

If...then

Critical Thinking Tutorials Student Series



Zero
Tolerance
to Youth
Drinking?

if...then

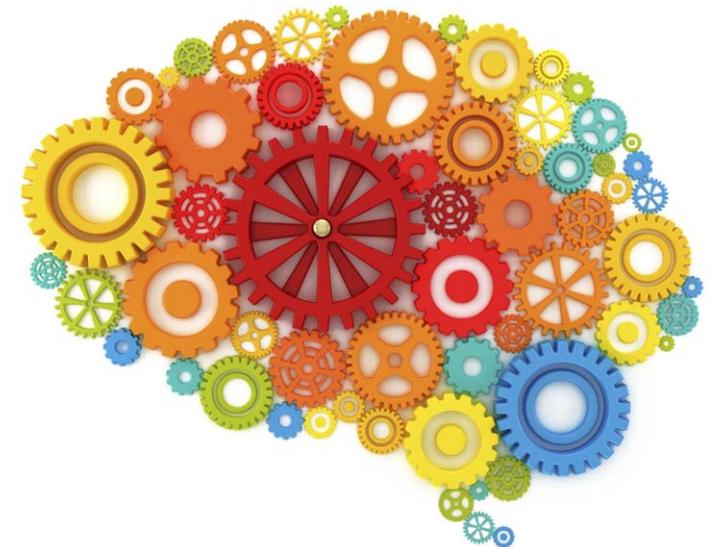
If...then provides courses, products, and guidance that enable the development of skills in Critical Thinking.

How to use this PDF

This PDF is designed to be used by students aged about 14 upwards. Whether or not you're doing a course in Critical Thinking, you can use this material (and others like it) to improve your skills in this area.

This particular exercise is concerned with whether parents should allow their 12-15-year-old children to drink small amounts of alcohol at family meals.

Read the passage on zero-tolerance to youth drinking. As you do, think critically about the claims that are made, especially the nature of the evidence that's used.



Critical Thinking?

Critical Thinking is concerned with the significance of claims that are made - it is a questioning way of thinking. By asking questions, we try to make things clearer. By making things clearer, we can make judgements as to the quality of claims that are made and any judgements that are made from them.

This author supports zero-tolerance to youth drinking. Is he right?

It's often argued that it is a good thing to allow older children (those between the ages of 12-15) to have a small glass of wine with their dinner at family meals. This argument claims that the 'Mediterranean way' of doing things (like in Italy, Spain, and France) ensures that children develop a healthy attitude to alcohol, seeing it as something to be enjoyed sensibly.

But this argument doesn't stand up to recent evidence. In a joint US-Australian study*, almost two thousand 12-13 year-olds were studied. Those in the US were in Washington State, a state that recommended parents use a zero-tolerance policy towards this age-group drinking. Those in Australia were from Victoria, a state that used a 'harm-minimization' policy which sees alcohol as part of normal adolescent development and thus encourages parents to supervise their children's drinking as a way of promoting responsible drinking.

After one year almost twice as many of the Australian teenagers (67 per cent) had drunk alcohol in the presence of an adult than had those in the US group (35 per cent). The study also looked at what it called 'alcohol-related consequences' (including vomiting, passing out, and fighting). After a further year, it was found that 36 per cent of the Australians had experienced these consequences, compared to only 21 per cent of the Americans.

It is clear from this study that the policy of 'harm-minimization' doesn't work. So adults should adopt a strict zero-tolerance approach to alcohol with younger teenagers.

*'Influence of family factors and supervised alcohol use on adolescent alcohol use and harms: similarities between youth in different alcohol policy contexts', Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs, Vol 72, issue 3, May 2011



How should we approach an evaluation of this argument?

Critical Thinking is centrally concerned, as Ennis puts it, with 'the correct assessment of statements'.

So how can we assess the author's statements?

1. We must question the evidence used to see if it has other significant results:

Does the evidence show that 'harm-minimization' has a higher risk than zero-tolerance of young people not only drinking alcohol but also of having 'alcohol-related consequences'?

2. We should ask questions about the bigger picture for all the points raised:

Can we generalise from a study of US and Australian 12-13 year-olds and apply the results to those in other countries?

Do we need to know about how 'harm-minimization' and zero-tolerance worked? (For example, how much alcohol was allowed under the first of these?)

Do we need to know whether the young people saw their parents drinking at home?

Do we need to know whether alcohol was available in the home?

3. We need to ask what important evidence has the author missed out:

The finding about how many of the teenagers had 'drunk alcohol in the presence of an adult' is perhaps not surprising at one level. However, only two-thirds of the Australian young people 'had drunk alcohol in the presence of an adult' even though 'harm-minimization' allowed (indeed encouraged) this. Furthermore, a third of the US group had done this, even though a zero-tolerance policy does not allow it.

What are called 'alcohol-related consequences' are part of what the study calls 'harmful consequences' of alcohol. The ones detailed in the argument can be seen as fairly extreme (especially passing out and fighting). It would be helpful if the above argument had provided some detail on the less extreme consequences.

As with any study on alcohol use, there are the issues of honesty in reporting. Though the figures are usefully different between the two groups, we need to know whether 'harm-minimization' is likely to lead to young people having a greater willingness to admit to drinking (and to having had its consequences) compared to those where zero-tolerance is stressed.

4. We must question whether any other approaches should be considered:

What about the issue of the general acceptability of alcohol in the two states? (For example, is alcohol more tolerated in Victoria than in Washington State?)

What about the ease of availability of alcohol? (In Australia it can be legally purchased by those 18 or over; in the US, it cannot be legally purchased by those under 21.)

What about the price of alcohol? (The relatively low price of alcohol is often used as part of the general explanation for the high level of teenage drinking in the UK.)

What about health education programmes in the two states?

5. We can then identify the assumptions made by the author:

Assumptions are a special part of arguments in Critical Thinking. If you're not sure what's meant by the term, then have a look at Chapter 4 of 'Critical Thinking for Students' (pages 33-38) by Roy van den Brink-Budgen. Here are two assumptions that are needed.

The higher level of drinking amongst young teenagers in Victoria compared to those in Washington State is caused (at least in part) by the 'harm-minimization' policy.

The lower level of drinking amongst young teenagers in Washington State compared to those in Victoria is caused (at least in part) by the zero tolerance policy.

As we can see, evaluation of evidence (and arguments using it) is a very creative exercise. It encourages us to ask questions about what the evidence might mean, what else it might mean, and what more we might need to know.

Look out for more of these Critical Thinking PDFs for students. In addition, have a look at the books and other resources featured on the if...then ltd website: www.ifthen.co.uk.

If...then Ltd

if...then Ltd has been active in the field of Critical Thinking for over ten years. We allow Critical Thinking to develop freely, by stressing its hugely creative potential.

Visit our website at www.ifthen.co.uk or call us on 01473 748 014 for more information on how developing Critical Thinking will change your outlook for the better.

- Critical Thinking
- Teaching Aids
- Educational Training
- Books
- CDs
- Games

- twitter
- facebook
- www.ifthen.co.uk
- +44 (0)1473 748 014

