

# AFTER SHOCK

When Sam Hart found her 14-year-old daughter comatose from alcohol it left her confused and scared. What had she done wrong? Here, she looks at the tricky balancing act of dealing with kids and drinking.

I was in a restaurant when I got the phone call. It was the mother of my daughter's best friend. "I think you'd better go home. Meg's very drunk." I was confused. My daughter Meg was 14 and as far as I knew had never had so much as a sip of shandy. "What do you mean drunk?" I asked stupidly. "I mean, how much has she had?"

"Half a bottle of vodka and some Strongbow. She's in quite a bad state," she replied. I can't exactly remember leaving the restaurant but luckily the two friends I was with paid the bill, collected my things and guided me to the car. During the five minute, yet seemingly interminable, drive home I tried to piece together the events of the evening. I had gone out about seven leaving Meg and her best friend Lara home alone. They were, as far as I knew, planning to watch DVDs, eat popcorn and drink 7-Up.

Instead, it transpired, they had got hold of some alcohol and Meg had drunk herself into oblivion. The evening had ended with Meg being violently sick and Lara putting her to bed before, in a panic, stumbling her way home alone across the city.

Arriving home I hurtled upstairs, ignoring the widening puddle of vomit, shards of broken glass and (bafflingly)

slices of bread that littered the floor (it turned out that Lara had tried to force feed her in order to 'soak up the alcohol'). Meg's room at the top of the house resembled an abandoned squat. Never tidy at the best of times, it was now strewn with sodden towels, empty bottles and piles of rubbish (Lara had enterprisingly emptied the waste bin for Meg to use as a sick bucket.) My little girl was comatose on her unmade bed; grey and clammy – her hair clogged together with her own vomit. Her fingers (which it seemed had only yesterday been squashing playdough into pretend tea cups) stunk of cigarettes. It took half an hour for Meg to recognise me. She wasted a good deal of her alcohol-soaked breath exhorting me not to tell her mum. "She'll be really cross," she slurringly assured me. But she was wrong – I wasn't cross. I was confused, frightened and utterly clueless about what to do next.

Children have always drunk alcohol. Before the advent of safe public drinking water, children and adults alike drank small beer, a low-alcohol drink, to avoid water-borne diseases. Women in the 18th century would regularly dose their children with gin to keep them sedated while they were at work. Smoking and

drinking were compulsory for boarders in one 17th century school and pupils were beaten for not drinking their ration of beer. And in the first half of the 19th century, Helen Graham, the heroine of Anne Bronte's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, is roundly mocked for not allowing her young son to drink wine: "I credited you with more sense. He will turn into the veriest milk-sop that was ever sopped."

Nowadays it is legal to give children alcohol at home from the age of five and parental attitudes seem to veer from a complete ban on drinking for under-18s, to teenagers being occasionally allowed a glass of wine at dinner. At the other extreme there are parents who positively encourage their children to drink. I spent an uncomfortable couple of hours in the summer watching the world cup with a friend who seemed to be intent on getting her 14-year-old son drunk during the match: "Do you want a beer? Are you sure? Go on – have a beer." Another mum I know bought her son a crate of beer for his 15th birthday. Research by Drinkaware has shown that one in five parents have bought alcohol for their children in the belief that it will help them keep tabs on their drinking.

The official advice on the 'continental approach' of allowing children a little





## ANOTHER MUM I KNOW BOUGHT HER SON A CRATE OF BEER FOR HIS 15TH BIRTHDAY.

alcohol with meals is ambivalent. “There is some evidence that the younger someone is when they start drinking, the more likely they are to develop alcohol-related problems,” according to the charity Drinkaware, “But this evidence is not conclusive. If you have older teenagers who are already drinking, you might prefer them to be somewhere you can keep an eye on them. Allowing them to have some low strength beer at home with their friends may be better than them being out on the streets drinking.” But in 2009 Chief Medical Officer Liam Donaldson warned that children under 15 shouldn’t drink at all, claiming that drinking at a young age can damage developing brains.

And experts agree that teenage drinking is a significant problem. Although the number of teenage drinkers is reducing, those that do drink are consuming more – with significant health implications. According to the charity Alcohol Concern, underage drinkers knock back the equivalent of 6.9 million pints of beer each week with an estimated 630,000 11- to 17-year-olds drinking twice or more per week. The number of under-18s admitted to hospital due to drinking increased by 32% between 2002 and 2007, costing the health and ambulance service £19 million per year both in terms of immediate damage such as alcohol poisoning and injuries. Teenage drinkers are also more likely to engage in risky behaviour such as crime, unprotected sex, misuse of other substances and anti-social behaviour.

There are of course strict licensing laws to protect minors from the effects of alcohol, but despite this 60 per cent of children have managed to buy alcohol in a pub or off licence. The Challenge 25 scheme introduced in 2009 encourages retailers to ask for ID if a young person looks under 25 but this is not mandatory and no guarantee against unscrupulous shop owners determined to carry on selling alcohol to children.

In Meg’s case, she and Lara had walked a mile or so to an off licence which was known for selling to underage drinkers: “Everyone at school goes there.” The shopkeeper asked them their age and questioned them when they said they were 18. When they capitulated and claimed to be 16, he produced a bottle of vodka from under the counter. The vodka turned out to be bootleg and it is hard not to draw the conclusion that the shop had a policy of deliberately selling pirate alcohol to children. The matter is now in the hands of the police.

New government proposals are hoping to crackdown on such practices by giving police the powers to permanently shut down premises which persistently sell to children. But closing dodgy off-licenses will not stop teens drinking. Pushing boundaries and taking risks is a normal part of teenage life. “Don’ worry I’m jus’ sperimentin,” as Meg drunkenly explained. Teenagers also drink to fit in with their peers, to lose their inhibitions, to cope with stress and because it’s fun. In short, children drink for many of the same reasons that adults do. But adult responses often focus on

the anti-social behaviour caused by under-age drinkers rather than real and frightening health implications. Some local authorities have taken steps to address the this, through initiatives such as “Operation Park” in Brighton and Hove in which police patrol the city’s parks in search of under-age drinkers, making referrals to parents and health professionals where necessary. And youngsters arriving intoxicated at the city hospital’s A&E department are offered support from drug and alcohol services.

But shop-keepers, police and substance misuse agencies can only shoulder so much of the responsibility. Experts agree that parental guidance and talking honestly and openly about the effects of alcohol is vital. In this I failed my daughter. Meg had no idea about the relative strength of vodka, that drinking on an empty stomach is a bad idea, the importance of keeping hydrated or what constitutes a unit of alcohol, because I hadn’t told her. I held the view that drinking alcohol was unacceptable at Meg’s age and that talking about it would legitimise its use. I had naively believed that there was no need to have the ‘alcohol conversation’ until she was older. But according to Drinkaware: “It’s best to start early... research shows children’s openness to their parents’ influence changes dramatically as they grow up. Between the ages of eight and 12, children generally accept what their parents say about alcohol. However, 13 -17 year-olds increasingly pay attention to their friends.”

The influence of parents’ own drinking habits is also key and, if I’m honest, Meg has from an early age spent many festive occasions watching various relatives (including myself) descend into drunken merriment, whilst being told that on no account must she do it herself – a strategy which on reflection seems obviously doomed to failure. My new approach is to try to encourage safe drinking habits whilst at the same time steering Meg and her 10-year-old brother Joe away from alcohol – a tricky balancing act. Perhaps fortunately for Meg her hangover was so severe she has vowed never to drink again. And Joe says he is ‘never ever’ going to drink because ‘it’s for losers’. Needless to say – I won’t be taking his word for it.

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