

Drink Parenting:

It is most encouraging to see the gradual change in social attitudes about drink driving. Gradually there are small shifts in our attitudes to drunken behaviour and its effects. As many of you are aware, there is an even greater scourge on domestic life and that is what I would call “Drink Parenting”. This is the kind of parenting that ensues when parents drink over the limit while their children are in their care. I am not just talking about parents being drunk – but parents who are ‘over the limit’ when small children are in their care.

If you are over the limit to drive you must equally ask yourself if you are over the limit to care for small children. The dark side of “drink parenting” is that children are affected in sometimes terrible ways. In psychology, the term Adult Child Of Alcoholics (ACOA) has become an established term to identify adults who have had to grow up dealing with the effects of a parents drinking. It is, in fact, an endemic problem in Irish family life. I would say one in five clients that I see in my work are adult children struggling in life with the various legacies of this problem.

If you allow yourself to see the effects of drinking through the eyes of a child, rather than that of an adult, you begin to get a sense of the problem. I know of no child that has ever enjoyed the sight, sound, or smell of their parents drunkenness.

But rather than trying to confine drink parenting to problem families or serious dysfunction, it equally applies to all of us who are casual about our drinking around our dependent children. You may say to yourself, as with driving, that a few drinks does no harm but if an emergency arises the under-the-influence parent is unable to react or function. It is my belief that when you have small children at least one parent should be under the limit.

There is a great deal of talk about teenage drinking and how terrible it is but most of it is quite hypocritical. The simple truth is that if something is bad for teenagers, it is also bad for adults. If something is bad, it is bad for all people. It is impossible for any adult campaign to address the problem of underage drinking and drunkenness while the adult world encourages and facilitates it. If teenagers should not get drunk, neither should adults.

I have often suggested that if the effects of problem drinking on children left physical rather than emotional scars then prohibition would have been a well enforced law centuries ago. But because emotional wounding is more or less invisible, carried in the quiet corners of a child’s heart, we permit ourselves to ignore it. But what if the dread, terror, fear, shame, anxiety, worry, over-responsibility, and stress experienced by a child growing up with an alcoholic parent or problem drinker were visible as bleeding wounds? Then we would have no drinking at all. None whatsoever.

It is interesting to note that many experts now do not find the term ‘alcoholism’ to be necessarily helpful. Many practitioners prefer the term ‘problem drinker’ because it is much easier to diagnose. A problem drinker is someone who continues to drink despite the negative effects it has on themselves or those close to them. What I find in my work is that a problem drinker will find excuses for his behaviour by trying to engage in a debate as to whether he is or is not an alcoholic. If he can prove to himself

that he is not an alcoholic then he can continue to justify his problem drinking. (“Look, I can stop drinking whenever I want, therefore I am not an alcoholic. Therefore, leave me alone to get on with my drinking!”). This argument is actually facile. The real issue is whether the drinking is upsetting the drinker’s family and those close to him/her. If he chooses to continue drinking despite this obvious distress, then there is a real problem.

The legacy of excessive drinking, drunkenness, and obnoxious behaviour left by any parent who camouflages his/her ignorant disrespect as ‘having a good time’ and ‘enjoying themselves’ are generations of children who grow up with the psychological scars of its effects.

The small child who understandably and naturally feels terrified, shamed, and rejected by its effects is told to pretend it is not happening. Like every child who is a victim of abuse, they grow up feeling that there is something wrong with them because they see and feel things that the adults around them suggest is not really there. The first rule in an ‘alcoholic’ family is “Do not feel”. So the small child has to make him or herself disappear and join in with the tragic family charade that “everything is fine”. It is often a tragedy too much for the vulnerable heart to bear.