

The vodka diaries

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Going under cover, Alice Vulliamy, 15, found it laughably easy to buy spirits at supermarkets and off-licences. How can we control underage drinking, asks her shocked mother Celia Dodd

When I agreed to my 15-year-old daughter Alice taking part an experiment to see how much vodka she could buy in 48 hours, I thought she'd come home looking sheepish with a couple of small bottles in her bag. I also assumed that shops would have tightened up their act after the recent furore caused by the Chief Constable of Cheshire's call to clamp down on underage drinking.

So I expected her at least to get a ticking-off or even a fine: under English law both she and the retailer could be fined £80. I was horrified when she came back laden down with more clinking carrier bags than she could carry, and enough vodka to land her and several mates in A&E. She was pretty shocked, too.

In two days Alice bought a total of 287 units of alcohol: eight 70cl bottles, three half bottles (35cl), two 20cl bottles and a couple of miniatures. She was served in a leading supermarket and off-licences as well as small independent food and wine shops in West London. Only seven shops out of twenty even asked for ID; she doesn't have one, unlike a lot of kids her age, so they automatically refused her.

She also bought two vodka-and-Cokes from a pub. After the first evening she had accumulated so much vodka that I decided to abort the pub part of the experiment. Although Alice had promised not to drink the vodka, it seemed irresponsible to tempt her friends. In any case, most teenagers seem to prefer drinking cut-price booze at home, when the parents are out.

Vodka is shockingly cheap: £6.23 was Alice's cheapest purchase for a standard 70cl bottle, although I've seen a bottle on special offer in supermarkets for as little as £4.99. With prices this low, Alice's income from her Saturday job coaching tennis would set her up with four big bottles every weekend. It's no wonder that vodka has become a favourite for today's teenagers.

A harmless rite of passage?

Like most parents I used to dismiss underage drinking as a fairly harmless rite of passage, but now it worries me just as much as drug-taking. I've got good reason: by the time Alice's older brother was her age he had been admitted to hospital with alcohol poisoning after downing a mix of vodka and cider in a park. He says that he and his friends trekked for miles to the shops that could be relied on to turn a blind eye to their age. I reckon it was easier for Alice to get served because she's a girl.

Her experience is not a one-off. It echoes Home Office research, to be published in the autumn, which indicates that one premises in five sells alcohol to under 18s. Alcohol Concern figures suggest that while the proportion of 11 to 15-year-olds that drinks has dropped in the past couple of years, to 54 per cent, but the amount that this group drinks has doubled from five to ten units a week. Nearly a quarter of 15-year-olds say they've been drunk ten times in the past year.

No wonder the Chief Constable's call for stringent measures to tackle the problem has struck a chord. He wants to see the legal drinking age raised to 21, the price of strong alcohol increased and parents encouraged to keep a tighter rein on their children. Alcohol is a lot cheaper than it was ten years ago and tax on alcohol has dropped in real terms. The Government recently promised a review of pricing structures.

Campaigners such as Frank Soodeen of Alcohol Concern hope that the Government will include taxation as part of its price review; he points out that it's one of the few levers the Government has available to it.

Should the drinking age be 21?

There has also been much discussion about raising the drinking age to 21, but surely all that's required is tighter regulation of existing laws? In England both buyer and seller can be fined for underage purchases, but as Kate Coleman, of the Wine and Spirit Trade Association, points out: "In practice, it is usually the retailer that gets penalised. If more was done to deter underage buyers, they might not try so often. We don't want to criminalise children, but it would help if more was done to deter the underage buyer."

It doesn't help that perfectly plausible fake IDs are easy to get hold of on the internet for little more than a tenner. Training retailers to be better at spotting fakes is one solution, but surely it would be better to stop them being sold in the first place? Parents could come down harder on fake IDs, too; they're all too often indulged as a bit of a joke.

Yet Soodeen believes that fake IDs are a red herring, since 17 per cent of underage drinkers get their booze from consenting adults. On the other hand, Coleman insists that retailers have made huge strides in combating underage sales. She says: "It doesn't matter how hard we clamp down because if teenagers want to get hold of alcohol, they will, whether through proxy sales or parents' drinks cabinets. We hope the recent coverage will shift the balance and make people realise there's a lot of work to be done with kids themselves, to work out why they want to buy alcohol in such quantities."

Alcohol is a way of self-medicating

This is the bottom line: why do our teenagers want to drink so much? There are all sorts of explanations: alcohol has long been a marker of adulthood; there's nowhere to go apart from the pub; getting lashed is glamorised by DJs and celebs. Added to this there are psychological reasons for alcohol's particular appeal for teenagers. Dr Terri Apter, a social psychologist at Cambridge University, says: "Alcohol is a way of self-medicating and a way of bonding with your peer group. It offers a way of managing bad feelings and

stress, and the sense that everyone is better and more sorted than you, and that the life you want seems very far away.

“And of course there is a lot of interest in risky behaviours in teens. Teens aren’t worse at assessing risk than anyone else, but the parts of the brain that deal with forward planning and impulse control are not mature. And while there is some evidence that the gap is closing between boys and girls drinking, boys are more likely to absolutely drown their feelings, whereas girls can get comfort from other things, such as talking, films and shopping.”

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) is about to publish guidelines on alcohol education in schools that recommend a greater focus on informed choice and equipping teenagers to better interpret alcohol advertising and resist peer pressure. It also recommends that schools offer education to parents on alcohol awareness.

This might be a step forward. Alice, like a lot of teenagers, is keen to know about alcohol: she’s already got the number of units in different bottles off by heart, for example. So maybe it’s time to tackle the problem at its roots, with some straight talking about the damage that alcohol can do to immature teenage brains.

A 48-hour buying binge

SATURDAY 4pm: off-licence They sold me a 35ml bottle of Glen’s Vodka without questioning my age. I also bought some toilet cleaner to make myself seem older.

5.30pm: food and wine store No proof of age needed. I was served a 70cl bottle of Smirnoff for £10.99.

6pm: Morrisons Although there were no obvious “No ID? Don’t even ask” signs, they instantly turned me away when I took a bottle to the checkout.

6.15pm: pub I asked for two vodka-and-Cokes but only got served with the help of a friend’s fake ID (he’s 16).

7.05pm: off-licence Went in with two friends who are also 15, and was easily served a 70cl bottle of Smirnoff after some friendly banter about the night ahead. They even offered to knock a couple of pounds off the price “just for us”.

7.20pm: Spar garage When I asked for a 70cl Glen’s, the man pointed to the “Under 18? Don’t bother” sign and shooed me away.

8.30pm: off-licence A couple of policemen were walking by as I went in, yet the guy still served me, kind of shiftily, and I walked out with a 70cl bottle of Smirnoff for £10.99.

9.30pm: cash and carry They didn’t think twice about it; they just served me two 35cl Smirnoffs and asked if they could be my boyfriends.

SUNDAY

10.50am: newsagent Surprisingly I was easily served at such an early time of day, this time a 20cl Czar Vodka for £3.99.

11am: mini-mart Got two miniature Smirnoffs, £1.60 each – a rip-off.

11.30am: Post Office/shop Despite signs saying that ID was needed, I was served a 70cl bottle of Smirnoff, no questions asked.

12.10pm: off-licence ID signs were everywhere I looked, which was extremely intimidating, but I still gave it a shot. So it was surprising to get 70cl Glen's for £8.99 without being asked for ID.

12.15pm: off-licence/shop These guys seemed really well briefed on underage buyers; they asked me for ID before I'd even finished asking for the booze.

12.45pm: supermarket The big signs all over the shop scared me, but with the help of some nonbio travel wash in the basket to make me appear older, I was sold a 70cl own-brand vodka for only £6.34.

2.30pm: mini-mart After a jolly conversation with the guy, he served me even though he clearly knew I was underage. This time we got a 200ml Smirnoff, £3.99.

3.30pm: wine shop Despite signs saying I'd be turned away, the guy sold me 70cl of Kulor vodka, £9.99.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/health/child-health/article1791780.ece>