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# Parental drinking as context for parental socialization of adolescent alcohol use

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** While alcohol-specific parenting practices have demonstrated unique effects on adolescent substance use, their efficacy in the context of parental drinking levels has not been studied. This study assessed the influence of three alcohol-specific parenting practices (rules, punishment, communication) on adolescent alcohol use, and the degree to which those associations varied by parents' own drinking.

**Methods:** We conducted logistic regression analyses among US adolescents ( $N = 1023$ ; 52% female; 12% Hispanic; 76% Caucasian, 5% Black, 8% mixed race, 11% other race/ethnicity; mean age at enrollment = 12.2 years) to examine the relationship between alcohol-specific parenting practices and the odds of ever having experienced two drinking milestones, having a full drink of alcohol and a heavy drinking episode, and whether parental drinking levels moderated those associations.

**Results:** Strict rules for drinking, higher levels of cautionary communication messages, and punishment for drinking were associated with lower odds of alcohol use. Witnessing parent drinking increased the risk for both alcohol outcomes. Furthermore, parental drinking modified the influence of parental cautionary messages on alcohol use such that the effect was particularly salient for those youth who witnessed and whose parents reported higher levels of alcohol use.

**Conclusions:** Family-based preventive interventions should include skills training in alcohol-specific parenting practices with emphasis on reducing parental alcohol use particularly when children are present.

## 1. Introduction

Adolescence is the developmental period in which initiation and escalation of alcohol use are most likely to occur (Windle et al., 2008). Despite ongoing prevention efforts, 64% of high school seniors have consumed alcohol, and 35% have done so in the past month (Johnston, O'Malley, Miech, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2016). The negative consequences associated with adolescent alcohol use make this risky behavior a public health priority and a concern of parents nationwide. Multiple parental socialization behaviors are known to have a substantial influence on adolescent alcohol use outcomes, however, the effects of these behaviors within the context of parental drinking in the home is not adequately understood. In the current study, we examine models of parental

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socialization that include the joint interaction of alcohol-specific parenting practices and parental drinking behaviors to elucidate which parenting practices are associated with initiation of adolescent alcohol use, and under which conditions of parental alcohol use those associations are most salient.

### 1.1. Parental socialization of alcohol

Parents play a critical role in the socialization of children, serving as their primary source of influence throughout childhood. Although peers become increasingly important during adolescence, parents continue to be instrumental in the socialization process throughout adolescent development (Wood, Read, Mitchell, & Brand, 2004). Parental socialization occurs via two processes. First, socialization occurs through general parenting behaviors, which reflect an overall parenting style and influence a range of adolescent outcomes including substance use, delinquency, and academic achievement. Research has long supported the conclusion that an authoritative parenting style, marked by high levels of support, and appropriate levels of behavioral control, is the most conducive to effective parenting (Baumrind, 1971; Steinberg, 2001). Second, socialization occurs through specific attempts to influence particular adolescent behaviors. One such targeted approach is alcohol-specific parenting, which reflects behaviors employed by parents to deter or prevent their child from consuming alcohol. These practices may include rules about drinking, punishment for drinking, and communication about drinking. Importantly, alcohol-specific socialization practices have been shown to be negatively associated with adolescent drinking, above and beyond the influence of general socialization behaviors (e.g. support and behavioral control; Handley & Chassin, 2013; van der Zwaluw et al., 2008). Thus, alcohol-specific parenting reflects a distinct component of the socialization process regarding alcohol. Given its association with adolescent alcohol use, and the modifiable nature of parenting behaviors, research on alcohol-specific parenting has implications for prevention and intervention strategies to reduce youth drinking.

A growing body of evidence supports longitudinal associations between alcohol-specific parenting practices and adolescent alcohol outcomes. We examine three alcohol-specific parenting practices relevant to family-based interventions. First, having strict rules about alcohol use has been repeatedly shown to have a significant protective effect on adolescent alcohol use (Jackson, Henriksen, & Dickinson, 1999; Janssen et al., 2014; Mares, Lichtwarck-Aschoff, Burk, van der Vorst, & Engels, 2012; van der Vorst, Engels, Deković, Meeus, & Vermulst, 2007; van der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, & Deković, 2006; van der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, Deković, & van Leeuwe, 2005). That is, when parents actively set boundaries and limitations for drinking, their child is less likely to become involved in, and stay involved with alcohol. Second, parents may enforce punishments when rules are broken. Parental punishment tactics include grounding their child from activities or taking away privileges, among others. These actions may serve to reduce adolescent drinking by impelling teens to refrain from drinking because they do not want to incur the associated punishment. However, to date, no studies have independently examined punishment for drinking as an alcohol-specific parenting practice. Third, cautionary communication messages about alcohol are associated with reductions in adolescent drinking (Andrews, Hops, Ary, Tildesley, & Harris, 1993). The content of the communication message is important, as permissive messages about alcohol (e.g. drinking in moderation is acceptable, drinking is allowed in certain circumstances), are associated with higher levels of alcohol use and misuse (Jackson et al., 1999; Wood et al., 2004). Therefore, research supports policies recommending that parents talk to their children about alcohol using messages that relay the harms and consequences associated with alcohol (Jackson et al., 2016). Indeed, strict rule setting by parents in combination with high-quality communication has been associated with reduced levels of adolescent alcohol consumption (Koning, van den Eijnden, Verdurmen, Engels, & Vollebergh, 2012).

### 1.2. Parental drinking as context for alcohol-specific socialization

In addition to alcohol-specific parenting practices, parents also influence child outcomes directly by modeling behaviors that are then internalized and repeated by their children, as specified by social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). Evidence suggests that adolescents whose parents drink regularly are at increased risk for using alcohol themselves (Alati et al., 2014; Ary, Tildesley, Hops, & Andrews, 1993). Witnessing parents drink alcohol may lead adolescents to drink and/or adopt norms permissive of alcohol use (Duncan, Duncan, & Strycker, 2006; van der Vorst, Vermulst, Meeus, Deković, & Engels, 2009; White, Johnson, & Buyske, 2000). Parental drinking levels are also associated with the severity of adolescent drinking, as heavy episodic parental drinking has been linked to both earlier and heavier alcohol use among adolescents (Vermeulen-Smit et al., 2012).

Parental drinking behaviors also can be conceptualized as an important component of the overall parenting context. In their integrative model of parenting, Darling and Steinberg (1993) argue that specific parenting practices occur within an overall context of parental socialization. That is, the effects of a particular parenting practice will differ depending on the parenting context within which the practices are enacted. Thus, the effects of alcohol-specific parenting practices will depend on the broader drinking environment parents establish in the home. The effects of parenting practices to reduce or deter adolescent drinking might be enhanced by parental modeling of reasonable drinking behaviors, whereas problematic parental drinking might weaken any protective effects of the alcohol-specific parenting practices. To date, however, these interactive effects have not been empirically examined. Therefore, in our study, we examine the degree to which the association between each parenting practice and adolescent alcohol use is dependent upon parents' own use of alcohol.

### 1.3. Current study

We sought to assess the associations of three parental alcohol-specific socialization behaviors (cautionary communication

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