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Parental drinking and characteristics of family life as predictors of preschoolers' alcohol-related knowledge and norms[☆]

Emmanuel Kuntsche^{a,b,*}, Sandra Kuntsche^a^a Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, La Trobe University, Melbourne, VIC 3086, Australia^b Behavioural Science Institute, Radboud University Nijmegen, PO Box 9104, 6500 HE Nijmegen, the Netherlands

HIGHLIGHTS

- Not much is known regarding where early alcohol knowledge and norms (AKN) originate.
- 214 3–6-year olds completed the electronic Appropriate Beverage Task.
- AKN was higher when parents drank frequently, at higher quantity or during meals.
- Frequent contact with other adults (relatives or at fairs) also increased AKN.
- No effects for parental binge drinking, TV viewing, or single-parent households.

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ABSTRACT

While risky drinking in adolescence has been found to be rooted in childhood, evidence is scarce regarding where early alcohol-related knowledge originates. This study investigates preschoolers' alcohol-related knowledge about beverage names, content and social norms (i.e. drinking to be common among men and at parties) depending on parental alcohol consumption patterns and characteristics of family life. In French-speaking Switzerland, 214 three to six year olds completed the electronic Appropriate Beverage Task (Kuntsche, Le Mével, & Zucker, 2016) while their parents (205 mothers, 154 fathers) were surveyed with a questionnaire. The results showed that when parents drank frequently, at higher quantity, or during meals, their children knew more about the names of alcoholic beverages and the social norms of consumption. No effect was found for parental binge drinking or living in a single-parent household. Frequent contact with adults outside the immediate family (visits from relatives and going to fairs and neighborhood parties) but not television viewing was associated with both knowing the name and the alcoholic content of alcoholic beverages. To conclude, this study indicates that the knowledge of children aged three to six about the content, name and consumption norms of alcoholic beverages does not only depend on the drinking frequency and quantity of their parents, but also on contact with adults outside the immediate family. When frequently surrounded by alcohol-consuming adults, children may get the impression that alcohol consumption is a common human behavior, which may put them at risk for early alcohol initiation and risky drinking later in life.

1. Introduction

Research has shown that the determinants of alcohol consumption and risky drinking in adolescence and beyond are rooted much earlier in life (Zucker, Donovan, Masten, Mattson, & Moss, 2008). Already at age three to six, for example, the majority of children are able to identify alcoholic beverages from pictures and to indicate who is

normally drinking what beverage under what circumstances (Jones & Gordon, 2017; Voogt et al., 2017; Voogt, Otten, Kleinjan, Engels, & Kuntsche, 2017). Previous analyses of the sample used in this study, revealed that among 301 three- to six-year-olds in Switzerland, 68.1% correctly classified beer, white wine, red wine and champagne as alcoholic beverages, while 46.4% knew the drinks by name (Kuntsche, Le Mével, & Zucker, 2016). Moreover, these children assigned alcoholic

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* Corresponding author at: Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, La Trobe University, Melbourne, VIC 3086, Australia.

E-mail address: e.kuntsche@latrobe.edu.au (E. Kuntsche).

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beverages more often to adults at a party (39.4%) than to those playing outdoors (34.7%) and more often to men (42.2%) than to women (28.7%). This is important because these and other alcohol-related cognitions form the basis on which early alcohol initiation occurs and may be responsible for risky drinking patterns later in life (Jackson, Colby, Barnett, & Abar, 2015; Prins, Donovan, & Molina, 2011; Voogt, Otten, et al., 2017; Zucker et al., 2008).

Unfortunately, scientific evidence on where preschoolers get their knowledge about alcohol is scarce (Voogt, Beusink, et al., 2017). Authors have argued that parents are not only important socialization agents but also are often responsible for their children's exposure to alcohol use and consequently their alcohol-related knowledge (Zucker et al., 2008; Zucker, Kincaid, Fitzgerald, & Bingham, 1995). The Primary Socialization Theory (Oetting & Donnermeyer, 1998) and the Cognitive Model of Intergenerational Transference (Campbell & Oei, 2010) assume that parents' verbal affirmations of alcohol and the children's observation of parental drinking are responsible for alcohol-related knowledge early in life and the intergenerational transference of drinking habits later in life. However, a recently conducted systematic literature review (Voogt, Beusink, et al., 2017) revealed inconsistent evidence, i.e. in some studies parental alcohol use was positively related to children's alcohol-related knowledge and norms (e.g. Dalton et al., 2005; Zucker et al., 1995), whereas other studies failed to find such an effect (e.g. Hahn et al., 2000). The authors of the review (Voogt, Beusink, et al., 2017) conclude that there is an urgent need for further studies in this area as the currently available evidence is limited (in the past forty years, only 20 studies were conducted) and outdated (out of 20 studies, only six were conducted after the year 2000). In addition, the majority of studies were conducted in only one country (the US).

One reason for the inconsistency of past research may be that the different studies have addressed different aspects of parental drinking (frequency of consumption, usual quantity, binge drinking), which in turn may have a different impact on different aspects of children's alcohol-related knowledge (beverage content and names as well as consumption norms). In addition, besides the parents, the alcohol consumption of other adults in the children's environment may play an important role. Children who are often surrounded by other adults who tend to drink at particular occasions, such as relatives who come for a visit or people at fairs, festivals, neighborhood parties etc., are likely to know more about alcohol. Moreover, alcohol-related knowledge can result from the child's own experiences, for example, when the parents let the child sip on their drink, which is an important risk factor for excessive drinking later, in adolescence (Ennett et al., 2016; Sharmin et al., 2017).

Authors have also argued that children can acquire knowledge about alcohol when being exposed to advertisements for alcoholic beverages or seeing actors drinking on television or in movies (Dalton et al., 2005; Hahn et al., 2000; Lang & Stritzke, 1993). While several longitudinal studies have demonstrated that being exposed to alcohol use or advertisements in the media predicts drinking initiation and escalation among adolescents (Hanewinkel et al., 2014; Jackson et al., 2018; Tucker, Miles, & D'Amico, 2013), to our knowledge, there is no scientific evidence regarding alcohol-related knowledge earlier in life, i.e. among children.

This study investigates three to six year olds' alcohol-related knowledge depending on parental alcohol consumption and characteristics of family life. We hypothesize that children know more about (1) the alcoholic content, (2) the name of alcoholic beverages, (3) who usually drinks (men rather than women or children) and (4) where alcohol is often consumed (at parties)

- if their parents drink more frequently or higher amounts or during meals,
- if the children have already tasted beer themselves,
- if they are often in situations in which other adults tend to drink (i.e. visits from relatives and attending fairs, festivals, neighborhood

- parties etc.) and
- when the children often watch television.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study design

After having obtained approval from two ethical commissions (Lausanne: Protocol 266/2012 and Geneva, Protocol 12-25), 37 preschool classes and seven nurseries were randomly selected in French-speaking Switzerland (the cantons Neuchâtel and Geneva and the city of Lausanne). Subsequently, preschool teachers, nursery staff and the parents were informed about the study. Between February and July 2013, at a scheduled appointment, children participated in the electronic Appropriate Beverage Task (eABT: Kuntsche et al., 2016; based on Zucker et al., 1995). As incentive, preschool classes received CHF 100 (approximately USD 112) and nurseries CHF 200 when more than three children participated (otherwise CHF 70). In addition, every child in the class received a small gift (e.g. a pencil). In the days following the appointment, both parents were asked to complete a questionnaire either by e-mail (containing a hyperlink to an online questionnaire) or by post (dispatched paper questionnaire with return envelope).

2.2. Sample

The parents of all 918 three to six year olds in the selected schools and nurseries were sent a consent form, of which 319 (34.7%) returned signed. Eighteen children with active consent from their parents (5.6%) were absent on the day of data collection (e.g. due to illness) and did not participate. Of the resulting 301 children, 205 mothers (68.1%) and 154 fathers (51.2%) from 214 families (71.1%) completed and returned the parental questionnaire. There was no difference in terms of children's age ($t = 0.9$, n.s.) or gender ($\chi^2_{(df=1)} = 0.6$, n.s.) between the families with and without parents' participation. In 67.8% of the cases, both parents completed and returned the parental questionnaire; in 28.0% and 4.2%, only the mothers and fathers, respectively, did so. A further description of the sample is provided in Table 1.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Children's alcohol-related knowledge

In the electronic Appropriate Beverage Task (eABT: Kuntsche et al., 2016), 11 drawings of adults depicted in everyday situations were presented to each child individually on a touch-screen mobile tablet PC (Sony Vaio Tap 20). An example drawing is given in Fig. 1. On the bottom of the screen, pictures of 12 beverages (8 non-alcoholic and 4 alcoholic) were shown. After having recorded the gender (0 = boy, 1 = girl) and the age of the child, the interviewer asked the child to indicate what he or she thinks the person in the drawing, to whom an arrow was pointing, is drinking in the given situation. By touching one of the beverage pictures the child's answer was automatically recorded and the arrow moved either to the next person in the drawing or the next drawing. At the end, the child was asked whether he or she knows whether each of the 12 beverages shown contains alcohol or not and whether he or she knows the name of the beverage.

Table 1

Sample size (percentages) and mean age (standard deviations) of the parents and the children included in the study by sex.

	Female	Male
Parents (n, % ^a)	205 (95.8%)	154 (72.0%)
Mean age (SD)	37.0 (4.7)	40.4 (4.6)
Children (n, % ^a)	105 (49.1%)	109 (50.9%)
Mean age (SD)	5.4 (0.8)	5.4 (0.9)

^a In respect to the 214 families included.

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