

Adult-supervised drinking in young teens may lead to more alcohol use, consequences

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PISCATAWAY, NJ – Allowing adolescents to drink alcohol under adult supervision does not appear to teach responsible drinking as teens get older. In fact, such a “harm-minimization” approach may actually lead to more drinking and alcohol-related consequences, according to a new study in the May 2011 issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

“Kids need parents to be parents and not drinking buddies,” according to the study’s lead researcher, Barbara J. McMorris, Ph.D., of the School of Nursing at the University of Minnesota. Allowing adolescents to drink with adults present but not when unsupervised may send mixed signals. “Adults need to be clear about what messages they are sending.”

In general, parents tend to take one of two approaches toward teen drinking. Some allow their adolescent children to consume alcohol in small amounts on occasion if an adult is present. The thinking is that teens will learn to drink responsibly if introduced to alcohol slowly in a controlled environment. This has been the predominant approach in many countries, including Australia.

A second approach is one of “zero tolerance” for youth drinking, meaning that teens should not be allowed to drink alcohol under any circumstances. This less permissive position is predominant in the United States, with local laws and national policies often advocating total abstinence for adolescents.

To test how these different approaches are related to teen drinking, McMorris and colleagues from the Centre for Adolescent Health in Melbourne, Australia, and the Social Development Research Group in Seattle surveyed more than 1,900 seventh graders. About half were from Victoria, Australia; the rest were from Washington State. From seventh to ninth grade, investigators asked the youths about such factors as alcohol use, problems they had as a result of alcohol consumption, and how often had they consumed alcohol with an adult present.

By eighth grade, about 67% of Victorian youths had consumed alcohol with an adult present, as did 35% of those in Washington State, reflecting general cultural attitudes. In ninth grade, 36% of Australian teens compared with 21% of American teens had experienced alcohol-related consequences, such as not being able to stop drinking, getting into fights, or having blackouts. However, regardless of whether they were from Australia or the United States, youths who were allowed to drink with an adult present had increased levels of alcohol use and were more likely to have experienced harmful consequences by the ninth grade.

The researchers suggest that allowing adolescents to drink with adults present may act to encourage alcohol consumption. According to the authors, their results suggest that parents adopt a “no-use” policy for young adolescents. “Kids need black and white messages early on,” says McMorris. “Such messages will help reinforce limits as teens get older and opportunities to drink increase.”

In a related study in the May issue of *JSAD*, researchers from The Netherlands found that, among 500 12- to -15-year olds, the only parenting factor related to adolescent drinking was the amount of alcohol available in the home. In fact, the amount of alcohol parents themselves drank was not a factor in adolescent drinking. These results suggest that parents should only keep alcohol where it is inaccessible to teens. In addition, parents should “set strict rules regarding alcohol use, particularly when a total absence of alcoholic drinks at home is not feasible,” according to lead researcher Regina van den Eijnden, Ph.D., of Utrecht University in The Netherlands.

“Both studies show that parents matter,” McMorris concludes. “Despite the fact that peers and friends become important influences as adolescents get older, parents still have a big impact.”

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