

THE DAILY NEWS

Is underage drinking really a big problem?

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Published March 13, 2011

Chief LeeRoy Amador, of the Galveston Independent School District Police, was a highway patrolman for more than 25 years, all too often called to notify parents their teenager had been killed in an alcohol-related accident.

Lt. Marc Decatur, of the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission, in law enforcement since 1985, has been on many raids of underage drinking parties, seeing fashion-conscious teen girls with vomit in their hair. He's also investigated tragic alcohol poisonings.

Dr. Robert Chapman, consultant and educator based in Philadelphia, has been on the receiving end of a 2 a.m. call after a raid on a drinking party at a local hotel. He told the policeman, "If my daughter was drinking, I want you to arrest her. I want her to realize there is that consequence."

Dr. Peter Delany, research director in Maryland, has studied drinking in young teens, with disturbing findings. An estimated 709,000 youths in the U.S. aged 12 to 14 drank alcohol in the past month, with a vast majority of them (93.4 percent) getting their alcohol for free the last time they drank. More than 300,000 of the young teens got it at home or from family.

All four men are experts in their fields, dealing with the impact of underage drinking.

All are also parents.

After last month's misdemeanor indictment accusing a county official of providing alcohol to a group of girls at a birthday party, the men agreed to talk about this teachable moment. The main question posed — whether underage drinking in a controlled environment was wrong and if so, what should parents be doing instead.

Supply affirmation, not alcohol, sums up their advice. Teens just aren't wired to responsibly drink.

"The bottom line is, if you want to have healthy kids, they have to have a healthy environment, and you have to have enough respect for them to talk about these issues with them on a regular basis," said Delany, speaking by phone from his Rockville, Md., office.

The director of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, Delany has two children, including a teenage son.

"I don't want him to drink because he's still developing; his body is not fitted to do this," Delany said. "I want him to get to the point where he has a good set of judgments and a good set of skills that when he does start to drink, he's going to be in a place to make good judgments."

That place probably is not during the teen years, according to Chapman, clinical associate professor

and associate director of the Behavioral Health Counseling Undergraduate Program in the College of Nursing and Health Professions at Drexel University in Philadelphia.

“We’re finding that it’s not until the early 20s that frontal lobes (of the brain) are fully developed,” he said. “That’s the seat of judgment and wisdom with the ability to delay gratification, to assess different options and choose lower risk options.

“All of those things are not naturally developed in that 14-, 15- or 16-year-old. It’s an old myth that, well, teenagers can drink at 16 and therefore learn to drink responsibly. It’s not only untrue, it’s also very, very dangerous.”

Another myth lies behind the argument that European teens, introduced to alcohol early in their culture, have fewer problems, Chapman stressed. Europe reports higher rates of binge drinking and underage intoxication. The statistics make American teen drinkers look “relatively moderate,” he said.

Veteran lawman Decatur bristles at parents who wink and brush aside underage drinking.

“I don’t believe this is a case of ‘kids will be kids,’” the father of two said, speaking by phone from the TABC Houston District Office where he supervises enforcement employees. “Statistics show that for people under the age of 21, alcohol-related traffic fatalities are the No. 1 killer.

“Texas leads our nation. I don’t find amusement or humor in that. As a parent, it scares me. As a member of society, I am appalled. And as a police officer, I am ashamed.

“It is a serious matter, and for all too long we have as a society, in our culture, ignored it or minimized it. And that has to stop for the sake of our children.”

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Underage drinking laws

Penalties for minors

Minors who purchase, attempt to purchase, possess or consume alcoholic beverages, as well as minors who are intoxicated in public or misrepresent their age to obtain alcoholic beverages, face the following consequences:

- Class C misdemeanor, punishable by a fine up to \$500
 - Alcohol awareness class
 - Eight to 40 hours community service
 - 30 to 180 days loss or denial of driver’s license
- There is an exception — the Carson Starkey Medical/Good Samaritan Amnesty Policy named in honor of Austinite Carson Starkey, who died from alcohol poisoning after a fraternity hazing ritual. Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission agents will not cite minors for the illegal possession or consumption of alcoholic beverages if an individual seeks assistance because of a medical emergency or because a person has been a victim of sexual assault or other violent crime.

Penalties for providing alcohol to a minor:

- Adults (who are not the parent or guardian) and minors who give alcohol to a minor face conviction for a Class A misdemeanor punishable by:
 - a fine up to \$4,000, confinement in jail for up to a year, or both
 - automatic suspension of driver's license for 180 days upon conviction
- People 21 years or older (other than the parent or guardian) can be held liable for damages caused by intoxication of a minor younger than 18 if the adult knowingly provided alcohol beverages to a minor or knowingly allowed the minor to be served or provided alcoholic beverages on the premises owned or leased by the adult.

Source: www.tabc.state.tx.us

Advice to parents

- Talk early. "My son is 14, but I've been talking to him about this since he was about 4," said Dr. Peter Delany, of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. "He can probably quote the statistics as well as I can, and he sometimes does to his friends." Research indicates that between the ages of 9 and 13, children's views on drinking shift and some even start to experiment. They become more curious and ask questions. Conversation is most effective before children start drinking.
 - Talk often. Short, frequent conversations can have an impact, but make sure they're not focused on threats. "It shouldn't be, 'I'd better not ever catch you doing this or I'll break both your legs,'" said Dr. Robert Chapman, consultant and educator. "Parents need to talk in the first person. This is what I feel; this is what I know; this is what I wish; this is what I hope." Parents should grab teachable moments for "frank, open discussion, one of those discussions where you're attempting to generate more light than heat," he said.
 - Talk consequences with compassion. Lt. Marc Decatur, of the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission, advises giving children good reason for strict rules about alcohol. "Overuse or intoxication can lead to acute problems either from alcohol poisoning, acting inappropriately, losing control of oneself or even passing out where other people can take advantage of you, take your money, assault you, physically harm you, sexually assault you," he said. "There are so many different things that could happen. It doesn't happen every time, but it is a possibility."
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- Chapman also advises laying down the law, and then adding affirmation. "Let them know there are rules and when they're broken, there are consequences. But in the same breath, I'm telling my kids that you can never ever do anything that will make me stop loving you."
 - Get involved. "As a parent, encourage and support your child," said Galveston Independent School District Chief LeeRoy Amador, father of two grown children. "There are thousands of ways to have fun being involved with your teen without alcohol. Spend time with him/her such as hiking, biking, swimming, skiing, making music, playing cards."
 - Look at yourself. "You as a parent, have a lot of influence on your kids and the choices they make," Amador said. "Find teachable moments to talk to your teens about alcohol and drugs."

"If you don't, somebody else will."

Sources: samhsa.gov, stopalcoholabuse.gov, madd.org