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Should you let your teenagers drink?

As the Chief Medical Officer Sir Liam Donaldson says teenagers should never drink before the age of 15, one mother discusses whether this is realistic.

By Cassandra Jardine

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Whenever one of my four teenagers asks for wine with dinner, I smile and pour. Actually, I don't wait until they are teenagers. My 10-year-old has had the odd sip, though he's still at the stage of puckering his lips in horror.

This is not a policy of weakness. I'm not so regularly sloshed that I can't say "No". Like many parents, I believe it is the way to prevent my children becoming part of the British binge-drinking culture and falling victim to liver disease in their twenties or thirties.



Alcohol will be priced according to the number of units in an attempt to tackle binge drinking in Scotland Photo: Simon Roberts

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But now Sir Liam Donaldson, the chief medical officer, tells us we are wrong. He says that, before the age of 15, childhood should be "an alcohol-free zone". Bang goes the common "middle-class" (his words) dream of bringing up sophisticated continental-style drinkers who can take it or leave it. Granted, our faith in the French and Italian approach is out of date. Those countries are seeing a rise in binge drinking.

But it's not the parents with their watered-down wine who are the problem, it's the drinking that teenagers do outside the home. All over the Western world, they are heading off to parks armed with six-packs and alcopops – which mysteriously supermarkets still seem to sell them.

Then there are the parties. The ones at home are riotous enough, when parents are "in charge". The weak wine cup soon gets spiked and the food largely ignored.

But those in the "free-houses" – where the parents are away – are the menace. Alcohol has never been cheaper, or more readily available, so of course teenagers are experimenting with getting "wasted". That's what teenagers do. It seems grown-up and helps them get over the embarrassment of having nothing much to say. And it isn't just beer or white wine they are drinking. Vodka is as ubiquitous as mobile phones.

The figures on teenage drinking are so alarming – one in five under 16s being drunk several nights a week – that I can see why Donaldson is taking a stand. We now know that alcohol (like other drugs) affects the development of the still-pliable teenage brain. Most bad habits start in the teens, and a constantly drunk teenager is going to miss out on sport and homework. She is also more likely get pregnant.

But that doesn't mean a ban is the answer. As with drinking alcohol during pregnancy, it's a fail-safe position for the Government. By advocating total abstinence, Donaldson can't go wrong.

But any attempt to impose an alcohol-free zone on "children" under 15 could backfire, as the "Just say No" policy did with drug use in the 1980s. For one thing, there's an important distinction between children and teenagers. At 14, you can't just tell someone what to do and expect obedience. At least that's what my teenagers say.

"The younger you try alcohol, the less amazed you are when you finally try it," says my elder son, now aged 19, who launched his drinking career at 13 by getting embarrassingly drunk at a wedding. After a few reruns of that scene, and offers of wine with dinner, he seems to have adopted a reasonably sober approach to drinking.

My 13-year-old is equally adamant that a ban is folly. Some of her friends are going to parties with quarter bottles of vodka in their pockets. And which children are they? "The ones whose parents would be horrified if they had a drink at home," she says.

Of course it suits her to say that. Teenagers want as much freedom as they can get, but the casualties do seem to be those with the most repressive parents or starved of parental attention – or those with parents who drink far too much themselves. I'm now trying to wean myself off pouring a glass of wine as soon as I get back from work.

I'm glad that Donaldson has encouraged a debate about teenage drinking. We need to talk about the dangers over dinner, with or without a glass in our hands. When teenagers understand the risks, and feel their parents trust them, they should (fingers crossed) learn to be responsible.

My 14-year old, who got spectacularly drunk a year ago, recently announced that it was "the anniversary" of the last time she had a drink. I hadn't even noticed. I could now be feeling smug, but instead I am worried that, if she does start drinking again, she might go overboard like all those first-year university students who have been kept under strict control.

At least, if she does, her brain will be that much more developed, and the risks smaller.

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