



Parents' and students' reports of parenting: Which are more reliably associated with college student drinking?

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Compared parents' and college students' reports of parenting for consistency.
- ▶ Assessed which source of data was more reliably associated with college drinking.
- ▶ Consistency between parents' and students' reports was moderate.
- ▶ Students' data were more reliably associated with longitudinal drinking outcomes.

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ABSTRACT

Recent efforts to reduce college student heavy episodic drinking have examined parental influences, with the goal of continually refining parent-based interventions (PBIs). This research has primarily relied on student-reported data, which is often cited as a methodological limitation although the degree to which parent- and student-reported data on parenting behaviors correspond is unknown. The goals of the present study were to assess the level of consistency between parent- and student-reported data for commonly examined parenting constructs and compare their associations with college student drinking. Data were collected from a sample of 145 parent–student dyads using a longitudinal design. At baseline, parents and students reported on parental monitoring, approval of light and moderate/heavy drinking, and permissiveness. At a 10-month follow up, students reported on their typical weekly drinking and consequences. Parents' and students' reports of parenting behavior at baseline were compared and their associations with student drinking and consequences at follow up were assessed. Agreement between parents' and students' reports of parenting was fair to moderate, with intraclass correlation coefficients ranging from .34 to .61. Student-reported data were more reliably associated with student drinking at follow up. Studies examining parent influences on college student drinking, including research on PBIs, do not appear to be limited by using student-reported data. Implications for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

College student heavy episodic drinking is a high-risk health behavior associated with short- and long-term consequences and harm to the larger campus community (Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005; Nelson, Xuan, Lee, Weitzman, & Wechsler, 2009; Read, Beattie, Chamberlain, & Merrill, 2008; Wechsler et al., 2002). Studies have shown that student-reported parental behavior, such as monitoring, is negatively related to college student drinking, whereas other student-reported parenting behavior, such as permissiveness and approval of alcohol use, is positively related to college

student drinking (e.g., Abar, 2012; Borsari, Murphy, & Barnett, 2007; Cail & LaBrie, 2010; LaBrie & Sessoms, 2012; Livingston, Testa, Hoffman, & Windle, 2010; Patock-Peckham, King, Morgan-Lopez, Ulloa, & Filson-Moses, 2011; Turrisi & Ray, 2010; Wood, Read, Mitchell, & Brand, 2004; Varvil-Weld, Mallett, Turrisi, & Abar, 2012). In turn, parent-based interventions are increasingly becoming a widespread intervention strategy used to combat high-risk drinking by providing parents with communication tips and information that can be used in conversations with their college-bound teens (e.g., Cleveland, Lanza, Ray, Turrisi, & Mallett, 2011; Ichiyama et al., 2009; Mallett et al., 2010; Testa, Hoffman, Livingston, & Turrisi, 2010; Turrisi, Jaccard, Taki, Dunham, & Grimes, 2001; Turrisi et al., 2009). The content of PBIs is based on empirical work documenting associations between student-reported protective parenting behaviors and lower levels of college drinking (e.g., Borsari et al., 2007; Fairlie, Wood, & Laird, 2012;

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LaBrie & Sessoms, 2012; Patock-Peckham et al., 2011; Turrise & Ray, 2010; Wood et al., 2004), and between student-reported risky parenting behaviors and heavier drinking (Abar & Turrise, 2008; Livingston et al., 2010; Varvil-Weld et al., 2012).

Reliance on students' reports of their parents' behavior, rather than parents' own reports, is commonly noted as a methodological limitation of research in this domain (see Abar, 2012; Fairlie et al., 2012; Varvil-Weld et al., 2012; Wood et al., 2004). Although it is often assumed that collecting parents' reports might provide unique information beyond students' reports, to date there has been a reliance on students primarily due to the ease of data collection. In fact, research with adolescents suggests students' perceptions of their parents' behavior may be more important than their parents' actual behavior. For example, research with middle school students showed parents' reports of parenting were not significantly predictive of student alcohol use while students' reports were (Cohen & Rice, 1997; Holmbeck, Li, Verrill Schurman, Friedman, & Millstein Coakley, 2002; Jacob & Windle, 1999). This suggests that students' perceptions have a stronger influence on their behavior than parents' perceptions. This research has not yet been extended to families with college-age students, despite the increasing quantity of parent-focused etiological and intervention research with emerging adult populations. Of greater relevance for prevention, it remains unknown whether the correspondence between parents' reports and student drinking changes for older individuals and whether parents' reports potentially provide additional unique predictive variance for improving behavior change efforts.

The present study had two goals in order to identify the optimal method for studying parental influences on college student drinking. The first was to assess the degree of consistency between parents' and students' reports of parenting behaviors. Based on the work conducted by Holmbeck et al. (2002), we hypothesize that parent- and student-reported data will have a low concordance rate. However, it is also possible that since college students tend to be more mature than younger adolescents, they will have more insightful perceptions of their parents' behaviors due to more open communication as they age. Therefore an alternative hypothesis is there will be greater correspondence between parental reports and student drinking behaviors in our college sample than has been observed in the literature examining earlier adolescence. The second aim of the study was to compare the extent to which parents' and students' reports of parenting were associated with college student drinking and consequences. Drawing on the research summarized above, we hypothesize that students' perceptions of their parents' behavior will be more reliably associated with drinking and consequences than parents' perceptions of their own behavior.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 145 parent–student dyads at a large, public northeastern university. Parents in the sample reported a mean age of 50.0 years ($SD = 5.6$) at baseline and identified as mostly Caucasian/white (91.7%) and female (80.7%). A majority of parents were married (89.0%), and approximately two-thirds of parents completed a Bachelor's degree (52.1%) or a more advanced degree (16.7%).

The mean age for the student sample was 18.6 years ($SD = .5$) at baseline, and the sample was 57.9% female. The racial background of the student sample was as follows: 91.0% Caucasian, 4.8% Asian, 2.8% Hispanic, 2.1% African American, and 1.4% multi-racial or other.

2.2. Recruitment and procedures

Participants were recruited in the summer prior to college matriculation using a two-step process. First, students were randomly selected

from the university registrar's database of incoming freshmen. Invitation letters listing study procedures, compensation, the URL for the online survey, and a personal identification number (PIN) were first mailed on university letterhead and then emailed (for convenience) to all potential participants. There was a 66% response rate for students at the time of recruitment. Students provided informed consent at the time of enrollment in the study, and students under the age of 18 were required to provide parental consent along with their own assent. Data from the time of enrollment were not used in the present study. Instead, baseline student data was collected in spring of the first year to correspond to parent data. Follow-up data were collected in the fall of the second year and were similar to baseline (e.g., measures of parenting, drinking, consequences, etc.). There was an 80% retention rate for students at follow-up. Students received \$20 for completion of each survey, and they received a \$5 bonus if they responded within 48 h of recruitment.

Parent data were collected at the time point corresponding to students' baseline only. Parents were sent a package containing a letter explaining the study, a consent form for participation, and a brief survey assessing parent–teen communication (items are described below), which was returned in a stamped, addressed envelope. The response rate for parents was 63%, and parents received \$30 for their participation. All procedures and measures were reviewed and approved by the study university's Institutional Review Board.

Only students whose parents completed the parent assessment and who provided both baseline and follow-up data were included in the present study ($N = 145$). There were no significant differences in drinking behaviors or demographic factors between students whose parents responded and students of non-responding parents.

2.3. Measures

Both parents and students reported on parents' monitoring, levels of drinking approval, and appropriate limits regarding alcohol consumption at baseline. Parents were asked to report on their own behaviors, while students were asked to report on their perceptions of their parents' behaviors. Items were phrased so that the parent and student versions of each item closely corresponded and referred to parenting during the first year of college. At follow-up, students reported on their own drinking and alcohol-related consequences over the first year of college. These measures are described in more detail below.

2.3.1. Parenting behaviors: parent- and student-reported

2.3.1.1. Monitoring: parent-reported. Parental monitoring was measured using two items asking parents, “to what extent [they] try to know:” 1) about their son's/daughter's activities in their free time, and 2) about their son's/daughter's drinking. Response options ranged from ‘1’ (I don't try) to ‘3’ (I try a lot). Items were summed to create a composite monitoring score, where higher scores indicated more monitoring ($\alpha = .68$).

2.3.1.2. Monitoring: student-reported. Students indicated the extent to which their parents try to know about what they do in their free time and about their drinking. Response options ranged from ‘1’ (they don't try) to ‘3’ (they try a lot). Items were summed to create a single composite score of monitoring and higher scores indicated more perceived monitoring ($\alpha = .70$).

2.3.1.3. Parental approval of light and moderate/heavy drinking: parent-reported. Three items were used to measure parental approval of drinking. Principal components factor analyses revealed two factors (factor loadings $> .70$). The first factor was composed of a single item, “I would approve of my son/daughter drinking 1 or 2 drinks on one occasion,” and was labeled approval of light drinking. The second factor consisted of two items that asked whether parents

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