

How Helicopter Parenting Can Cause Binge Drinking

The way some white professionals raise their children is exacerbating an alcohol problem on U.S. college campuses.



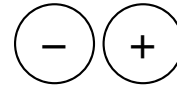
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SEPTEMBER 2016 ISSUE |

HEALTH

TEXT SIZE



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WAS A TEENAGER in the 1970s. It was a different time. We did not drink—or do drugs or have sex—in captivity. We did those things in the wild, away from our parents, in the danger and thrill of the dark, sacred night. Our parents understood that it was the beginning of the end: We were leaving them. Some of us had curfews, others did not—but either way, you could get a lot done by midnight. Beyond us, on the other side of high school, was some sort of future, probably more or less in line with our parents' larger plans for us, but maybe not. The average middle-class kid

(as we were called back then, meaning: a white kid whose parents owned a house and whose father was steadily employed) was not burnishing dreams of Princeton. Go to class, show up for the SAT, fill out the applications, and then enroll in the best, or the most interesting, or the farthest from home, or the cheapest college that lets you in. We didn't need much help from our parents to do those things. Which meant that at night, we were free. And we did many dangerous things. Mothers were not yet against drunk driving; cheerful ladies did not give you condoms at school. It wasn't an arcadia, and many times things went terribly wrong. But most of us survived.

Today, of course, all of that is different: Professional-class parents and their children are tightly bound to each other in the relentless pursuit of admission to a fancy college. A kid on that track can't really separate from her parents, as their close involvement in this shared goal is essential. Replicating the social class across a generation is a joint project. That's why it's so hard to break into the professional stratum of society: The few available spots are being handed down within families. From this has flowed a benefit that parents love—deep emotional closeness throughout adolescence, with no shadow of a future parting. Kids don't rebel against their parents anymore; why would they? Would you rebel against the concierge at the Hyatt?

Which leaves only the problem of the dark, sacred night. What to do about it? It's full of everything parents fear the most: physical danger, unknown companions, illegal substances, and the development of a separate and secret life. And so, to keep their children close, to keep them safe, and to ensure that they do not escape into the wild freedom of an adolescence

unfettered by constant monitoring, drinking in captivity has become a popular alternative. Drinking isn't like doing drugs—it's not something parents recoil from in horror. It's something they can make an accommodation for, and so they practice "social hosting," as the law refers to the custom: allowing teens to get hammered in the comfort and safety of the rec room. Let Charlotte and her pals suck down flavored vodka and giggle while watching Netflix; indulge Jack's desire to have a party in the backyard. Collect the car keys, make sure no one gets into trouble, peek out from an upstairs window, bustle into the TV room with a tray of alcohol-absorbent pizza bites, and then relax in the knowledge that the kids are all right. They have the freedom to experiment that they crave and the physical protection that your peace of mind requires.

Of course, not all parents are down with this approach, and so at high-school gatherings that include parents—sports events, back-to-school nights, college fairs—you can overhear the adults gingerly sounding out one another. They speak in a kind of code, but this is what they want to know: Are you a Good Parent or a Get-Real Parent?

Good Parents think that alcohol is dangerous for young people and that riotous drunkenness and its various consequences have nothing to recommend them. These parents enforce the law and create a family culture that supports their beliefs.

Get-Real Parents think that high-school kids have been drinking since Jesus left Chicago, and that it's folly to pretend the new generation won't as well. The horror stories (awful accidents, alcohol poisoning, lawsuits) tend to involve parents who didn't do it right—who neglected to provide some

level of adult supervision, or who forgot to forbid anyone to get in a car after drinking.

Get-Real Parents understand that learning to drink takes a while and often starts with a baptism of fire. Better for Charlotte to barf her guts out on the new sectional than in the shadowy basement of a distant fraternity house. On the nights of big high-school events, Get-Real Parents pay for limos, party buses, Ubers—whatever it takes to ensure that their kids are safe. What is an Uber except a new kind of bike helmet?

In the beginning, everyone is a Good Parent. Bring up teen drinking among parents of elementary-school students and it will elicit the same shiver of horror as the word *adolescence* itself. But slowly people start defecting. At first, it's easy to demonize the ones who chuckle fondly about their kids' boozy misadventures. But by junior year, it feels as though everyone is telling these funny stories. The Good Parents comprise a smaller and smaller cohort, one that tends to stay quiet about its beliefs. Get-Real Parents can be bullies—they love to roll their eyes at the Good Parents, so it's best not to expose yourself.

The top colleges reward intensity, and binge drinking is a perfected form of that quality.

Ridicule is not the only disappointment in store for the Good Parents. For one thing, high schools turn out to be more in the Get-Real business than they were a generation ago. Go to a parent meeting on some topic like “Teens and Drinking” and you're likely to get an earful about how to keep

your teen drinker safe. Teach her to recognize signs of alcohol poisoning in her friends; tell her it's always okay to call 911; advise her to check in on conked-out partygoers every 15 minutes or so to make sure they're just sleeping it off and not unconscious. The message doesn't involve any moral or emotional imperatives; it has to do only with not ending up dead or in jail.

Furthermore, the Good Parent who naively assumes that preventing a teenager from drinking will help him or her in the college-admissions stakes is dead wrong. A teenager growing up in one of the success factories—the exceptional public high school in the fancy zip code, the prestigious private school—will oftentimes be a person whose life is composed of extremes: extreme studying, extreme athletics, extreme extracurricular pursuits, and extreme drinking. Binge drinking slots in neatly with the other, more obviously enhancing endeavors. Perhaps it is even, for some students, necessary. What 80-hour-a-week executive doesn't drop her handbag on the console table and head to the wine fridge the second she gets home? Her teenager can't loosen the pressure valve that way—he has hours of work ahead. A bump of Ritalin is what he needs, not a mellowing half bottle of Shiraz. But come Saturday night? He'll get his release.

The top colleges reward intensity, and binge drinking is a perfected form of that quality. Moreover, it's highly correlated with some of the activities admissions officers prize most, such as varsity sports: High-school athletes are less likely to use drugs and more likely to drink alcohol than their fellow students. Colleges complain like hell about binge drinking, but their admissions policies favor the kind of kids most likely to take part in it.

BY 12TH GRADE, parents have made their decisions, and made peace (more or less) with the decisions of their peers. The year grinds on, seeming to last forever, until, abruptly, it's over. After an oddly moving blast of "Pomp and Circumstance" on a hot morning, there it is: childhood's end. The summer is a strange, liminal time, and then the cars are loaded up, the airplanes boarded, and the parents stand on green lawns in college towns and say goodbye. Now the teenagers are far from home, with only the remembered counsel of the people who love them most to help them negotiate what lies ahead.

College drinking, including extreme heavy drinking, has been a tradition since the 19th century. Because of this, it can be hard to convince middle-aged people that something has changed. But the consistent—at times urgent, at times resigned—report from college officials is that something has gone terribly awry and that huge numbers of students regularly transform the American campus into a college-themed spin-off of *The Walking Dead*. They vomit endlessly, destroy property, become the victims or perpetrators of sexual events ranging from the unpleasant to the criminal, get rushed off in ambulances, and join the ever-growing waiting lists for counseling. Depression and anxiety go hand in hand with heavy drinking, and both are at epidemic proportions on campus.

The National Minimum Drinking Age Act—the "21 law"—is often blamed for the college drinking problem, on the theory that it pitted students against campus authorities and drove drinking underground, where it became an extreme, ritualized behavior. But the truth is more complex. Overall drinking rates on campus have gone down since the law's passage

in 1984, as they have among 18-to-21-year-olds not in college. The law's public-health benefits are undeniable. And yet many of the students already primed to be heavy drinkers have begun consuming alcohol in the intense new manner, chasing not a high but oblivion.

How much are these students drinking? We don't know. In 1994, Harvard's College Alcohol Study established what is still the prevailing definition of a college binge: five or more drinks in a row for a man, and four or more for a woman. But while this measure may have been useful a quarter century ago, it's essentially useless today, when bingers often have 10 or more drinks in a night. The change on campuses may involve not the number of students drinking but the intensity with which they drink—by the traditional measure, fewer students are binge drinking, but of those who do, a sizable number are now doing so to the extreme. A study published in 2011 in the *American Journal of Health Education* found that 77 percent of college freshmen “drink to get drunk”—and what today's college student calls being “drunk” is oftentimes something an expert would define as being in a blackout.

Who are these students? By and large, they constitute the most privileged subset of undergraduates, and those who would (unwisely) emulate them. The students at the center of this culture are most likely to be the children of white, college-educated parents, young people whose free time is probably spent not working to help support themselves, but rather participating in certain activities, most notably Greek life and athletics. They are at the center of the most visible social scene on campus, and while their sorrows and travails unfold in private, their wild partying is a public spectacle.

Black students drink less than all other races on campus.

Some less privileged students look on in disdain, while others gaze in envy, imagining that if they only pour enough booze down their throats, they will join the crowds of wealthy white sorority sisters, with their polished hair and bouncy cheerfulness. But for these kids, who lack the layers of protection and support that cocoon the richer and whiter kids, the consequences can be harsh.

Black students drink less than all other races on campus. Why? The question hardly merits an answer. Drinking while black can be downright dangerous, as local police officers tend to take a dim view of young black people breaking laws. Last year, a black University of Virginia student sustained head injuries requiring 10 stitches after he was arrested by three state law-enforcement officers for the outrageous act of trying to enter a student bar. “I go to UVA, you racists!” he yelled at the men, blood streaming down his face. Not long after the Ferguson riots, at a New Hampshire outfit named Keene State College (87 percent white), a local event called Pumpkin Fest turned the area around the campus into a kind of war zone in which young people—including students from Keene and other local colleges—took part in a massive drunken riot that included throwing billiard balls and full bottles of alcohol at cops, pulling street signs out of the ground, setting fires, overturning a car, and reportedly threatening to kill police officers. In the disappointed characterization of Keene State’s president, the children failed to “pumpkin responsibly.” How

long would those behaviors be tolerated if they were committed by young black men?

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This kind of spectacle, with its confusing mixture of misery and social power, encourages Good Parents and Get-Real Parents to make their very different decisions. Good Parents want their children to avoid the unhappiness that binge drinking can result in. They may also wish to transmit to their children larger values—of abiding the law, or of religious practice, or of aligning themselves with activities that will uplift rather than diminish a person. Intuitively, the Good Parent understands something public-health research confirms: that when it comes to alcohol use, adolescents take their parents' counsel into strong consideration. Today's young people—unlike members of my own, '70s generation—don't ignore their parents' guidance on important matters; they seek it. Even if the child of a Good Parent decides to drink, she has a lodestar that many of her peers do not. When she wakes up in the mess and humiliation of a morning after, she thinks: *This isn't what my parents want for me.*

What about the Get-Real Parents? Don't they love their children? Of course they do. Some of them even think they're helping their kids by teaching them to drink while they're still at home—like “the Europeans,” or, more

specifically, “the French.” Leaving aside the fact that the French have their own burgeoning teen-drinking problem, the research shows that college binge drinking is a performative behavior, with its own customs and vocabulary and a high degree of intentionality. Kids don’t binge instead of drinking moderately; they do it in addition—they perceive the two behaviors as distinct. You can teach a young person to enjoy a glass of good wine with dinner, but this will not be a protective factor when it comes to binge drinking. It will probably be irrelevant. Kids don’t binge on pinot noir and braised lamb shanks. They binge on flavored vodka and cinnamon whiskey, and they do it until they puke. As for letting them drink heavily with their pals so they can “learn their limits”—the way parents did back in the day—that notion is out-of-date. The point of college binge drinking today is that there are no limits. Blacking out isn’t a mistake; blacking out is the goal.

The real question about these parents (many of whom pay for their kids’ alcohol, revel in their stories about the shit show, delight in emails from campus highlighting new services for the plastered, such as golf-cart rides back to the dorm by helpful safety officers) is this: Why have they so cheerfully handed over their children to this ugly and worthless experience?

To a large extent, what many Get-Real Parents are interested in is success. Ever since returning home from the maternity ward, they have been in the business of raising winners. Winners make varsity, winners take Advanced Placement classes, winners apply early decision to selective colleges, and winners are at the top of the social hierarchy at their competitive high schools—which means they boot and (more important) rally. Perhaps, for

some of the more mercenary and lucrative professions—including stock trading, investment banking, and high-stakes sales—there are actually benefits to heavy drinking. A binge drinker emerges from college both elevated and coarsened: educated enough to compete in the market and sullied enough by the hard knocks of binge drinking that he won't be too shocked by what he finds there.

No wonder these young people keep drinking. The hollowness at the center of their lives—the increasing abandonment of religion, the untethering of sexuality not just from relationships but even from kindness, the race to jump aboard the STEM express because that's where the money is, the understanding of eventual parenthood as something that will be subordinated to the management of two successful careers, and the understanding that their own parents care so little about them that they will happily allow them to sustain the kind of moral injuries that blackout behavior often engenders—would make too much consciousness hard for anyone to take.

What are these kids really vomiting up every weekend at their fancy colleges? Is it really just 12 shots of apple-flavored vodka? Or is it a set of values, an attitude toward the self and toward others, that has become increasingly hard for them to stomach?

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