

EMERGING NEW PROBLEM: YOUNG GIRLS' DRINKING

Barbara F. Meltz recently wrote an article in the 8/11/05 Boston Globe: "Alcohol Study Says Girls are Outpacing Boys in Drinking." Her report provides some alarming observations as well as some helpful information and resources.

Last year, we were alerted to research and educator reports of an increase in bullying behavior in pre-school and kindergarten girls. Now, according to the latest AMA survey, teenage girls are more likely than boys to obtain alcohol illegally.

A few key facts to keep in mind:

1. The human brain does not stop growing until the early 20's.
2. Alcohol tends to inhibit that growth and interferes with memory and test-taking ability. It also appears to retard social and emotional maturation.
3. Girls are more likely than boys to obtain alcohol from their parents, misguidedly thinking it is innocuous.
4. A large survey of 8th and 9th grade girls showed that girls were more likely to binge than boys. A binge is defined as at least 5 drinks (usually beer) in a 2-hour period.
5. A further misconception and underestimation of the problem is the folk-wisdom conclusion that the only choice is between supervised drinking and unsupervised drinking, and abstinence is not an apparent possibility.
6. Because females have a lower level of stomach enzyme that breaks down alcohol than boys, they become intoxicated on less alcohol.
7. Because of the above enzymatic gender difference, girls are more susceptible to alcohol poisoning, hepatitis B, liver and heart disease; also menstrual cycles and fertility are adversely affected.
8. Not to be overlooked: sexual misconduct, reputation problems, unwanted pregnancy, and STD's.
9. Teen girls who drink more than five times per month are six times more likely to attempt suicide than girls who never drink.
10. Heavy-drinking girls are more likely than heavy-drinking boys to be clinically depressed.

So, what is going on among the young females in our country to account for this spike in drinking behavior? The answer: we don't know...but there are some possible explanations.

1. Girls grow up thinking that drinking alcohol is normal, glamorous and cool.
2. They watch TV reality shows where alcohol is prominent.
3. Videos and films targeted to young girls feature alcohol product placement.
4. Even Bratz dolls and My Scene Barbie feature pool and bar-side drinking scenes.
5. Popular TV shows watched by pre-teens such as "Seventh Heaven" and "Gilmore Girls" feature alcohol ads.
6. Young girls are specific marketing targets in popular teen magazines: Cosmo, In Style, Vibe, Vogue, and Entertainment Weekly; also advertisement on the radio music shows. David Jernigan, research director for the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Georgetown University (www.CAMY.org) stated: "Studies show that the more alcohol advertising teens are exposed to, the more likely they are to drink."
7. Alcopops are a 6-year-old marketers invention that make girls feel safe while getting alcohol. They are sweet, fizzy, and brightly colored with names like Skyy Bliss, Tilt, and Bacardi Silver. They are not safe. They have the same 5-7% alcohol as most beer.

What can parents do?

1. Karen Zalickas wrote about her own brush with an alcoholic death, "Smashed, the Story of a Drunken Girlhood." (Viking Press) She says, "If a daughter is old enough to go to a coed dance, she is old enough for a conversation about alcohol." Have your daughter (and you) read her book.
2. "It's not about turning off the TV or forbidding magazines," it's about watching the shows and reading what she reads, and having conversations...(KZ)
3. Girls in middle schools are insecure about their changing appearances, and they are looking for acceptance.
4. Be aware that Massachusetts has social hosting laws that hold parents responsible for underage drinking in their house.
5. A new book, due out Spring 2006, by Lyn Mikel Brown, Colby College gender researcher, "Packaging Girlhood, Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers Dreams." (St. Martins Press) Get it when it comes out.