



Learning About Drinking *Letters*

A collection of letters
from around the world



International Center for Alcohol Policies

Introduction

In March 2001, the International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP)* published a book called *Learning about Drinking*, which was edited by Eleni Houghton of ICAP and Ann Roche of the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction at Flinders University of South Australia. The book explores, from an international perspective, a variety of factors that can influence a young person's decision to drink or not, including family, religion, peers, the media, government and the alcohol beverage industry. It also addresses how these influences interrelate and what lessons the family and the alcohol education community might draw from this knowledge.

Learning about Drinking takes as its main premise the fact that drinking is a learned behavior. With the proper skills and experience, a young person can learn how to drink responsibly if that is what he or she chooses to do. One of the main conclusions of the book is the strong influence that parents and family can have on their children if they stay involved in their lives and set a good example, not just in the pre-teen years, but also as teenagers.

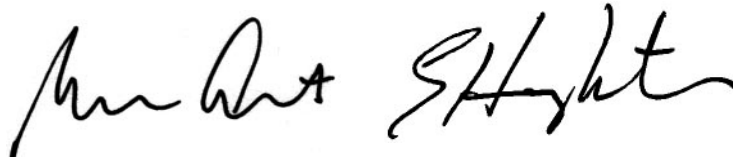
Following up on this publication, ICAP thought it would be interesting to ask parents or guardians from around

* The International Center for Alcohol Policies is dedicated to helping reduce the abuse of alcohol worldwide and to promoting understanding of the role of alcohol in society through dialogue and partnerships involving the beverage alcohol industry, the public health community and others interested in alcohol policy. ICAP is a not-for-profit organization supported by twelve major international beverage alcohol companies.

the world to write a letter to a young person regarding the advice they would give about alcohol. We asked people associated with the alcohol field to prepare these letters, stipulating the age and sex of the child to whom they were writing and to try to address the topic as a parent/guardian rather than necessarily from their professional position.

This compilation contains ten letters from professionals in Canada, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Mauritius, The Netherlands, Uganda and the United States of America. The affiliations of these professionals are noted in the back of the booklet for identification purposes only. ICAP made only very minor editing changes to standardize grammar and spelling. All views expressed in the letters are the views of the authors and not necessarily those of ICAP or its sponsors.

While most parents or guardians would probably prefer to address the issue of alcohol with their youngster in person, we thought a compilation of different advice and approaches from around the world would be helpful. ICAP has put all the letters on its website (www.icap.org) and is working to include many of them in the language of the country from which they originate. We hope the letters will generate feedback from young people and parents alike regarding this important issue.

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is for Marcus Grant, and the signature on the right is for Eleni Houghton. Both signatures are written in a cursive, flowing style.

Marcus Grant
President

Eleni Houghton
Director of Social Policy



Canada

Dear Michel,

People my age often say that they'll never understand kids of your generation, never mind agree with them on the subject of drinking. I can just hear your response: "Big deal! It's always been like that: adults have never understood teenagers." Perhaps. But I'm not about to keep my mouth shut just because some people say that this business of getting drunk every time you drink is just age-related behaviour that will eventually pass. You know, people also say that kids your age are just incorrigibly stupid and that your generation is the generation of excess in everything. What really bothers me most, though, is that too many of my generation have thrown in the towel and given up on even trying to have a real conversation on the subject. No doubt many of us have simply forgotten that we were once teen-agers ourselves.

I admit that our own conversation about drinking left me a bit perplexed. I know you were provoking me when you said that "wine was really not *in* anymore," and that even in France and Italy, teenagers are drinking more beer and hard liquor, and in any case, it doesn't really matter because "it all tastes the same anyway" (and sometimes it tastes downright awful). You added that the important thing was to get drunk, because that's what's fun.

I figured that, once you were finished pushing my buttons, we could probably get back to some serious dialogue. But first, my turn to push a few buttons.

So you think your ideas are new? Think again. There may well be adults who've forgotten what it was like to be a teenager, but there are plenty of teens who are convinced that they've just invented the wheel and that nothing of any importance existed before they were born. I don't mean to annoy you, but the notion that all drinks taste the same and the only purpose of drinking is to get drunk is as old as the hills. There's even a really old French proverb, which, roughly translated, means "never mind the container, as long as it gets you drunk." So forget that huge gap you think there is between teenagers and adults.

OK. Now that I've got that off my chest, let's get serious.

You started by saying that everyone gets drunk and you're just doing what everyone does. You called it "team spirit." I'm not so sure about that. What if I said that people who get drunk may be more noisy, but they're not necessarily the majority? What if you checked around a bit and found out that, in Quebec, there are a lot more teenagers who drink without getting drunk than teens who do? And what if you learned that those who do get drunk are in the worst possible position to tell the difference between who's drunk and who isn't? Or if you found out that a lot of your friends - the girls in particular - pretend to be drunk just because peer pressure is so strong, and in the end, the pretending has itself become part of the game?

You also said, "So we get drunk. It's a free country."

Let's talk about freedom for a moment. Think about this carefully, now: Which person do you think is really more free, the one who loses control over his mind and body, or the one who stays in complete control? The one who has no idea what he said the night before or the one who remembers exactly what went on? Isn't freedom about being able to do what you want? Or is it just about doing what you can? And where exactly is your freedom at the end of the night, when you're puking in the toilet and can hardly stand up or put three words together, and all your friends are standing around laughing?

I deliberately wrote "standing around laughing" because I didn't want to hurt your feelings by adding "at you." Which is what they're doing, of course. You can be sure they're not laughing WITH you. You may well tell yourselves that you're having fun, but ask yourself in all honesty where the fun is in making a fool of yourself.

A lot of adults tell me that regularly getting bombed is a kind of "rite of passage" to adulthood, a sort of unavoidable initiation process that everyone has to undergo at some point. I must say I always thought that was a totally idiotic argument. I mean, really! I never went through that stage. My parents introduced me to moderate, balanced drinking, and I managed to discover which products I enjoyed drinking without passing through the "getting drunk" phase. Does that mean I'm not yet a real adult? Give me a break.

I know you'll reply that, since I never did the getting drunk thing, I don't know what I'm talking about. You'll say that, if I had experienced it first-hand, I might have been inclined to enjoy it. I am not at all sure. There's a saying that being an adult means having the experience of that which you have not done. True, I

never got drunk myself, but believe me, I have plenty of friends who did, and I learned from their experience. Today, they admit that they really went overboard back then, and they also say it wasn't really worth it. No doubt about it: they are adults now.

And speaking about adults, allow me to make this little observation for you to consider. When boys hit puberty, you know how eager they are to start shaving. They're thrilled when those first mustache hairs appear and can't wait to grab a razor. At last, they are shaving and they have become men. But before long, they get fed up with shaving. It's a real drag - a boring daily chore that just takes up time in the morning. You see, I think *that's* the point when they really become men: when the novelty has worn off and their beard is just a reality to be dealt with.

It's the same with drinking. Today, some of you think that getting drunk is a sign that you have become an adult. I would suggest that, as with shaving, it's when you're no longer getting drunk that you're becoming an adult. That being said, you have to realize that just because you're an adult doesn't mean you automatically stop getting drunk. Far too many adults get drunk, too. And sometimes - often, even - they do more damage than teenagers when they drink too much.

I haven't even mentioned girls, yet. Well, barely, when I talked about how they pretend to be drunk. I am well aware that, after a drink or two, you feel less inhibited, and have more "courage" to approach the girl you're interested in. But are you sure that, after seven or eight drinks in a couple of hours, you're still as charming as you think? Do you think your beer (or gin, vodka, whatever) breath is going to turn her on?

I'm not saying drinking isn't enjoyable. It's simply not true. I enjoy life and all good things too much to even pretend it's true. I don't pretend to be a connoisseur. I drink because I enjoy it. However, while having a drink is very enjoyable, it's not always necessary to drink to enjoy yourself. In fact, you can have a lot of fun without drinking.

I don't for a moment pretend to have all the answers. Or the truth. But I can - and feel obliged to - tell you that the happiest people are those who lead the most balanced life, those who have discovered the best of moderation, and who take pleasure in quality, not quantity.

I know it's your life, and you will live it your way, but I don't see why you, too, can't find your way to that place where you can enjoy drinking as a treat for your nose and palate, and for the sheer delight of discovery.

Here's to you, Michell!

Hubert



India

Dear V:

I was pleasantly surprised when I got your letter asking me, "Uncle, is it alright for me to drink sometimes?" I was pleasantly surprised because I guess these days young people do not ask their elders' advice in these matters. Moreover, you are now approaching the age when you can legally buy alcohol and drink without consulting anyone. Still you chose to ask me, I guess, because I am a medical doctor in the family and have known you from childhood. I appreciate your gesture.

Now, let us begin by asking the basic medical questions: Why do people drink and what possible harm can come if they do? Well, people drink because they enjoy doing it. It makes them feel good. It removes their inhibitions temporarily and improves their social communication. Then, why is there a need for control over drinking? Well, there is equally strong evidence that excessive and uncontrolled drinking leads to many serious medical and social problems. Temporarily, it may cause a hangover following excessive bout, or socially embarrassing behaviour or drunken driving. The more serious long-term problems are of alcohol addiction; the effect on health, on the liver, on the brain, and on other organs; financial loss, and family breakup, etc... There is good medical evidence to say that if one

hundred people are drinking regularly today, 5-10 of them will get into serious alcohol-related problems in the course of ten to fifteen years. Funny thing is, everybody in the beginning thinks that he or she is not the one who is going to fall into this alcohol risk category. But sadly, many of them realise it only when it is too late. As a medical doctor I am appalled to see the growing number of young people who now reach my clinic, often brought by their families, who have already become dependent on alcohol at a very young age, with all its serious health and social consequences. The question then boils down to this: How can one enjoy one's drink without getting into serious problems so often associated with alcohol, or in other words -- What are the guidelines for safe and healthy drinking?

The first thing I want to point out to you is that it is not essential to drink. Many people never do throughout their lives. It is a personal decision to drink or abstain. Nobody should force this on you. I know that drinking at parties is now considered "cool" and "hip" among young people in the big cities in India. It was not always so. I myself had my first drink when I went to England at the age of thirty. As a student of history you must have read how, during the freedom struggle of India, prohibition of alcohol was one of the important national agenda items for which Ghandi Ji and all great leaders fought. Drinking alcohol was then considered to be a foreign habit which the British were forcing on Indians. I understand that the times have changed, but my main message to you is that an intelligent and sensitive young man like you should make his own decisions. Do not simply start drinking because your other friends drink and because you are afraid of what they will say if you do not drink. Nothing will happen if you do not drink - in fact, you might win new respect among your friends for your independent views.

Now, suppose you have taken the personal decision to drink, you'll need to make sure you do not get into some of the problems I have hinted at earlier in this letter. The important thing is to make some mental rules to which you should strictly adhere while drinking until it becomes a part of your way of life. Here are some simple suggestions for your consideration:

- Do not drink alone or in secret.
- Do not drink during day-times.
- Do not drink daily. On average restrict your drinking to once or twice a week or on special occasions.
- Do not rush to your next drink. Anything between half an hour to one hour should be spent on one drink.
- Limit your drinks. As a general rule, up to two drinks (or one bottle of beer) should be your set limit for an evening.
- If you are driving, never have more than one drink in the evening.
- Drink in a good mood to enjoy it. Do not drink when you are sad to "drown your sorrows." It is a bad habit. Alcohol does not solve any problem.
- I have heard sometimes from young people that beer and wine are not really alcohol and that one can drink them safely. It is not medically correct. Beer and wine are also alcoholic drinks like whiskey and rum. One small peg of whiskey (30 cc) is

roughly equal to $\frac{1}{2}$ bottle of common beer in India. These days in Indian markets strong beers are also available which have twice the amount of alcohol of ordinary beers. Hence, be careful with the stronger beers.

- My most important advice to you is that you not continue drinking until you get "drunk" and lose your social sense. Always stop short of that. There is nothing more embarrassing than to wake up in the morning not knowing how silly you behaved the night before.

As you know, I have lived many years outside India and have visited many countries abroad. I found drinking quite common in European homes, but two things were striking in that culture. Firstly, nobody forced you or repeatedly persuaded you to drink. Secondly, the general convention was to have one drink before a meal, then a glass or two of wine with meals, and that is it. What I find disturbing nowadays in Indian upper-class homes or at parties is that most of the male members continue to drink until they are sozzled and dinner is inevitably delayed. I am writing this in hopes that if you are drinking you will avoid such embarrassing social scenes.

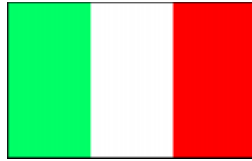
My letter is becoming long, and I must close now. I began with your question, "Is it alright to drink?" My answer is, "Yes, it is alright, provided that it is done

occasionally and in moderation." In fact, moderation should be a way of life with you, not only in drinking but in everything else in life.

With affectionate regards,

Yours,

Doctor Uncle



Italy

To a young male or female adolescent:

As a father I would like to discuss with you some issues which are important to your parents as well. When they decided to bring you into this world they agreed to take care of your education in the name of God and/or according to human laws. I am convinced that your family shares with you happy and sad moments, tries to understand your wishes and definitely is on your side.

As you are growing up, more of your free time is spent outside your family setting. This is normal at your age. Frequently you come home late at night having been out with friends. It happens that some of them are unable to control their behaviors after alcohol intake. This is not what you have learned at home where your parents have always drunk alcohol in moderation. Even during important events celebrated outside the home (like your Holy Communion) alcohol has brought pleasure to the whole group and no one has ever dared to misbehave.

You will ask me: "How can I help when a friend has drunk immoderately on only one occasion?" But you know that even a single bout could be lethal to your friend if your friend jumps on his/her motorcycle and drives under the influence. Your friend's risk perception will be altered. The consequences could last for a lifetime,

and health and insurance coverage will probably never give your friend back the health and vigor of a 15 year old. In this case your common sense will suggest that you or a friend you trust will be available to take him/her back home or, if no one in your group is sober or has a driving license, you can immediately call one of the parents (not necessarily those of your drunken friend).

To enter a drunken state is unwise also from a broader perspective. It is human to spend time with friends in search of common happy moments but it is not acceptable to deliberately alter the state of mind in order to avoid sorrows and reality. A change can only be attained through personal growth and maturation and not through the effect of substances external to your body. The process of change is often long and even painful but this is true not only at your age. Stressful conditions can always be encountered in life. These experiences may be helpful in influencing future life events if alcohol and drugs do not alter the perception of reality.

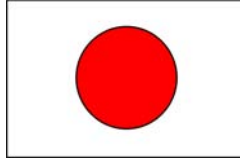
Feelings of anxiety and anger should be expressed and confronted. Someone for sure will listen to you and help you but you should ask for support. Several persons can understand you: the "real" friends, but also the educators you trust, a priest, your family doctor, your cousins, uncles, and, above all, your parents who have always taken care of you.

Do not consider your family a stranger to changes and experiences happening outside your home. Express your feelings and emotions and make your family participate in your daily experiences. Your good relationships with friends should also be transferred to your family. However, you must set aside a moment a day in which everybody (yourself and your parents too) can express

themselves without being pressured by commitments or diverted by TV programs. Would supper time be the best moment of the day?

Alcohol is a friend to mankind if drunk in moderation. A good relationship with alcohol can last a life-time as the history of our traditions and family has taught you. But you have to remember that any human activity is pertinent only if it is performed within the limit of our endurance. I wish you determination to ask if you have any doubt on this matter.

Flavio



Japan

Dear Young Person,

I don't say you should not drink alcohol, but before you drink I want you to think about the following issues.

For everyone

1) **DON'T DRINK TOO MUCH ALCOHOL IN A SHORT TIME**

In Japan, when the new students join the club activity of universities, senior students tend to force them to drink a large amount of alcohol in one gulp. Everybody, in a kind of ceremony, shouts "Ikki, Ikki, Ikki..." which means drink a glass of alcohol in one breath. Most students can't refuse it. But if you drink much alcohol in a short time, the body can't accept it. So some students may end up ill and some of them even die. Their parents get seriously sick by this sudden loss of their child. So please remember it is very dangerous to drink a large amount of alcohol in a short time. You might lose your life.

2) **DON'T DRIVE WHEN YOU DRINK, DON'T DRINK IF YOU DRIVE**

When you drink alcohol, even a little, it influences

your nerves. There is a watchword in Japan. If you drink and drive, you have a greater chance to be involved in a car accident, even though you think you can drive properly. Drinking and driving will bring you serious problems. Your happy and enjoyable life might be lost forever.

3) DON'T DRINK ALCOHOL EVERYDAY

It is OK to drink a moderate amount of alcohol from time to time, but if you drink every day, alcohol might destroy your body. It is very hard to stop drinking when it becomes a habit. At first, you can't recognize it easily, but when you recognize it, it is too late. It will be very hard to change the habit, and you will be in serious condition mentally and physically.

For a boy

4) DON'T DRINK A LOT WHEN YOU DRINK WITH GIRLS

When you drink with girls, you should be careful, sometimes you can't control yourself when you drink a lot of alcohol. If you should lose your control, you might get wilder than you imagine and you might hurt girls. To protect yourself, and not get into serious problems, drink alcohol properly, especially when you drink with girls. Also, if you drink heavily, you will certainly lose your chance with the girl.

For a girl

5) BE CAREFUL WHEN YOU DRINK WITH A BOY(S)

Don't drink until you can't control yourself. It is

very dangerous, especially when you drink with boys. Some of them are much wilder than you imagine. Of course most of them are very gentle and kind even when they drink alcohol, but nobody knows (even they) how wild some boys will become. When they drink alcohol, even before they lose their self-control, alcohol has a power to change them. If they become wilder, you can't control them, they will control you. And maybe you can imagine what will happen after that. So to protect yourself, don't drink much alcohol with boys, otherwise you will be in a serious condition, and it will be too late to cry after you are raped.

6) DON'T DRINK ALCOHOL WHEN THERE IS THE POSSIBILITY OF BECOMING PREGNANT

Alcohol has a very bad influence on a baby. If you drink much alcohol when you are pregnant, the baby will be influenced by alcohol. You should pay attention to your baby inside your body. Alcohol brings physical and mental damage to your baby. And both you and your child will have a difficult time during your whole lives. I think you are clever enough not to do such a silly thing.

Please enjoy your life by drinking alcohol moderately and wisely. Please remember to drink alcohol under your control. You should not be controlled by alcohol.

Dr. N. Shinfuku



Mauritius

Dear Young Friend,

You will soon be 18 years old. The past few years have been an exciting period of discovering new things, learning about yourself and about the world around you. You are constantly challenged to explore new ideas and adopt new lifestyles. Your environment persistently exerts forces on you. And in this hectic world, you are needed to make informed decisions on many subjects. As a young man and woman, leaving behind the tumultuous years of teenagehood and entering the early stage of adolescence, you will be acquiring new rights, like getting a driving license, voting, drinking alcohol, and getting married. New rights, however, also imply new responsibilities.

Let us discuss drinking alcohol. If this is not prohibited by your religion, or restricted by other personal, familial, social, or medical considerations, it is bound to be an issue you will soon face. Now that you are legally allowed to drink, you need to be aware of its implications towards yourself and others. Alcohol is a psychoactive substance and its use, as a social lubricant is well known. For millions, it is a source of pleasure, of relaxation, and "of the good life". In moderate amounts, its consumption procures a sense of warmth and wellness; while larger amounts may be the source of various problems. As you consider whether to use

alcohol or not, and start discussing it with your parents and friends, there are a few things to reflect upon.

1. Know the facts about alcohol. There are many myths conveyed through advertising, like alcohol gives strength, provides you with status or leads to success.

2. What is "a moderate amount?" What is moderate for one may be too little for some and too much for others. Learn how to use alcohol sensibly and know your limits.

The way your body and mind react to alcohol is a very personal and intimate process. Comparing yourself to others, as in other fields, may induce you to yield to pressure to consume more, in a way that may jeopardize your greatest right and asset, namely to make the right choice. Drink sensibly and responsibly to enjoy yourself but not to harm yourself

3. Drinking and driving is a potentially hazardous combination. This is particularly true if you have just secured a driving license and have not yet mastered the art of driving. Alcohol may impair your ability to handle your vehicle, to judge distances, and lengthen your reflex time, specially at night. Inform yourself as to the legal alcohol limits allowed for drivers in your country. However, please remember that your personal safety, as well as the safety of those you are driving, depends on you. And this has nothing to do with the limits imposed by the law but with your personal ability to drive safely while under the influence of alcohol.

4. Sex may or may not be part of your lifestyle. The disinhibitory effects of alcohol must not increase the risk for you to engage in unsafe sex practices.

5. If you are a young girl intending to have a baby, it is safer to abstain from alcohol. Alcohol ingested by the pregnant woman passes the placental barrier and reaches the foetus. As what constitutes a safe amount for the pregnant woman has not been clearly established, and given the potentially harmful consequences alcohol may have on the developing foetus, a zero tolerance approach to alcohol in this specific case is reasonable.

6. The taste buds on your tongue are meant to allow you to derive the maximum benefit and satisfaction from whatever you ingest. The pleasure centre in your brain is designed to provide you with the maximum enjoyment in the activities you undertake. Whatever factor interferes with either one will diminish your sense of pleasure. Excessive alcohol does both. The choice, my young friend, is entirely yours.

Yours faithfully,

Reychad Abdul



Mexico

Dear Javier and Julieta:

You cannot know how proud I am of you, my only sister's children, my only niece and nephew, having watched you develop with such spirit and achieving so much. The time has slipped by so quickly, and your childhood falls ever further into the past.

I write to you in an attempt to share with you some lessons I've learned during my time, and I ask for your patience. Sometimes adults are too worried about their children. We are constantly trying to ensure that you are happier and better off than we, and we feel quite fearful of the risks you will face in life.

And it is about life that I wanted to write to you. I am certainly no expert, but have learned some lessons from my successes and failures along the way. You, too, will grow in this way, hopefully with more successes than failures, but there is not a simple formula for living well.

And, what does "living well" mean? To live well means to do what is good and appropriate for one, while respecting the right of others to do the same; to make decisions, to choose. But it's not always as easy as deciding whether to wear jeans or shorts, or whether to go to the movies or to a friend's house. As you've already

found out, sometimes there will be much more complicated decisions.

This brings us to a very important issue, a fundamental ingredient in human life, freedom. To be free is to be able to elect, to choose, and most importantly, to be aware of one's decisions. One must think, "Why am I doing this? Because I've been told to, because it is customary, or because I want to?" Whatever the reason, ask yourself -- "Is doing this appropriate, or good, for me? Am I being free if I do whatever my friends are saying just to be accepted by them? What if they are asking me to do something I don't want or that may cause me harm?"

But we don't do things just to secure rewards or to evade punishment; that would not really be freedom. Therefore, true freedom is doing things because I, as an individual, believe them to be good, not because they are customary, or because somebody ordered me to, or as a result of a whim. Of course, we don't live in isolation, rather in social groups that mold us as individuals. Sometimes we are just repeating what most people do, and that is OK, because many people do some really good and cool things.

When you were small, you were able to play, or eat, or sleep whenever you wanted to. As you grow up, there are more things to do, more liberties, but they are always accompanied by more responsibilities. "What are these responsibilities?" you ask. It is to be able to accept the consequences - be they good or bad - of our actions. Responsibilities are the other side of the coin of freedom. As we gain more freedom, it becomes more important that we know how to use it.

As adolescents, your lives are surely filled with curios-

ity and discovery, both within yourselves and in the world around you. There are new pleasures and pains, different from when you were children. Do not be afraid to enjoy the pleasures, or sometimes suffer the pain; they are part of living, also dual sides of the same coin. But in order to be free to enjoy life, you will have to question: "Am I doing what I'm doing because I want to? Because it makes me happy? Because it is good for me?"

The problem with enjoying life's pleasures is that often we forget about everything else, and that can be dangerous. Eating a plate or two of one's favorite food is pleasurable, but, if one continues, the stomach-ache will be regrettable. Playing or hanging around with friends is great but it could make us forget about homework or attending other things. Having a glass of wine with family or friends is pleasant, but excessive drinking can have ugly consequences.

There is no need to be afraid of pleasure, but one must enjoy it with responsibility, keeping in mind the possible consequences. We can also take pleasure in sports and working, experiences that make us feel good and proud of ourselves, but in excess these too may be dangerous. In general, true pleasurable times are those that do not give us problems, experiences that do not make us feel sorry or ashamed afterwards.

Those individuals that are overly prohibitive are scared of pleasure; they are afraid that people may abandon their school, work, and other responsibilities for the temptation of enjoying life. They think that if something gives us pleasure, it must be bad. These people-puritans and moralists - think that one must abstain completely from enjoying life, and don't understand that we can learn to use freedom and pleasure as

ingredients for a fuller life. This is the difference between the use and the abuse of the things we enjoy. When we "use" a pleasure, it enriches our life. When we are doing something in excess or abuse, it's no longer a pleasure. It becomes an escape from life and may cause pain. Thus, we are no longer free.

In youth, more than ever, there is the constant temptation to push the limits, to tempt risk and to taste danger. You should cherish the freedom of exploring and experiencing the pleasurable things that life offers, though I ask you to keep in mind that you should avoid doing things that could embarrass you, or can result in harm to you or others. And so, I'll end with a wish: Enjoy life with happiness, freedom, and responsibility!

Love,

Your Aunt - Haydee



The Netherlands

My Darling Chancer,

Do you remember your first sip of alcohol? Just a few minutes after you entered this world we were enjoying this wonderful Møet while you were so close to my breast. It was the right moment: safe, relaxed, and both full of love and universal happiness...

By now, you refuse a chocolate when there is alcohol in it and when at night you have to go to the toilet -all dizzy - you say "I feel drunk," - probably you have already seen intoxicated people not able to walk straight. When I swear in the car because some idiot puts us in danger you say, "he must be drunk," so by now you know some of the effects.

But, my darling daughter, in the near future, friends of yours will offer you all kinds of things saying, "Please take some, it makes you feel good," but then my love, just remember my letter. If you do not know what it is - if you cannot smell or taste it, if it is a chemical and you do not know its effects - please refuse it. And when the group puts pressure on you, and you do not want to be seen as a softie, just say "thank you, I will save it for later to really enjoy it," and then take it home so we can see what it is.

Of course, I can understand that sometimes you like a

change of mood - just to look at reality from a different angle - or to get an euphoric feeling or even to make contact with the gods in a quick way - and that's fine. Just make sure that you do not put yourself or others in danger.

I hope that within a few years we will enjoy a good glass together with our meal or celebrate glorious moments with some more glasses - by then you will be aware of what the effects are. How does it make you feel, what does it intensify, does it make you feel good, or are the effects annoying?

I hope that soon enough you will be aware that substances which alter your mood or consciousness do work differently, depending on how you are feeling at the moment you take them. Is the company all right? Are you in a good mood? You do not have to worry how to get home safely? You do not have to drive? Can you fall asleep if you want to? You do not have to get up early?

Naturally, I will not tell you "Do not take them," I only have to remember myself when I was young - one only really learns by one's experience and find our own limits - how else can we grow up and become reasonable, responsible adults? (At least most of the time!)

Just be alert not to take whatever natural substances for the wrong reasons: because you feel rotten or angry or aggressive or down. It will then work out as if you had taken poison: Probably you will experience that feeling as well.

If you find yourself in a situation surrounded by people who take whatever psycho-active substance for the

wrong reasons, please make sure you get out of there as fast as you can - a war might break out and I think you are too precious to be hurt - or worse.

I hope you will enjoy all the good things this earth is giving us - even sometimes to such a degree that you say the day after: "god, that was good" and feel as if your soul enjoyed a refreshing shower although you forgot most of what happened...

The substances are delicate - the effects can be as well or they can be rough but - as with most things in life - it should contribute to your well being in all honesty and clear self-observation.

But if you prefer to get your kick out of dancing as you do now - please continue to do so. It's beautiful.

Take care my angel and enjoy your time.

I love you.

Your mam and mate



Uganda

Dear Peace,

My dear niece, you have just turned 18 years old and the world presents all kinds of opportunities. You are on the verge of joining the University with all the challenges that it presents.

There are a lot of changes going on in your physical body as well as in your emotional and cognitive life. You may have the urge to experiment with new things and to chart out your own path. It is the final stage of individuation when you change from child to adult, a process that can be a pleasure but can also be rife with danger. Decisions made at this time in your life may have an impact on what the rest of your life will be like.

It is for the above reasons that I write this letter. I would like to write specifically about alcohol. What I hope to discuss may help you make the decision whether to drink alcoholic beverages irresponsibly, to drink alcohol responsibly or not to drink at all. Ultimately the decision will be yours. I hope this letter will provide some guidance on the decision that you decide to take.

The letter will cover the following areas;

- What are the different kinds of drinking?

- How do some people become problem drinkers?
- What are the harmful effects of alcohol consumption?
- What are the benefits of alcohol consumption?

Different Kinds of Drinking

I will classify the different kinds of drinking into three categories. The abstainer does not consume any kind of alcohol. This may often include not taking wine with food. The problem drinker, on the other hand, has a problem with controlling how much alcohol they consume. Very often, the problem drinker cannot stop once the drinking starts. Some problem drinkers have an adverse reaction to alcohol in that they may consume an equal amount as someone else but they may react differently. The last category is the responsible drinker. This person may drink a little wine with food and also take alcohol in the evenings, usually with others. They can control how much they drink and will not lose control over their actions or become disinhibited and carry out irresponsible actions.

Causes of Problem Drinking

It may be that some people have an increased likelihood of getting addicted to alcohol once they begin to drink. It is thought that it may be linked to a gene which may also cause depression in the female relatives of the male problem drinker. The implication would be that if someone has one or two relatives who seem to have a problem with alcohol, it may be wise if that person avoided alcohol altogether. For others as mentioned above, they have an idiosyncratic reaction to alcohol.

This is something like an allergy. When they consume alcohol, it causes their personality to change dramatically.

For another group of people, they may begin to drink as a social activity but if this continues on a daily basis and the quantities drunk are not controlled, they may become problem drinkers. This may include professionals who may attend cocktails and other social events frequently. Another at risk group are housewives who may remain at home alone and if they get bored, may take a glass or two of wine with lunch then increase it to a glass or two of wine while they prepare dinner, then more with the husband before and during dinner and more before bed and may find that they cannot do without it.

There may be other groups such as young people who attend parties and drink heavily every weekend as well as people who distill and/or sell alcohol in their homes; this is often true of the developing world. They may drink to keep their customers company and end up as problem drinkers. There are also those affected by wars, conflicts, sexual and other forms of abuse, domestic violence, and other traumatic events who may drink to try and forget their problems.

Harmful Effects of Alcohol

Alcohol can cause harm to every organ of the body if it is not drunk in moderation. It will damage the central nervous system as well as causing depression. It will harm the pancreas and the liver and the kidneys. Alcohol will cause harm to an unborn baby if the mother drinks excessively during pregnancy. These are direct effects.

There are the indirect effects such as alcohol causing the drinker to become disinhibited so that they are more likely to initiate or agree to a sexual encounter and to have unprotected sex, putting themselves at risk for sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS as well as for pregnancy. Most rapes that take place at University campuses have alcohol as an underlying factor for both the victim and the rapists.

Alcohol will also have a negative impact on the income of a home if one of the parents is a problem drinker. The problem drinker will use the food money to buy alcohol, children may become malnourished and may even drop out of school due to lack of school fees. If a young person drinks alcohol excessively, they may find it difficult to concentrate in school, school grades would suffer and they may even drop out.

Some people drink and drive and this is causing the rates of accidents to rise. The person who drives under the influence of alcohol not only puts their own life at risk, but that of the passengers they may be carrying and the pedestrians and other road users as well.

Benefits of Alcohol Consumption

Although there are many harms associated with irresponsible consumption of alcohol, there are also benefits. These include the benefits to the heart that have been demonstrated for men who drink red wine. As stated above, consumption has to be in moderation.

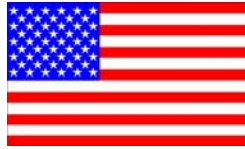
Alcohol is also a part of our social fabric and an integral part of all events, from birth to death and all that goes on in between. Alcohol is a social drink that melts barriers, creating opportunities for dialogue between

the groom's party and the bride's relatives. Alcohol opens discussions and cements agreements. It is a vital part of our lives.

In conclusion, I would like to repeat that the decision is now yours to make, taking into account what the family history is, what you have seen from how your parents drunk alcohol and what effects it has on those who have a problem. Think about your future and where you want to be ten years from now. Think about who you are with when you drink, how much you drink, when to stop or not drink at all and when to seek help if you suspect you may have a problem with alcohol.

I look forward to receiving a reply from you with any comments or questions you may have.

Aunty Florence



United States of America

Dear Sarah:

I almost forwarded an email to you last week. It was a note from a colleague who is nursing her 18 year-old daughter who is recovering after a fall from the second story window of her college dormitory.

You will not be surprised that I immediately wondered how much alcohol the daughter had consumed prior to her fall. I find it hard to believe that a bright and otherwise healthy young woman would be likely to fall out of a window unless she was severely impaired.

I didn't forward the message because I could imagine the insulted look on your face as you read it and realized that I intended it to be a cautionary tale. As you pack your bags and prepare to leave for your first year of college I'd like to talk with you about drinking. But, despite some claims to the contrary, it is not easy to find the right time and place to discuss the topic of alcohol with a young person who happens to be your child.

This is true even though we have been talking about alcohol and young people for years. Because of my work in public health, I've always had a professional excuse. But now, when it is perhaps most important, I find it difficult to raise the topic.

And I know why. To bring up alcohol use, apropos of nothing, is to provoke a defensive question, "What did I do?" And putting a young person on the defensive is never a good way to begin.

So I did not send you the email about the girl recovering from a broken neck. Instead I decided to write this letter hoping that I could come up with a better way to begin an important discussion.

It was easier when you were a little younger. I remember when you were in junior high and I introduced you to my "barf" curriculum. I exploited the fact that you thought gross facts were kind of cool. So I said, "Hey Sarah! Did you know that it is possible to be so drunk that you can choke on your own vomit and die from asphyxiation?" Having attracted your attention, I then explained that passing out from drinking too much isn't just hazardous if you happen to fall down. Then, I hedged. Instead of saying, "And that's why YOU should never drink." I said, "My expectation is that you won't drink, but I know what goes on and neither one of us can guarantee that you will never be in a situation where other young people are drinking, perhaps even your friends. That's why, even though you have no plans to drink, you still need to know a few things about drinking and how it affects the human body."

I won't repeat the whole thing again. The point is, now that you are going away to college, all of the alcohol related problems that I was trying to prepare you for are much more likely to be going on around you.

Living in the dormitory, you will know at least a few students who drink on a regular basis, some heavily. You will know others who drink only rarely but always

end up sick or passed out. You'll come to anticipate particularly rowdy weekends and events that prompt more widespread, heavy drinking. You'll hear stories, directly or indirectly, about students who got drunk and ended up having sex with someone they hardly knew.

So, you ask, what has this got to do with me? You'll be relieved to know that I've got it boiled down to just three things*:

1. I still hold out the expectation that you will not drink, if only because it is illegal for an 18 year old to drink. But if you do, I expect you to protect yourself from most potential harm by limiting your drinking to not more than one drink in any hour and not more than 3 drinks in any 24 hours.

2. You do have a responsibility to intervene if a fellow student is at risk of serious harm from drinking. This applies even if it is uncool to intervene and even if the student may get into trouble.

3. You have the right to live at school without enduring second-hand effects from the drinking of others that disrupt your studies, your sleep or your safety.

Okay, that wasn't so painful was it? Now you can get back to your packing. We can talk about all this during our 8 hours on the road next week when I drive you to school.

I love you to pieces,
Mom

*I cheated a little here because I'm not including the many things that I know you have too much good sense to do like riding with a driver whose been drinking or taking a drink from a stranger.



United States of America

Dear Adolescents:

As you were growing up, most of you saw your parents consume alcohol, participated in family gatherings where alcohol was served, and watched special occasions being toasted with alcohol. In fact, your first drink was probably given to you by your parents during a meal or at a family party; it might also have been part of a religious ceremony. Though alcohol was interwoven into your early years, it was probably not the topic of family discussions, as most parents don't talk about alcohol with their children.

Over the years many of you decided to drink alcohol with your friends, and some of you have consumed alcohol to the point of intoxication. Yet, for the most part, you do not have the necessary facts about alcohol (e.g., number of drinks related to BAC); you probably also have not given much thought to your attitude about and responsibility for your use of alcohol or that of your friends. In fact, most of you don't decide on the quantity of alcohol that you will consume before you start drinking, nor do you consider the high-risk consequences related to excessive alcohol consumption.

Though thinking about alcohol and discussing it will not stop you from drinking and/or becoming intoxi-

cated, I believe that it will help you identify the role alcohol plays in your life and that this awareness will result in your minimizing risks related to alcohol. That is, before you go out, if you decide that you're not going to drinking, you will have thought about what you're going to tell your friends, so that you're comfortable. If you've decided that you're going to drink, you'll consider your body weight, the beverage you will drink, and the length of time of the drinking occasion. To determine the quantity of alcohol that you'll consume, you need to know that a 160-lb. person can metabolize the alcohol in a normal size drink (12 oz. of beer, 5 oz. of wine, and 1.5 oz. of 80-proof distilled spirits) in about one and one-quarter to one and one-half hours.

Hopefully, at all times, you'll know what it is that you're drinking and won't drink a "mystery" beverage because there's no way you can know how much alcohol is in this type of drink (e.g. grain alcohol mixed with juice). Also, you'll never feel that you have to finish a drink. If you put your drink down, rather than pick it up (as you can't be sure that someone didn't put something in it), you'll get another drink. As the evening wears on, you'll keep the number of drinks that you decided to consume in mind, so that you don't drink more than you intended. You'll also remain mindful of the negative consequences of intoxication and you won't drive after drinking or go in a car with a driver who has been drinking.

As you exercise personal responsibility in your use of alcohol, please also give thought to your responsibilities as part of the group. Helping a friend who has passed out, taking the keys from a drunk driver, and giving a friend a lift home are all life-saving strategies that members of a group should provide for one an-

other. The adage that there is "safety in numbers" holds true in these situations.

My hope is that you will make responsible decisions toward the use of alcohol throughout your life, so that you can fulfill your potential at every step along the way.

Sincerely,

Gail Gleason Milgram, Ed.D.

Contributors

(For identification purposes only)

Canada

Mr. Hubert Sacy
Director General
Educ'Alcool

India

Dr. Naren Wig
Retired senior staff member
All India Institute of Medical Science and
World Health Organization

Italy

Prof. Flavio Poldrugo
Office for Research and Innovative Projects
on Alcohol, Other Addictions, and Mental Health
University of Trieste

Japan

Dr. Naotaka Shinfuku
Director and Professor
Kobe University School of Medicine

Mexico

Mtra. Haydée Rosovsky
Head Researcher
Mexican Institute of Psychiatry
Advisor to the Commissioner
Consejo Nacional Contra Las Adicciones (CONADIC)

Mauritius

Dr. Reychad Abdul
President

Dr. Idrice Goomany Centre

The Netherlands

Drs. Annette van den Hogen
Director

International Strategic Communications Counselling,
and
Formerly, Public Affairs Manager, Heineken N.V.

Uganda

Dr. Florence Baingana
Human Development Department
The World Bank and formerly
Ministry of Health, Uganda

United States of America

Ms. Laurie Leiber
Communications Manager
Partnership for the Public's Health

Dr. Gail Gleason Milgrim
Director and Professor
Education and Training
Center of Alcohol Studies, Rutgers University

International Center for Alcohol Policies
1519 New Hampshire Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036 USA
Tel: +202-986-1159
Fax: +202-986-2080
www.icap.org