



Drinking and Parenting

Use of alcohol is a much-heated topic of discussion. Ask almost anyone who drinks regularly how much they drink and they will dismiss their level of drinking by comparing themselves to people who drink more. Press for exact numbers and the usual reply is, "I'm a social drinker". Press for how often they socialize and what you may be told is that they only drink wine or beer. So pressing a drinker to quantify their drinking can be a lot like trying to catch air. The more you squeeze, the less you get.

Drinking is generally categorized into three levels: light, moderate and heavy. For a man, light drinking is considered about six standard drinks per week; moderate drinking is about 12 to 14 standard drinks per week and heavy as 22 to 24 standard drinks per week. Binge drinking is considered five or more standard drinks per occasion, at least once per month. Levels for women are about 2/3's those of men.

With regard to a standard drink, this means either 12 ounces of beer, four ounces of wine or one ounce of liquor. It is a myth that beer or wine is less harmful than hard liquor as what matters is the amount of alcohol consumed, not the form it comes in. It also doesn't matter whether one drinks alone or socially. It is the number of standardized drinks that matters when determining the risk of alcohol consumption on parenting. Light drinking is only a statement of quantity, not effect on parenting. Even light quantities of alcohol consumption can affect parenting. So as drinking increases, so too does the risk of poor parenting and poor outcomes for kids.

Truth is, a good many parents are drinking alcohol in quantities that contribute to poor parenting. Persons who are regular light drinkers may find their one or two drinks a day, or several on the weekend interferes with their time with the kids. It isn't being intoxicated that is necessarily the issue, but time drinking is time away from the children. Drinking can occur at a time when children may most require adult supervision such as after school or during weekend free time. Taken further, in addition to time away from the kids, more drinking can limit a parent's emotional availability to their children.

Hence, time away or emotional unavailability takes on the appearance of neglect. Further, even amongst parents who are only light drinkers, when their children are approaching drinking age, they will look at the parent's level of drinking as their starting point for what is acceptable. Imagine what teenaged children may consider acceptable if their parents were then moderate or heavy drinkers. So the more a parent drinks, the more their children may drink and the more the parent loses their moral authority to guide their children in their use of alcohol. Parents who drink and who tell their children not to drink or how much to drink will be viewed as hypocrites in their children's eyes. As children rebel or call their parents on their own drinking, the situation is then ripe for an escalation of parent-child conflict.

Parents are advised to review and rethink how much they drink, particularly if they do drink on a regular basis. While drinking parents are often the best at arguing why their drinking is harmless or not an issue, the simple fact remains that abstaining from alcohol provides the best moral position from which to guide their children. Understandably though, few drinking parents are going to relinquish drinking altogether. Hence if fathers are going to drink regularly, they are advised to drink less than six standard drinks per week and never more than three per occasion. Mothers should cut those numbers by a third to arrive at their suggested limits. Further, parents should have at least 2 drink free days per week.

Best reason to limit alcohol consumption: the love of your children.

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