

## Should Adults Allow Supervised Teen Drinking?

### Study Shows Teens Who Drink Under Watchful Eye of Adults Aren't Immune From Later Alcohol Problems

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April 28, 2011 -- Letting younger [teens](#) drink alcohol with supervision from mom and dad may lead to higher drinking rates and more alcohol-related problems as kids get older than a "zero tolerance" approach, a new study suggests.

The research offers an international perspective on underage drinking and parental supervision since it looked at two countries on opposite sides of the globe with different attitudes toward it.

In the study, published in the May issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, scientists compared the opinions of 1,945 seventh-grade students and their parents over a three-year period. Slightly less than half the group came from Washington state while the rest were from Victoria, Australia.

Many parents in Australia gradually introduce teens to alcohol in supervised settings with adults monitoring them. This "harm-minimization" approach views alcohol as a normal part of growing up and involving parents in overseeing this behavior helps teens learn responsible drinking later on.

In the U.S., on the other hand, many parents have a "zero-tolerance" approach that frowns on all youth drinking.

#### Supervised Teen Drinking

Students completed a written survey each year from seventh through ninth grade, and parents did a one-time phone survey during the first year of the project.

Seventh-graders in Australia reported more alcohol use (59%) than their U.S. peers (39%). By eighth grade, two-thirds of the Australian teens had tried alcohol with adult supervision, but little more than a third of the American adolescents had.

In ninth grade, 71% of the teens from Australia drank, compared to 45% in Washington. Besides higher usage, more than one-third of the Australian youngsters reported having a drinking-related problem, such as getting sick, passing out, or losing control, while roughly one-fifth of the American teens did.

#### Later Problems With Alcohol

Researchers found that the younger students were when they first started drinking, the more likely they were to continue drinking by ninth grade and have a negative experience with alcohol. This was true in both countries. But drinking at an earlier age under the watch of parents seemed to lead to higher rates of alcohol-related problems in Australian youths. A more permissive [parenting](#) approach to alcohol appeared to encourage drinking but didn't necessarily teach safe, responsible drinking.

"Kids need parents to be parents and not drinking buddies," says study researcher Barbara J. McMorris, PhD, a senior research associate in the department of adolescent health and medicine at the University of Minnesota, in a news release.

McMorris also advises that parents enforce a "no-use" policy to teen drinking. "Kids need black and white messages early on," she says, and setting and reinforcing these limits when teens are younger may help reduce harmful alcohol use as they get older.

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#### SOURCES:

McMorris, B. J. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, May 2011; vol 72: pp 418-428.

News release, *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

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