

Children are introduced to sipping and tasting alcohol in the home

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“Almost all of the limited scientific literature on alcohol use in children has focused on drinking, not sipping or tasting alcohol,” said John E. Donovan, an associate professor of psychiatry and epidemiology at the University of Pittsburgh. “Local community studies seem to show that drinking by children – not sipping – correlates with higher levels of disinhibition, more positive alcohol expectancies, more peer alcohol use, and lower school grades, just as it does in adolescence.”

Donovan, also the corresponding author for the study, added that most surveys of adolescent and child drug and alcohol use ask about ever having had *more than a few sips* of alcohol. “This type of question essentially ignores the alcohol experience of those who have only had sips and tastes of alcohol, which can be a substantial number of children,” he said. “I wanted to determine what percentage of young children have had this level of experience with alcohol, and to find out if children who have only sipped alcohol are different from those who have not.”

Researchers used targeted-age directory sampling and random-digit dialing to recruit a sample of 452 children (214 boys, 238 girls), aged eight or 10, and their families from Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. The children reported their own sipping or tasting, as well as their perceptions of alcohol-related parental beliefs and behavior, through computer-assisted interviews. Parents were also interviewed.

“Nearly forty percent of children aged eight to 10 have sipped or tasted

alcohol, whereas only six percent have ever had a drink of alcohol,” said Donovan. “If one only asked about drinks, one would have the impression that few children at these ages have had experience with alcohol, whereas the reality is that nearly seven times as many have had some experience. Second, alcohol is most often sipped by children in the family context or during religious services, and almost never with friends or when alone. Third, children in families in which the parents drink are at greater risk for having sipped or tasted alcohol as young as age eight or 10. Additionally, children whose parents drink more frequently are at higher risk of having had a sip or taste of alcohol. Surprisingly, it appears that much of this greater risk is *not* due to parents having offered the children alcohol: a third of the mothers and half of the fathers whose children have sipped alcohol are not aware of it.”

“In short,” commented Robert A. Zucker, director of the Addiction Research Center at the University of Michigan, “early encounter with alcohol in young children is largely an opportunistic experience, related to what happens in the family, such as drinking at family dinners, or at family celebrations such as weddings, barbecues, etc., and the fact that parents are themselves drinkers. Thus, young children’s sipping/tasting of alcohol reflects parental modeling of alcohol use and increased opportunities to try alcohol in the home rather than deliberate family socialization of alcohol use.”

“People need to recognize that parents are not the only source of models for drinking to which children are exposed,” added Donovan. “They are literally bombarded by beer commercials on TV, by alcohol ads in magazines and on the radio, and by characters in primetime TV shows and even in half of all animated children’s films who are shown drinking alcohol ... usually without any negative consequences like bar fights, unwanted or unintended sexual experiences, or car crashes. Children whose parents do not drink, or who do not drink in the presence of their children, are also exposed to these other models for alcohol use. Seeing

their own parents drinking, however, is an important predictor of whether they themselves have ever had a sip or a taste of alcohol.”

Both Donovan and Zucker noted that even though it appears that by age 10, roughly half the population has had some personal experience with alcohol, sipping/tasting by children does *not* seem to be associated with a tendency to engage in delinquent or other problem behavior.

“We still do not have a clear sense of what the longer-term outcomes are of early sipping/tasting,” said Zucker. “Only when this study, and others like it, follow these children into adolescence will we have the full picture of what the long-term consequences of this early experience are.”

Donovan confirmed that this study is part of the first wave of an ongoing longitudinal study of these children. “We need to study alcohol use in ways that are developmentally appropriate,” he said. “When studying childhood, it is important to study sipping and tasting, but not important to study alcohol dependence. In adolescence, it is much less important to study sipping and tasting, but more important to study alcohol abuse and dependence. Furthermore, we hear over and over again about the importance of peer pressure for adolescent drinking and drug use. Here we can see that if you focus on the earliest stages of involvement in alcohol use, the most important influences are parents and the family context, not peers.”

Source: University of Michigan Addiction Research Center

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