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### **Study: Adult-supervised drinking harms teens, saying 'no' better**

by PRISCILLA KUNAMALLA

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Parents who allow their teens to drink in adult-supervised settings, hoping it will teach them responsible drinking, may be doing more harm than good, according to a study published in the May issue of the Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs.

"Parents face a real dilemma," said lead investigator Barbara J. McMorris, of the School of Nursing at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. "If they forbid it, they're worrying that their son or daughter is going to be drinking in an unsupervised setting with friends. Parents wonder whether it's better to allow their teen to drink at home under their supervision so that they might learn to drink responsibly."

In addition to resulting in negative outcomes for the teens themselves, parents who allow minors to drink under their watch can face serious legal consequences.

In 2007 Deerfield parents were convicted for endangering the life of a child when they allowed teens to drink at a homecoming party held in their home, contributing to the drunk driving deaths of two partygoers.

The study suggests that the "zero tolerance" approach predominantly used in the U.S., which discourages any underage drinking, is ultimately better for teens.

On the other hand adult-supervised drinking, using what researchers refer to as the "harm minimization" approach, primarily followed by parents in Europe and Australia where attitudes toward drinking are more relaxed than their American counterparts.

McMorris and her team, collaborating with the Social Development Research Group in Seattle and the Centre for Adolescent Health in Melbourne, Australia, surveyed over two years more than 1,900 7th graders over two years in both the U.S. and Australia on their drinking habits and family rules.

By the 8th grade about 67 percent of Australian youths and 35 percent of American youths said they consumed alcohol with an adult present, which was expected because of the different approaches used in the two countries.

However, key differences arose in the 9th grade, when 36 percent of Australian youth, compared with 21 percent of American youths said they had experienced alcohol-related consequences such as not being able to stop drinking, getting into fights and experiencing blackouts.

"If harm minimization works, teens in Australia should experience less harmful consequences of alcohol use," McMorris said. "That's not what we found. Even though kids in Australia are drinking in supervised contexts, they're suffering more negative consequences."

John D. Kassel, an associate professor and director of clinical training at the University of Illinois at Chicago's psychology department, was surprised by the findings.

"My own clinical experience with addictive behaviors and substance abuse suggests that harm minimization is ultimately a better approach than complete abstinence. But I have to say, I was swayed by these findings," he said.

Compared with other drugs, the risk of becoming addicted to alcohol is fairly low, according to Kassel. However, he said that risk varies depending on how young a person is when they start drinking.

The younger people are when they start experimenting with drugs or alcohol, the greater the risk that they will eventually suffer alcohol or drug-related problems, including the development of dependence, according to Kassel.

"Our society in the United States is rather hypocritical and ambivalent about alcohol use," Kassel said. "Though it's illegal for anyone under 21 years of age, it has become a very socially sanctioned activity."

Despite the societal and peer influences on teenagers, McMorris said parents play a pivotal role in their children's attitudes toward drinking.

"Even though friends become increasingly influential as teenagers get into high school, parents still play a major role in the lives of their kids," she said. "Kids need their parents to be parents. They need them to be the positive adults in their lives. They need them to set boundaries."



*Priscilla Kunamalla/MEDILL*

*Teens allowed to drink in adult-supervised settings are more likely to experience negative consequences, such as not being able to stop drinking, experiencing blackouts and getting into fights, according to a new study.*