

Target tipsy teens: Beers equal brain damage

Sunday, Jul. 9, 2006

SOME PARENTS believe that letting high schoolers drink at home keeps them safe. At least they are supervised and not on the road, right? Yet new research shows that those parents are probably doing lasting harm to their children. Alcohol is much more damaging to the teenage brain than previously believed, scientists now say.

"There is no doubt about it now: there are long-term cognitive consequences to excessive drinking of alcohol in adolescence," Aaron White, a Duke University assistant research professor, told The New York Times last week. "We definitely didn't know five or 10 years ago that alcohol affected the teen brain differently. Now there's a sense of urgency. It's the same place we were in when everyone realized what a bad thing it was for pregnant women to drink alcohol."

The brain is still developing in the teen years, and heavy drinking during that time impairs its development, scientists told the Times. Even moderate drinking can be dangerous. Teenage drinkers perform more poorly on cognitive tests than their counterparts who do not, have worse memories, and have an enormously higher odds of becoming alcoholics than peers who start drinking later in life.

One study found that 47 percent of people who began drinking before age 14 became alcohol dependent later in life, compared to only 9 percent of those who started drinking after they reached the legal drinking age of 21.

A sizable number of New Hampshire parents continue to violate the state's party host law, which forbids adults from holding parties at which underage kids drink. The common excuse from parents is that they want the kids to drink in a safe environment.

Now we know that there is no such thing as a safe environment for teenage drinking. Letting kids drink puts them at significant risk of suffering brain damage and developing alcohol dependence. Any parent who provides alcohol to minors is, in the broadest sense, guilty of child abuse. The law might not see it quite that way, but that's what it is. Do your kids a favor. Don't let them drink.

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