

Children in Pubs: Possible Strategies to ‘please some of the people some of the time’

Pubs, especially village pubs, invite people from near and far, locals, holiday walkers, and family groups who often, today, include babies and toddlers. The law says that all children may enter a pub providing they are accompanied by a responsible adult and are intending to eat in the pub. All persons 14 or over are also entitled to use a pub providing they intend to eat in the pub unaccompanied. It is obvious that the pub must be providing food and if it is not doing so and if they do not have a children’s certificate young people under 16 are not allowed in the pub. It is unclear what might be the extent of the meal they should order. All persons 16-17 may consume alcoholic beverages (beer, wine and cider, not spirits) if accompanied by a responsible adult who orders it and they are eating. (In Scotland no adult is required). Again, the nature of the latter is not clear. However, all these permissions are at the discretion of the licenced publican.

In his book on ‘The Local: A History of the English Pub’ Paul Jennings notes that the history of young people in pubs is varied. An 1830 act of parliament even allowed weaker beer for children, women and servants that could be sold without a licence as they forbade the sale of spirits to under 16s. However, during the late 19th century village pubs became less used by women, particularly in rural areas where the Victorian culture disapproved of women and children in pubs, although later some bars were reserved for women. Then the 1908 Children Act banned under 14s in all bars. In the late 20th Century there the provision of family rooms separate from the bar area was allowed and by 1984 between 2500-3000 of such rooms had been reported as existing. Ten years later so-called children’s certificates were introduced, which could be granted by licensing justices to allow children under 14 in bars where meals were sold, provided the ‘environment’, was suitable for them. The 2003 licensing act then effectively ended restriction. Accompanied children were now to be allowed, unless conditions specific to the premises forbade it.

The historical trend was towards greater restriction. From the late 1950s this was reversed in the ways I’ve shown. Transfer of responsibility for licensing matters from the Home Office to the Department for culture media and sport in 2001 was symbolic of the changes that had been taken. The licensing act of 2003 ended the 450-year jurisdiction of the justices in a radical transformation of the system. Licensing powers transferred to local authorities, the justices licence replaced by separate licences for person’s and premises and the latter given individual operating schedules. All applications were to be granted unless objections were received.

We are now in a phase where all children are welcomed in most pubs if accompanied by a responsible adult and those over 14 may come alone if requesting food. Many pubs are now places, where families go for long meals and some pubs provide outdoor play areas. Most pubs provide some children’s games and entertainment although many bring their own in the form of digital gaming devices and internet connected tablets. Children’s parties are now held in pubs with some parents and friends bringing their own birthday cakes. In one pub the following took place Sunday afternoon about 5pm.

It’s nearly 5pm on a Sunday in late September. A large family arrive for a child’s party in a dining room at the west end of the pub. There are at least 6 children under 8 and they occupy one table with drawing materials and tablets. The adults sit at an adjacent table chatting. They even bring their own chocolate cake and ask the staff to provide a plate and serviettes. When the meals arrive, the parents eat on their table and children on theirs. There were no other customers in this bar.

Another cross generational group arrive with at least one small child and spread themselves from on the outside tables drinking and taking photos. Eventually they take up their table in a small dining room at the furthest eastern end of the pub. A third group join them with 3 youngsters at the other table in this east end bar. A fourth group arrive and are placed in another small room with two tables between main east end bar and the main bar in the middle of the pub. It appears that the publican has kept the main bar free of children, which is occupied by 8 or so adults. Although the central bar is child free the high-pitched wails and voiced delights still permeate the main bar like the experience of an outdoor playground. Those left in the main bar carry on their quiet conversations, perhaps grateful that they are in the 'quiet bar' but aware that this is a community pub. There are, at 5.30pm 27 adults in the pub and 14 children; more than 50% are children under 10 and 80% of them are under 5. Our village pubs survive by servicing the whole community, often all at the same time.

The Good Pub Guide 2016 carried a critical article about children in pubs written by the editor Fiona Stapley. She suggested that the ambience of the 'British boozier is being ruined by screaming babies and children whose parents allow them to run riot, according to disgruntled licensees and customers'. She argued that badly behaved, unruly children was the number one bugbear cited in a survey by the compilers of [The Good Pub Guide 2016](#). She suggested that the overturning of the pre-1995 ban on children under 14 being allowed in pubs in England and Wales has helped increase food takings, with the introduction of family dining, but the survey results suggest that there may be an appetite for a return to a time before the rules were relaxed. She noted that landlords welcomed families, but 'sometimes with their fingers crossed behind their backs'. She said: 'I think it's something that's been irking people for a long while. Most children are good in pubs, most are warmly welcomed. It's this small persistent minority that spoils it for everybody,' she said. She noted that 'There may be someone sitting with a pint and a paper that doesn't want to have a child running around unchecked, tripping up waitresses carrying food, bumping into tables and screaming'. Stapley, herself a mother-of-two, said several pubs addressed the issue by having adult-only or family areas. She said it was parents' responsibility to keep their children under control and respond reasonably to problems. One customer's response to the survey said: 'My peaceful lunch by the fire with a pint was totally ruined by a child running around whooping and tripping up staff – and when asked to quieten down by the landlord, the poor man faced abuse from over-protective parents, ridiculous!'

The emotive nature of the issue was highlighted in July when [the Waterfront](#) in Burton upon Trent, Staffordshire, decided to bar under-fives from the pub completely and allow under-14s inside only until 7pm. A [Facebook group](#) calling for a boycott of the pub attracted dozens of members. Waterfront manager, Megan Morrish, said the decision was 'made as a direct result of feedback from our customers. Some people were disappointed at this, but the move has been welcomed by the vast majority, including couples with young children. It certainly hasn't adversely affected our business'.

One comment often heard is that parents are at fault for not controlling their children and supervising them strongly enough. However, there have been social and cultural changes that make that more problematic.

According to Valentine (2008) who wrote about 'Young people and cultures of alcohol consumption in rural environments', at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries parents have sought closer, less hierarchical relationships with their children with the consequence that some of their 'natural' authority has been eroded. Rather than laying down

the law with their children parents are more willing to invite discussion and to negotiate their relationships. As such several studies have suggested that children have an increasingly powerful voice in terms of patterns of household consumption and some writers even go so far as to suggest that in the context of individualisation the balance of obligations has shifted between the generations. Rather, than children having a responsibility to be dutiful sons and daughters, the onus is on parents to maximise their children's potential by providing them with an idyllic childhood (in mainly material ways) and all opportunities that they themselves were denied. Thus, the liberal consensus that it is rural parents' responsibility to encourage sensible drinking rather than total avoidance of alcohol reflects both a reluctance to assert a heavy-handed traditional, 'do as I say but not as I do', approach, and a general desire to try to ensure that their offspring maximise their enjoyment of their youth, for example, in this case by facilitating their leisure opportunities.

In terms of rural life, alcohol plays a significant part in local culture. The pub has traditionally played an important role in village communities as a social space, especially for men. Despite broader socio-economic changes in rural communities the lack of entertainment and leisure spaces in the countryside mean that the pub, as well as increasing home-based alcohol consumption, provide the focus for many adults' social lives. As such young people's drinking - in pubs and in informal spaces - is not only tolerated but in many cases regarded as normal behaviour by adults aware that their children (like themselves) have limited other social opportunities.

However, a new aspect of social life has developed alongside these developments. The era of 'customer being king' is a dominant trope, e.g.: railway users are no longer passengers carried by a company responsible for their charges but customers who have a lot of unlimited choices. Consequently, we have seen the introduction of 'Quiet Carriages'. In the pub arena customers enter a pub and take over a space with their group on the understanding that they have chosen it and are renting it for a limited period. This applies to the whole space of the pub not just their sitting or standing place. Their children, they presume, can also take control of the space available.

Children are now allowed in all parts of most pubs and they express ownership by clambering on to foot rails to see over the bar and occasionally order drinks; sometimes using the whole area as a playground. Toddlers are often allowed to wander round the bar from time to time, followed at a distance by a parent, waving and saying hello to all and sundry and everyone engages them as do the bar staff while carrying hot plates. One enterprising youngster took control of the bar space by parking her dolls buggy in front of an unlit fire while the whole family sit down to Sunday lunch. She ministered to her charges from time to time bringing them to the table for her mother to caress as the family conversation continued. They open their gaming machines at the dinner table and take ownership of the space by allowing strange chimes and voices to emanate from their tablets. They are sometimes encouraged to join in the merry throng by playing noisy games with adults with the occasional shriek or quiet games such as chess and cards, seeing the pub as their third place alongside home and school (A Sunday pm).

The whole family regard the pub as a public space and publicans appear to have ceded control of their space to the customer as part of their survival strategies.

We haven't really had any problems with kids. Sometimes on a Sunday afternoon the parents will be in here, and they'll sit chatting and they will let the kids run around, if there's no-one else in the pub, that's fine. But if there are other people in the pub and it's bothering them, yes, I would expect them to sit. We have loads of

babies in here. Yeah, it's no problem. You know, we're really, sort of, kid-friendly in that way. I love them, (Publican).

Busy Friday nights are now often family evenings,

It's Friday night at the R&C and at 6.30 there are four women sat on the settle and table in the middle of the bar with three young children occupying a low table next to them playing some board games. Another trio occupy a bench and table opposite the bar and a couple arrive and sit around the corner from the main bar. There are eighteen tables spread through this long L shaped bar approximately 50yds long and the other end of the L being 15 metres long. On this night four of the tables are reserved. A local worker stands at the bar drinking. Five young teens arrive with father and two women and the youngsters make themselves at home by disappearing to the Boules room. The girls re-join the family as it grows bigger. There is a sound of pounding feet as one of the younger girl's sprints through the bar to get the menus. Another regular greets one of the large companies with a kiss as they are surprised to see each other. All the tables are set for dinner with wine glasses and paper serviettes occupy the space between the cutleries in a tetrahedron shape. The lighting is subdued with lots of wall lights (Fri evening).

Again, children can roam freely,

Their children start chasing each other but their mother gently stops them, and another party takes up a reservation. The babe screams again but perhaps the music, the chatter, the sound of the open kitchen shades it slightly. The whole cacophony indicates a busy, thriving pub as the four bar-staff serve drinks and deliver meals plus the open kitchen staff of at least 3. People are constantly moving through the pub as the kitchen is at one end and the tables surround the bar, which is in the middle, and extend from it into a dining area at the other end.

Another fellah strides in with two young girls who dance their way into the pub as if it was their local and so it probably is. In amongst this central hubbub the main reception worker can be seen pouring water from a jug for people at another reserved table that has been filled.

One of the central infants is encouraged to rock in a small rocking stool. The girls sip orange through straws as they make their way outside for 'some fun'. The children and the bar group leave at 7 although one woman remains with her quiet babe at the bar together with the boy in the rocking chair and their dad who is with them. The girls come back in, park their drinks and wonder around the bar. Our food arrives. A local couple arrive and greet the woman cuddling her babe at the bar and they greet each other warmly while the babe crawls onto the to play with the beer mats. It's a real local. The girls continue to roam freely, the infant carts his stool around and more locals pile in to greet the couple and their children and the other newly arrived couple. The screaming baby leaves with her family but the cacophony of chatter, enthusiastic greetings, occasional outbursts of laughter kitchen activity, background soul music, occasional high pitched voices of the children, overhead comments about dishes with almonds and 'good menu' from a group drinking wine - all go to construct a living environment full of joy and pleasure, (Sat-pm).

It is clear that young people and children are being welcomed into our pubs to meet social and cultural changes and to ensure the survival of all pubs, but village ones in particular, due to falling footfall due to locals drinking at home along with lots of home entertainment, the introduction of drink and driving laws and the lower prices of alcohol in supermarkets. The

behaviour of very young children in our pubs cannot be restricted or contained as easily as older children, say from 10 onwards. Babies cannot help crying and screaming no can infants from 2-7 be restricted from expressing delight and enjoyment as well as frustration and self-expression in family groups. Arguing that parents should control very young children is not possible, but they come to the pubs with their young families because it suits them, and the pubs welcome them.

Some pubs do have child restrictions: a town pub locally has notices on all the tables concerning the responsibilities of parents for their children and all those under 14 are supposed to leave the premises by 7pm. A village pub has a notice on the door of their main bar which says no children under 14 are allowed in it. Another village pub did restrict children to the dining room and the Bell has an 18 and over only bar.

So, is there anything that can be done to allow the adult experience in our pubs less child dominant? The answer is probably no but is there any way the child influence can be ameliorated. Clearly there are several possibilities.

- 1 Publicans could designate 'child free bars or areas'. The problem with this phrase is that it sounds as if the children are diseased and our pubs cannot afford to give that impression.
- 2 Publicans could more positively designate specific bars or areas Adult environments/bars/areas. One slight problem with this option is that it appears to exclude those over 14 and Adult/Teen Only Bars is a mouthful and clumsy. Perhaps an area could be designated the Quiet area like Quiet Carriages on trains. They might also include no noisy phones as well of course. However, how do you define 'quiet' and how do you reinforce it when some of the adults are making more noise than the children. Nevertheless, some sort of positive statement such as a 'Conversation area' might work, and parents would surely respect it for they once used pubs without children.
- 3 Another less obvious option is to do what the publican did in the first example where there were four children's/family parties taking place. The publicans reserved spaces for them at the extremes of this pub or they could have put them altogether in one end area of the pub furthest from the main bar. In the latter option they could then keep the other end of the pub child free without anyone really noticing. Something along these lines would entail all the staff enquiring of people reserving tables whether they had children under 14. The pub mentioned above has a carpet in one end bar and so will not allow dogs in it, so it is possible to employ some criteria being applied to certain pub areas.
- 4 Allied to the last suggestion pubs could put reserved labels on all tables in the main bar or the designated quiet area and direct unreserved parties to the appropriate area for children and without children (or dogs). If anyone queried it, they could politely say that they keep a specific area for quiet conversation and for their regulars who use the pub to catch up on their reading.
- 5 Another suggestion from the AH is to put up notices or leaflets on the tables indicating the sort of culture that they find acceptable, particularly mentioning the comfort, consideration and experience for other customers in the pub. This puts the onus on the parents to ensure an appropriate atmosphere and ambiance.

An approach that publicans abhor is any statement that is a negative one, i.e.: that has 'no' in the phrasing or implies obvious restrictions. They prefer a more positive message such as 'this is our quiet area'. In this way the customer makes the decision to enter it or not.

However, some publicans may well see this as a possible reduction in income and prefer to accept children wholeheartedly and providing solutions to noisy infants.

I think in order to survive you encourage all forms of custom. You can't say no to a family of six, you just can't, and if that means that there are four children in the dining room, so be it. I never really see the answer as being no, I always like to say yes, because then you can see what the demographic is that's interested in being in your pub, and it's true, recently I've noticed it's more – especially on the weekends – it's quite family orientated. We've got a games box with Connect 4 and things like that for children. I've noticed that especially younger children when they cry or get upset, it's nice to have something to hand to them to quieten them down a little bit. We've got a farm in a tin on the windowsill which has saved many a soundscape. Yeah, well, they're here, you can't pretend they're not here. I think food brings families, and that's the simplest way to put it, because we've had to focus more on food in order to keep the numbers up (Publican).

Nevertheless, how about using some 'nudge theory'. We, could publicise examples from pubs we have seen or know about who are using strategies to deal with this issue. However, any change over a pub's atmosphere and ambiance is the publican's decision but we should be supportive if they acknowledge it is an issue.

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References

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