

Grog blame lies with us



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I WAS invited as a "grown-up" to an 18-year-old's birthday party last weekend. The small group of parents who braved the acceptance of an invitation to such an event was quickly separated from the teenage group by the young hostess, who really did not want her style cramped by a bunch of wine-sipping old fogies.

Most of the young men present were still at the awkward stage I call Transfer To Adulthood. They rarely let down their guard, say very little and are still afraid to mingle with females.

Young women of exactly the same age are quite the opposite. They have more front than Myer, talk under wet cement and drink vodka -- lots of it.

Not much has changed about men who drink. Over several generations, their habits appear to have stayed pretty static -- a couple of beers several times a week and a big night on Saturday have been the norm in post-war Australia.

Most of my son's mates fit the mould perfectly. They rarely stray from beer (and that is not saying they always remain sober). Young males binge after a game of footy on Saturday, just like their dads did. They still get into trouble -- like their dads did.

They are far from perfect but they are also not exactly surprising when it comes to their first forays into alcohol.

Young women are different. Their drinking habits have changed so dramatically in three generations that 18-year-old females now regularly out-drink their male counterparts. Their first experiment with alcohol is often earlier than a male's and it is a lot more potent than beer or wine.

It is not unusual for two women to share a bottle of vodka on a night out. I have seen a young woman bring a six-pack of Bacardi Breezers to a party and drink them all herself. Girls know how to pack a punch into a fruit punch -- with copious quantities of vodka and white rum mixed in to ensure they write themselves off pretty early in the night.

At another 18th birthday, I stumbled over an 18-year-old girl in the host's back yard. She was semi-conscious -- her beautiful face covered in vomit and her pretty dress torn. She had been drinking straight vodka.

This is not meant to be a judgment call on the young women of today. Quite the opposite. These are observations that alarm me and confirm what I have suspected for some time.

Women of my generation have a lot for which to claim credit. We have paved the way for workplace reform, equal pay and cracking the glass ceiling.

But we have a lot for which we should be ashamed, too. We are the generation that changed the way women use, and abuse, alcohol.

Let's cast our minds back to when our mothers were a little younger than us (I am 48). Many were cast in the '50s housewife mould -- stay-at-home women who relished their roles as full-time wives and mothers.

My best friend's mum had four young girls under five, but insisted on bathing, dressing and putting make-up on before her husband arrived home from work. She would be waiting, newly preened, at the front door with a cocktail for Dad. Her treat was a single shot of brandy before donning the apron again to tackle acid hour.

MY own mother, who was forced back to full-time work early because of a marriage break, would never dream of having wine or anything stronger in the house. For her, Saturday was a treat when she would take herself out with a girlfriend for a glass of moselle.

Our generation (late baby boomers) changed all of that. With the onset of equality came the realisation that we, too, could indulge in more than the occasional drink. We quickly adopted the European model, believing a glass or two of wine every night was a sophisticated method of relaxation.

It was a great stress relief, we would tell ourselves. The more we took on -- marriage, full-time work, children, the juggle -- the more we deserved a drink or three at night.

One girlfriend of mine confessed at a girls' dinner a decade ago that her two glasses had become a bottle because her husband was away working so much. My own husband was constantly away, so it was easy to fall into the trap of either drinking alone or doing it with friends in the pub after work. For every one of us, our mother's single glass had become more than half a bottle a night.

We are now raising a whole new generation of modern women. They outsmart boys in their final year of high school, top the state in everything, including maths, and play males off a break in social situations.

Quite simply, there is nothing they can't do -- including drinking blokes under the table.

T HEY have watched their mothers drink since they were toddlers. The only difference is their choice of drink. Alcopops are perfect because of their sweetness. When they became too expensive, girls worked out pretty quickly that it was the vodka in these sweet bottles of rocket fuel that was making such a quick impact on

their sobriety.

One thing is certain from all of this -- we have a massive problem on our hands that was of our own making.

Nobody can blame these young women for taking what they have seen in their own homes one step further.

It is what we did. Our biggest regret could well be that we did not stop at one like our mums did.