



Wellingborough

HEADMASTER'S ARTICLE ON ALCOHOL AWARENESS

My recent letter draws attention to the presentation by Dr Aric Sigman as a provocative starting point for debate because of its clear message about the negative neurological impact upon the teenage brain of alcohol use certainly before the age of at least 16 and possibly up to the mid-20s, Dr Sigman's visit needs to be built upon. This is not a simple exercise to undertake and the low attendance (40 parents only across both the Senior and Prep Schools) at Dr Sigman's presentation perhaps suggests either a resignation or ambivalence on the part of parents.

As a starting point, parents might find it useful to access the references in The Senior School Guide to the School (misuse of Alcohol is mentioned on Pg 20 & 21 of the current Guide) and Point 8 in Code of Conduct for Out of School Visits which parents and pupils have signed already and which is available on the website.

Parents might find it of interest to read Dr Sigman's recently-published book "The Spoilt Generation" which controversially draws attention to parenting techniques, but his views regarding the negative neurological and biological impact of drugs and alcohol need to be considered; he is quite adamant in his assertions that alcohol is poisonous to nerve cells. Equally parents would find the website of an independent charity, www.drinkaware.co.uk, hugely informative in terms of setting out the facts about alcohol and under 18s as well as providing links to numerous teenage-related websites.

We are also conscious of teenage Mental Health issues and are aware of some young people drinking to relieve the stresses of teenage life such as impending examinations. Official Government advice is that under-15s should not drink at all; over 15s ideally should not drink either but if they do it should be no more than one day a week and they should drink below adult daily levels. The evidence which has been presented is that delaying alcohol use for as long as possible is the correct path. Again, our evidence is that our 6th form drivers exercise diligent responsibility in not combining alcohol and driving. For some, alcohol is to be avoided on all occasions at all costs through personal choice and that view is one to be respected and promoted, for others a sense of moderation is the preferred approach. Whilst understanding the reasoning behind both stances our greatest concern is over the drinking culture which accepts alcohol in a carefree manner and in particular condones a binge-drinking culture especially amongst those below the age of 18.

One could argue that as a Day School this area is actually wholly a parental responsibility and what occurs outside of the School day is no business whatsoever of the School. I would argue quite forcibly that alcohol use does, on occasions, impact upon School life: the effects of drinking are sometimes apparent the following day in class or on a Monday after heavy drinking at the weekend. Not only is academic progress therefore affected but also relationships are sometimes strained as a result. Therefore we in School must carry some responsibility and we are seeking to work with parents.

For our part we also host a number of School-sponsored social events where alcohol is available, albeit these are controlled occasions when only 6th form are allowed an alcoholic drink under supervision. For some teachers and parents even this is a step too far and we publicise the fact that we have had numerous highly successful "dry" events; the suitability of non-alcoholic drinks is, and will be even more forcibly promoted in the future. However, one is constantly aware of the danger of sending

mixed messages to young people and we are in the process of reviewing this whole question.

In School my attention is drawn to House Dinners and Charity Balls, Sports Dinners – (Hockey, Rugby, Cricket, Football etc) and CCF Dinners for example. We are duty-bound to exercise strict control at all of these events and pupils know that under no circumstances will anyone below 6th form be able to consume alcohol and the organizers might legitimately decide upon a completely “dry” event. In the future there will be strict penalties for anyone who abuses the ‘organisers’ rules.

Away from School I know that some parents have difficulty in saying “no” to requests for alcohol when hosting parties or they have difficulty in policing teenage parties. One hears of horror stories in the media about the consequences of parties where damage is done to property or, worse still, teenagers have to receive medical treatment.

The general principles which we will be seeking to publicise are:

- The promotion of the benefits of not drinking alcohol.
- No alcoholic drinks to be consumed at any School function by any non-6th formers.
- Any alcoholic drink consumed at an official School function to be strictly controlled by staff.
- No spirits to be allowed on site (other than at the Summer Ball which is organized by parents) or at any school function off site.
- No midweek social functions to be encouraged out of School and this to be communicated to parents.
- A parental acceptance that this includes Friday evenings because of the extensive co-curricular programme on Saturdays in particular and Sundays because of the lasting effect on academic work on a Monday.
- An acceptance that mis-use of alcohol at any official school function will be dealt with as a matter of seriousness through the School’s disciplinary procedure.
- A commitment on the part of parents and pupils alike to support the fact that an Alcohol Awareness Education is a significant feature of the personal, social and health education at Wellingborough School

The feedback from the WSSPA focused on:

- Some parents think that a total Friday night ban on social events would be heavy handed, as so many parties are held then. Obviously it is noted that many pupils have co-curricular or sports training or matches on Saturday, but these pupils should exercise restraint, rather than there being an active discouragement of all such gatherings.
- It was remarked that the talk by Dr. Sigman was extremely interesting and was pitched at the right level for the children. It didn’t merely say “Don’t drink because I say it’s bad for you!” It was suggested that some of the facts, comment and analysis be put on the School website for the benefit of those parents who were not able to attend.
- We consider the idea of a Parents’ Forum to be a good idea to provide a coordinated approach on this and hopefully other matters.

There was an agreement with the need for a strong message; the parents acknowledged that teenagers will often experiment with alcohol but the focus was on the consumption of excessive quantities, or the frequency of consumption and that we should all absolutely condemn binge-drinking.