse of the possible consists of utterances oriented towards the future, and it is the parents' own children that frame these utterances. Many of the parents in meetings also have children older than those participating in the alcohol prevention programme. The experience gained with older siblings is a source of knowledge about what is possible. But the utterances are still more oriented towards *what we can do* than *what we have done*. In most discourses, a dilemma exists between what parents formulate as *right* and what they think is *possible*. This is the relationship between ideals and realities. Parents'

ability to know about and control what young people do is a major challenge. And a general characteristic of all the material is an absence of utterances about the sanctions for norm violations, or even an explicitly formulated distrust of sanctions being possible or appropriate. This does not of course necessarily mean that sanctions and possible punishments do not exist in these families, but they do not belong to the public conversations between the parents taking part in these meetings.

#### *Discourses as a resource*

The figure below describes the characteristics of utterances about *the right*, *the common* and *the possible* within the three discourses described:

conflicts are therefore not internal to the traditional discourse on the age of debut. This is a resource of argumentation rooted in a collective traditional understanding. But increasingly, tensions arise between this understanding and opinions about the transition from childhood to adulthood in modern society. And a clear conflict also exists with regard to knowledge of risks and injuries correlated to an early age of debut, as is often formulated in meetings organised by alcohol prevention programmes. It is therefore reasonable to interpret the traditional discourse on the age of debut as a defence of a practice most widespread in Norwegian rural communities and in conflict with the preventive purpose of a postponed age of debut. This

	Traditional Discourse	Modern discourse of upbringing	Discourse of legalisation
<b>The right</b>	After confirmation.	An independent decision to postpone alcohol debut.	Age limit of 18 years defined by law.
<b>The common</b>	After confirmation.	Variation and process.	Too early.
<b>The possible</b>	After confirmation. No need for sanctions.	Influence through trust and dialogue within each family. No support for sanctions.	Distinct rules make 18-year limit possible. No expression of sanctions.

**Figure 2:** Different dimensions of utterances about the age of debut in different discourses.

Public opinion about the significance of the confirmation ritual from generation to generation is a key characteristic of a *traditional discourse* about the age of debut, with parents and children having a common view about when it is acceptable to start drinking alcohol (Henriksen & Sande 1995). This common understanding across the generation boundary means that there is no dilemma between what parents think is right and what they describe as a common age of debut. Neither does it appear to create any problems to realise. The

also signals a clear conflict with the norms for alcohol debut in politically approved recommendations about the 18-year age limit, as defined by the law.

Within a modern individualised discourse of upbringing, there are no immediate frames of reference for the right age of debut, which is rather defined by way of discussions between parents and children within the family. Communication, individuality and the development of independence are the central values. There is also felt to be considerable vari-

ation between people. There is therefore no shared understanding about what is the common age of debut. It differs between families, but also between children in the same family. This is related to the modern idea of upbringing in which the relationship between parents and children is crucial, and where openness, confidence and verbal communication are the key elements. The parents' ability to influence is also linked to the importance of a confident relationship and to a lesser degree to control and limitations. As a resource of argumentation, this is a discourse with many dilemmas, both between distinct limitations and confidential trust, but also between parents' own drinking habits and their arguments for a delayed debut for the young. It is also a discourse challenged by preventive strategies and political campaigns for an increased age of debut. Although alcohol policy has been liberalised in the Nordic countries recently (Lund & Ugland 2002; Babor et al. 2010), there is nevertheless increased political focus on recommendations to parents to respect the age limits and to communicate distinct norms (The Norwegian Directorate of Health: [www.settergrenser.no](http://www.settergrenser.no)).

Although the usual age of debut is lower than the legal age limit, and it can be argued that parents who buy or serve alcohol to their children actually commit a crime, violation of the law is in itself not central to the discourse of legislation. The discourse of legislation becomes a resource for parents to conclude negotiations with their children. It represents a contrast to a modern individualised discourse. The discourse also creates a clear contrast and critique of what is perceived to be a common age of debut. The average age of debut

is too low, and there are too many unnecessary discussions between parents and children about this subject. In this way, a politically decided age limit is brought into the conversation between parents and children in a very distinct manner. Not so that the parents become representatives of enforcing the law and implementing sanctions for violation, but the use of law as a resource of argumentation has strength in itself in realising a delayed debut and in handling the dilemmas associated with this question.

### **Norms of alcohol debut in the movement from tradition to law?**

An analysis of the discussions about alcohol debut in the parent meetings in alcohol prevention programmes are particularly interesting, both because this is an arena where the parents should try to establish shared views and because it highlights the problems of a collective frame of reference for this type of issue in modern society. Through analysis, I have shown how the discussions in the meetings are developed through a process of attitudes applying 'in our home' to the formulation of common positions that everyone can agree on. The meetings are an arena for negotiating norms, working out compromises and resolving dilemmas. It is therefore interesting to see what the written minutes of these four parent groups conclude on the question of the age of debut. At the school in the mid-Norwegian village the conclusion was: *zero tolerance of alcohol, at least until the age of confirmation*. For the other schools the conclusion was: *zero tolerance of alcohol, preferably until the age of 18*. These conclusions represent two different points of balance in the discussion of

limits on alcohol debut. One is the tension arising between the traditional idea of childhood ending at confirmation and a modern individualised understanding of the transition from childhood to adulthood as a gradual growing of independence. The other lies in the tension between a modern discourse of upbringing and regulation of age limits for the buying and serving of alcohol as defined by law.

Modern individualised negotiation between parents and children about alcohol debut hence takes place in a setting between two collective frames of reference. One is a cultural frame of reference rooted in tradition, whereas the other is a political frame expressed through legislation and formulated objectives in preventive strategies. Although the confirmation ritual still represents collective reality in some parts of Norwegian society, it is obvious that the law's formulation of the legal age is a stronger and more widespread resource of argumentation for parents in my data and probably for today's Norwegian parents in general. This raises further research questions: Is the culturally acceptable debut age for alcohol shifting from the age of confirmation to the eighteenth birthday? And what is the relation

between a discussion of norms in a public arena and the private conversation about norms which takes place between parents and children at home? This requires further research and another design than in the study I have conducted here. I can only conclude that in discussions held at parent meetings arranged within the alcohol prevention programme, there are good reasons to suggest that the norms for young people's alcohol debut are moving towards an 18-year limit ... really. And even if the purpose of this article is not to recommend specific prevention strategies, it is also reasonable to conclude with support for strategies promoting the delayed age of debut as not only being right, but as also being possible. However, this cannot be limited to an argument about the legal age limit, but must rather have a broad and long-term focus on the cultural significance of alcohol debut. This may also contribute to the 18-year limit becoming more common.

**Declaration of Interest** None.

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