

# Parental drinking and parenting practices influence adolescent drinking

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Adolescence is a critical time of development on many different levels, but especially concerning the initiation and escalation of alcohol use. For example, the proportion of American adolescents who regularly drink alcohol roughly doubles during secondary-school years. New findings show that parental drinking both *directly* influences adolescent drinking, as well as *indirectly* through adolescent perceptions of parenting, especially monitoring and discipline received.

Results are published in the February issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research*.

“We wanted to, first, examine the extent of the relationship between the drinking behaviors of parents and those of their adolescent offspring at 14 and 17.5 years of age,” said Shawn J. Latendresse, a postdoctoral research fellow at the Virginia Institute for Psychiatric and Behavioral Genetics at Virginia Commonwealth University, and corresponding author for the study. “Second, we wanted to determine how much of that association was due to parents' drinking behaviors affecting their ability to parent responsibly, which translated into a risky or protective environment.”

“There is little question that parental behaviors influence adolescent alcohol use,” added Michael Windle, Rollins Professor and chair of the department of behavioral sciences and health education at Emory University. “However, much remains to be known about *how*, specifically, parental influences impact adolescent behaviors, including

alcohol use.”

Researchers examined data from 4,731 adolescents (2,402 males, 2,329 females) and their parents (87% with data from both parents, 13% with data from only one parent), gathered through an ongoing Finnish population-based, developmental twin study of health-related behaviors and correlated risk factors. Parents were asked about their frequencies of alcohol use and intoxication, as well as their lifetime prevalence of alcohol-related problems. Adolescents reported on perceptions of the parenting that they received, as well as their own prevalence of alcohol use and intoxication at 14 and 17.5 years of age.

The findings were twofold: first, among the parenting dimensions examined, monitoring and discipline played the strongest intermediary role in associations between parental and adolescent drinking behaviors; and second, the magnitude of this mediating role was much stronger during early adolescence, whereas parental drinking had more direct associations with their offspring’s drinking in later adolescence.

“These two dimensions of more parental control – monitoring and discipline – may be useful targets for the development of intervention studies,” said Windle. “The second finding is important in identifying the differential influences of parenting behaviors at different stages of adolescent development. From a developmental perspective, older adolescents are much more influenced by other socialization agents, especially peers, and perhaps stronger genetic influences, whereas in early adolescence parenting practices are more highly influential. These findings are important for designing age-appropriate interventions whereby parenting practices may play a prominent role in early adolescence, but peer, parental drinking, and other factors may need to be focused on in later adolescence.”

“With respect to individual aspects of parenting, our analyses show that

parental alcohol use, intoxication, and problem drinking symptoms are consistently associated with decreases in monitoring and increases in discipline,” said Latendresse. “Decreases in monitoring are related to higher levels of adolescent alcohol use at age 14 and more frequent intoxication at both 14 and 17.5. Likewise, increases in discipline are linked to more frequent use and intoxication, but only when adolescents are 17.5. Although these findings are consistent with the protective effects of parental monitoring, it is important to note that excessive discipline may actually have the unintended effect of conveying greater risk for alcohol-related behaviors among adolescents as they get older, and are seeking a greater sense of autonomy.”

Both Latendresse and Windle spoke of the need to recognize that what parents *do* as individuals and how they *behave* as parents both have a huge impact on their children’s alcohol use.

“This awareness provides us with some tangible targets for prevention,” said Latendresse, “that is, knowing where one's children are, what they are doing, etc., and not exerting excessive control or discipline to the extent that it actually subverts a child's need to develop their independence.”

“Furthermore,” added Windle, “this awareness may be viewed as an empowering finding for parents; and, ideally, parents in need will be proactive and seek assistance to reduce their own drinking behavior and/or strengthen their parenting skills.”

Source: Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research

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