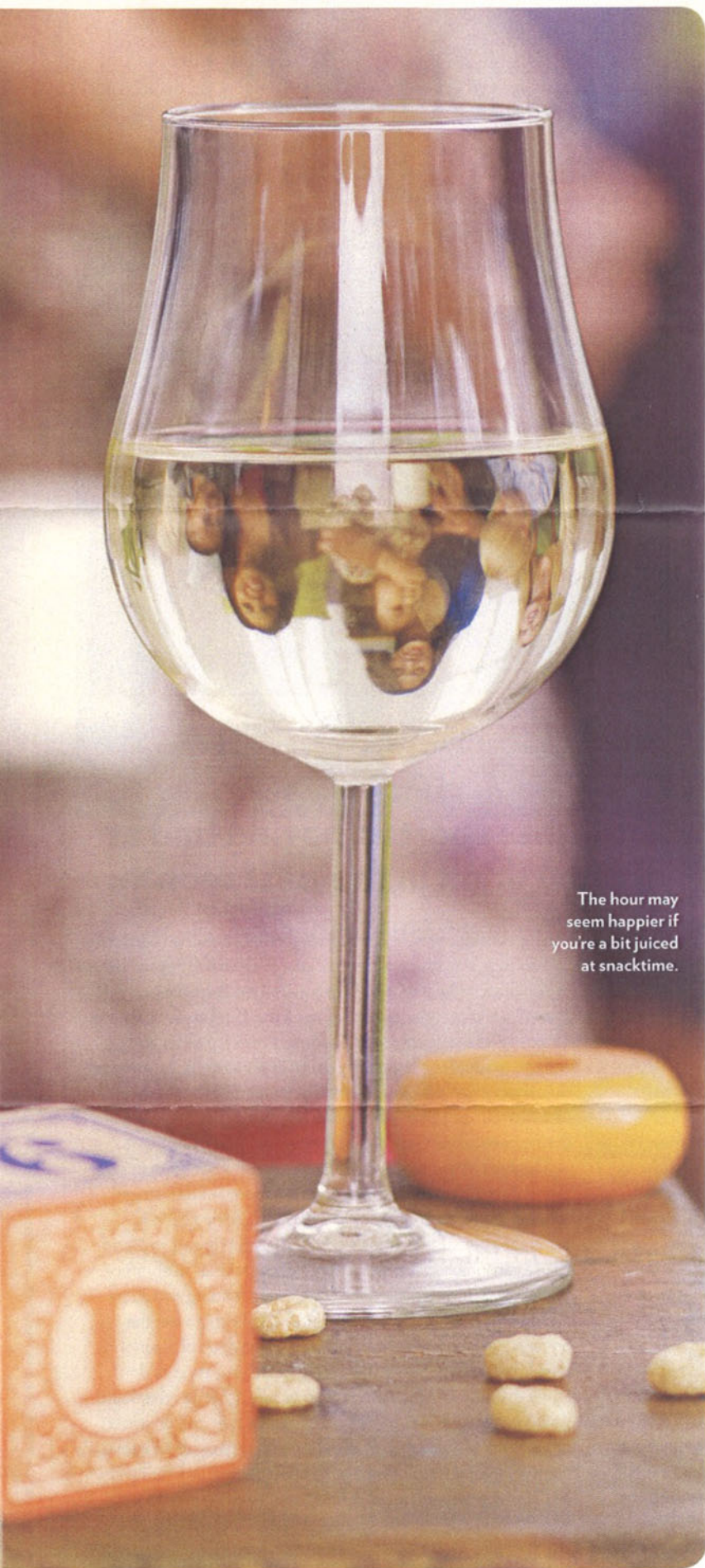


Playdates WITH Cocktails

Lots of women see nothing wrong with nursing a drink while minding the kids, but some experts are quick to dish out sobering news about moms and alcohol.

BY KELLEY KING HEYWORTH
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BUFF STRICKLAND





The hour may seem happier if you're a bit juiced at snacktime.

The sun is setting over Hollywood, Florida, and friends and business partners Courtney Brietstein and Jennifer Walrave are catching up over mojitos. As the women often do at the end of a long or stressful day, they chat about work and family and sip their own blend of rum, mint, lime, Sprite Zero, and crushed ice that hits the spot.

The scene could pass for happy hour at any watering hole—except that the bar, in this case, is a suburban kitchen table. The mojitos were mixed by Walrave, using a sprig of mint from her garden. And the loud voices on the other side of the room are their four rowdy children under the age of 5.

"The kids run around and play, and we get to relax a little," Brietstein says. "We have one drink—maybe two. We make sure the kids aren't running into the countertops. And after a couple of hours, we walk home. It's like any playdate—just a little more fun."

These two aren't the only ones who are unapologetically mixing alcohol and child care. A new survey commissioned by *Parents* found that 41 percent of moms are having playdates with cocktails or would like to try them. The Facebook group "OMG! I So Need a Glass of Wine or I'm Gonna Sell My Kids" has swelled to more than 72,000 members since launching last December. You can search for "Babies in Bars" on citysearch.com, and if you Google "Momtini," you'll find dozens of options, from vodka-infused pudding shots ("fun for your mom get-together!") to a concoction of coffee and Kahlúa ("cuts the edge after a long day of doing chores").

Are today's mothers really heavier drinkers—or are they just more open about it? Women overall are consuming more alcohol than ever, according to a large study from the University of Washington, in Seattle. And the drinking divide between moms and women without kids is hardly dramatic: A 2009 survey by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that 55 percent of women with a child as young as 15 months old had at least one drink in the past month, while 63 percent of those without children did.

However, there's little data about when the average mom is drinking. "Of course, the issue is whether alcohol consumption is interfering with safe and effective parenting," says Janet Golden, Ph.D., professor of history at the Center for Children and Childhood Studies at Rutgers University in Camden, New Jersey. "Are women drinking and driving with children in the car or are they consuming moderate amounts of alcohol with meals or after their kids are asleep?"

Certainly, the recent tragic car crash caused by Diane Schuler, a mom from West Babylon, New York, is a chilling reminder of just how dangerous this scenario can be. Schuler reportedly had the equivalent of ten shots in her system when she drove the wrong way on a parkway—killing her 2-year-old daughter, three young nieces, three men in another vehicle, and herself. In fact, the number of women arrested for driving under the influence increased 29 percent between 1997 and 2007, according to the FBI. There's not much research about the rate of kids' accidents at home when a parent is drinking, but one study from Albert Einstein College of Medicine, in the Bronx, New York, found that kids of women who are problem drinkers have double the risk of serious injuries as kids whose mothers don't drink.

In a recent Parents.com poll, 60 percent of readers said they know a mom who drinks too much—and there's an increasingly vocal debate about moms and alcohol. For every mom who's affronted by the suggestion that she can't care for her kids after a single, legal adult beverage, there's one who's aghast at the notion of sipping a martini while her kids are slurping juice boxes. "If you're the primary caregiver, I don't think you should be drinking," says Merritt Patterson, of University Park, Texas, who's written articles on her local paper's Website to decry an unnamed group of moms she's seen drinking wine at lunch before driving to pick up their kids. "Even if you aren't driving, your kids could wander out of the house, fall into the pool, or stick their finger in a socket."

Legal Limits

Alcohol is a thorny subject the moment a woman discovers she's a mother-to-be. Since the 1980s, doctors have been advising women to cut back on heavy drinking during pregnancy to prevent fetal alcohol syndrome, a pattern of mental and physical defects in newborns. But more recent research suggests that even light drinking might lead to more subtle developmental delays. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) issued a statement last year that "no amount of alcohol consumption



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can be considered safe during pregnancy," and the March of Dimes suggests that women abstain even while they're trying to conceive. However, one in eight women drink some alcohol while pregnant, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—and women who are older and college graduates are actually more likely to imbibe. Some of them might get the green light from their doctor: As recently as 2000, about half of physicians felt that occasional drinking during pregnancy was safe, according an ACOG survey.

The rules about drinking are somewhat fuzzier for nursing moms. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "breastfeeding mothers should avoid the use of alcoholic beverages because alcohol is concentrated in breast milk and its use can inhibit milk production. An occasional celebratory, single, small drink is acceptable, but breastfeeding should be avoided for two hours after drinking." Women can use the home test Milkscreen to see if the concentration of alcohol in their breast milk is higher than .03 percent, but experts don't agree that lower levels are necessarily safe. On the other hand, La Leche League says there's no evidence that one drink per day is harmful to a baby. "I tell patients they shouldn't deprive themselves of a glass of wine with dinner," says Jack Newman, M.D., who opened Canada's first breastfeeding clinic, in

Ontario. "Nevertheless, most don't drink while breastfeeding."

By the time they wean their baby, many women haven't had a drink in well over a year—and are ready for one. In the new mothers' support groups she runs at New York City's Soho Parenting, psychotherapist Lisa Spiegel hears women talk and joke about alcohol. "I hear things like, 'By the second drink the whining wasn't bothering me so much,'" she says.

Of course, having a drink can lighten the mood, whether it's happy hour or witching hour. But Suniya Luthar, Ph.D., a psychologist at Columbia University's Teachers College, in New York City, thinks deeper forces are at work when it comes to the bonding effects of alcohol for today's moms. Initial evidence from an ongoing study she is conducting shows that upper-middle-class moms drink as much or more than lower-income moms who have a history of substance abuse. The women who drink more also say they have a tough time presenting their "real selves" to others. "It's difficult for many moms to admit they're having trouble coping with the hard job of motherhood," says Dr. Luthar. "They may need a drink or two in order to be truly authentic with each other."

It's no wonder, then, that women who drink wine or Irish coffee at a playdate or a first birthday party gravitate toward others who do too. "The cocktail playdate has come to represent a mother who's hip, cool, and won't lose her selfhood after she's had kids," says Rachael Brownell, a blogger and mom of three in Seattle.

Buzzed at Bedtime

For many moms, however, having a drink during a busy day or evening is simply a way to relax that doesn't cut into family time as much as a pedicure or a yoga class would. "Anything that a mother does to take care of herself makes her a better parent—and that may include a small amount of drinking around the kids, especially with her husband or friends," says Andrea Hussong, Ph.D., professor of psychology at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

However, there can be a fine line between enjoying a drink and depending on one. "Mothers should ask themselves if the cocktails are becoming more central than the socializing," says Dr. Hussong. The postpartum period is a particularly high-risk time because it's such a major transition, especially if you have a family history of alcohol abuse and tend to drink alone to manage stress. "Addiction can sneak up on women," says Stephanie Gamble, Ph.D.,

assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Rochester Medical Center, in Rochester, New York.

This was the case for Stefanie Wilder-Taylor, who celebrated the liberating effects of mommy cocktails in her books *Sippy Cups Are Not for Chardonnay* and *Naptime Is the New Happy Hour*. She shocked her fans several months ago when she admitted on her blog that she had an alcohol problem and had decided to become sober. "For me, drinking with friends wasn't as much of a problem as drinking alone at night—a few glasses I felt I deserved at the end of a long day," says Wilder-Taylor, a mom of three in Los Angeles. "One day, I woke up with a hangover and went, 'Wow.' Sure, my life is stressful, but that's not a situation I can drink my way through. When I blogged about it, e-mails poured in. It's amazing how many other moms are just checking out at night."

Brownell chronicles a similar tale in her recent memoir, *Mommy Doesn't Drink Here Anymore*. "It wasn't as if I was getting sloshed and driving," she says. "I just noticed that I was starting to look forward to my 4 P.M. glass of wine and that I'd watch the clock. I wasn't really present with my kids."

Children are surprisingly clued in to their parents' drinking habits—for better or worse. "There's an idea out there that if we raise kids with the so-called European model—where drinking at the table is the norm and adults consume

responsibly—that our children will grow up to use alcohol responsibly as well," says Dr. Hussong. "However, research shows that this is not likely to be effective." One study of preschoolers found that children whose parents drank once a month or more were three times more likely to "purchase" alcohol during a role-play game at a pretend supermarket.

The best approach is to drink moderately around your kids and not to hide it, says Dr. Hussong. "Label it as an adult drink, and avoid giving your child sips, which sends a mixed message. If you start talking about using alcohol responsibly as early as second grade, it'll be easier to broach the topic when the conversations get harder in middle school."

Because there are no official guidelines about drinking on the 24-hour-a-day job of motherhood, the momtini debate will continue. But everyone agrees that most parents could use a few playdates of their own. "Women who feel they have the right to drink while they're with their kids probably need more adult time," says Dr. Hussong. Hiring a babysitter might be more fun for everyone. □

WHAT ABOUT FATHERS?

Somewhat lost in this debate is the fact that dads—shocking news alert—have been known to enjoy a drink during family time too. In fact, about one in three fathers report binge drinking in the past 30 days, compared with one in six mothers, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

But dads' drinking may affect their kids more than they think. Children with alcoholic fathers, for instance, have a higher rate of anxiety and depression as early as age 2. Clearly, it's wise for dads to watch their intake when they're around the kids and to take advantage of opportunities to talk about drinking. Says Dr. Andrea Hussong, "There are a lot of messages out there that it's okay for men to drink heavily or irresponsibly, and fathers can do a lot to counter that."