

Wednesday, June 20, 2007 - 12:00 AM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.



Andrea Otanez / Guest columnist **Alcohol and teenagers: What's a parent to do?**

Do you ever wonder what you would do if your kid got picked up for underage drinking, especially if you didn't even know your kid drank alcohol? A wilderness camp exists for everyone, right?

While Lindsay Lohan and other young celebs weaved their way to the headlines and colleges emptied

for the summer, I got a headache thinking not only about all those morning afters, but how to help my own kids develop healthy habits if they choose to drink alcohol.

I had my first beer at age 18, on graduation night. Nothing ruinous ensued; in fact, the look on a girlfriend's face as I held the cup to the keg is the most remarkable memory. Later on she said she was disappointed in me because I hadn't been a drinker up to that point and therefore quite possibly caved to peer pressure and expected graduation behavior.

Had I caved? Probably. In so many circumstances, drinking is expected, and then you find out it is fun. And then you find out it can be disgusting and dangerous. But find out we do.

In our house, questions about alcohol use intermittently arise. Why do you drink wine? Will I drink alcohol? I try to make the most instructive use of those organic opportunities, but I also improvise like mad.

Maybe the answer is simple: No drinking until you are 21 because that is the law. That's a respectable approach, but reality requires a more nuanced discussion because booze is pervasive, even if a kid isn't exposed to it in the home.

When you start poking around for ideas and answers to this parenting question, two sides quickly emerge.

On one side you find groups such as the National Youth Rights Association (NYRA), a small nonprofit in Washington, D.C., whose Web site says it seeks to end discrimination against young people. According to NYRA, the legal drinking age of 21 is an ageist, hypocritical, neoprohibitionist policy that encourages alcohol abuse by giving people a rule to break while all around them other adults drink for fun, to relax, to celebrate, to socialize — often as part of their children's rites of passage.

Young people can drive at 16; they can own a shotgun, vote and go to war at 18; but they can't legally buy a beer until they are 21.

Health and safety advocates on the other end of the debate focus on the effects of alcohol on the developing brain, the dangers of drunken driving, the effects on schooling, the dangers of becoming an alcoholic if one starts drinking at a young age.

In a statement addressing the effectiveness of the 1984 federal act that established 21 as the minimum legal drinking age lest states want to lose federal highway funds, the American Medical Association says:

"A common argument among opponents of a higher minimum legal drinking age is that because many minors still drink and purchase alcohol, the policy doesn't work. The evidence shows, however, that although many youth still consume alcohol, they drink less and experience fewer alcohol-related

injuries and deaths."

In other words, the law is imperfect, but it's far better than the alternative. If the legal drinking age is lowered to 18, then the wink-and-nod drinking age drops to somewhere around 15. That logic only goes so far, of course, because some kids in middle school and high school drink.

Yes, we all know that wink-and-nod reality. I'd have to agree with critics who say the current legal drinking age breeds disrespect for laws and encourages clandestine binges.

Those are two key reasons why John McCardell, a president emeritus of Middlebury College in Vermont, wants drinking laws fixed. At www.chooseresponsibility.com, he advocates for a licensing system that gives 18-, 19-, 20-year-olds a "drinker's permit" in an effort to educate them about alcohol.

So how does all that prepare me for that conversation around the kitchen table? As long as the law is 21, why risk legal troubles even though I see no reason why the legal drinking age shouldn't be 18. Still, I won't be the mom who buys wine coolers and beer for my kids' parties — and I'll be damn mad if others furnish it at their parties.

If my kids have a beer on graduation night, I might not know it. And if they do tell me, I'll ask what kind and if it was cold enough.

Long before that, however, they'll know (they already do) that our extended family has a pattern of alcoholism, so be smart and careful. They'll also know — because I'll tell them — that alcohol in excess can make you depressed, fat, boring and vulnerable.

But the bottom line is clear: Drinking alcohol isn't the danger; abusing it is, and we all know young people are not the only ones susceptible to that.

Andrea Otanez is a regular contributor to Times editorial pages. She is the journalism instructor at Everett Community College. E-mail her at otaneza@gmail.com