



Parental alcohol use, alcohol-related problems, and alcohol-specific attitudes, alcohol-specific communication, and adolescent excessive alcohol use and alcohol-related problems: An indirect path model

Suzanne H.W. Mares^{*}, Haske van der Vorst, Rutger C.M.E. Engels, Anna Lichtwarck-Aschoff

Radboud University Nijmegen, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Alcohol-specific parent–child communication has often been studied in relation to regular alcohol use of adolescents. However, it might be as important to focus on adolescent problematic alcohol use. In addition, the way parents communicate with their children about alcohol might depend on their own (problematic) drinking behaviors. Therefore, the current study examined the direct effects of parental alcohol use, alcohol-related problems, and parental alcohol-specific attitudes on adolescent excessive drinking and alcohol-related problems later in life. It also looked at indirect effects via alcohol-specific communication. The sample consisted of 428 Dutch families including fathers, mothers and adolescents from two age groups (13 and 15 years old) at T1, who have been surveyed annually for 5 years. We tested the model with structural equation modeling (SEM). The results showed that parental alcohol-related problems were positively associated with communication about alcohol, which in turn was related with less excessive adolescent drinking and alcohol-related problems. Lenient parental attitudes about alcohol and parental alcohol-related problems were directly related to more excessive drinking and alcohol-related problems in adolescents. In conclusion, alcohol-specific communication intervenes in the relationship between parental alcohol-related problems and adolescent excessive drinking and alcohol-related problems. This indicates that in family alcohol interventions targeted at youth alcohol use, parental alcohol-related problems should be taken into account.

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1. Introduction

Many European and North-American prevention programs advocate parent–child communication to reduce adolescents' alcohol use (Brody et al., 2006; Komro et al., 2008; Mason et al., 2009; Riggs, Elenbaum, & Pentz, 2006; Robertson, David, & Rao, 2003; Rueter, Conger, & Ramisetty-Mikler, 1999; Smit, Verdurmen, Monshouwer, & Smit, 2008). As part of promoting good and solid parent–child bonds, these prevention programs teach parents to talk with their children about alcohol. However, research on the link between alcohol-specific parent–child communication and adolescent alcohol use showed that familial communication about alcohol might not always be effective in preventing adolescent drinking (Ennett, Bauman, Foshee, Pemberton, & Hicks, 2001; Martyn et al., 2009; Van der Vorst, Burk, & Engels, 2010). Therefore, more research is required into which family aspects lead to effective

parental communication in lowering adolescents' alcohol consumption. The present study examined the link between alcohol-specific communication and adolescents' excessive alcohol use and alcohol-related problems while taking parental drinking and attitudes into account.

1.1. Parental factors related to alcohol-specific communication

One of the missing links regarding alcohol-specific communication and adolescents' excessive alcohol use is to examine why or which parents communicate intensively with their offspring on alcohol matters. Although it is known that adolescent drinking positively affects how frequently parents talk with their offspring about drinking, at least for boys (Van der Vorst et al., 2010), previous studies did not pay attention to other factors influencing the frequency of communication. However, there are ample studies on general parenting practices such as support and control indicating that parents lack in their parenting when drinking excessively. That is, parental control and monitoring are negatively affected by parental alcohol-related problems or heavy alcohol use (Blackson et al., 1999; Chassin, Pillow, Curran, Molina, & Barrera, 1993; King & Chassin, 2004; Lang, Pelham, Atkeson, & Murphy, 1999; Tildesley &

^{*} Corresponding author. Behavioural Science Institute, Radboud University Nijmegen, P.O. Box 9104, 6500 HE Nijmegen, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 24 361 2801; fax: +31 24 361 2776.

E-mail address: s.mares@pwo.ru.nl (S.H.W. Mares).

Andrews, 2008). Parents who were intoxicated in an experimental setting were less accurate in perceiving problems in children, and were less consistent in their control strategies (Lang et al., 1999). Parental alcohol use has a negative effect on positive parenting as well (Tildesley & Andrews, 2008), with parents using alcohol expressing less support and providing less structure (Barnes, Reifman, Farrell, & Dintcheff, 2000; Engels, Vermulst, Dubas, Bot, & Gerris, 2005). These studies reveal that parent's alcohol-related problems negatively affect the parent–child interaction and child rearing styles. It seems plausible that a parenting practice like alcohol-specific communication would be affected in a negative way by parental alcohol-related problems.

Besides parental alcohol-related problems, normative parental alcohol use and parental alcohol-specific attitudes are likely to determine the way parents communicate with their adolescents about alcohol as well. Normative alcohol use of parents has been shown to be related negatively to general parenting (Tildesley & Andrews, 2008) and alcohol-specific parenting (Van Zundert, Van der Vorst, Vermulst, & Engels, 2006). Moreover, parental alcohol use and strict alcohol-specific attitudes show a strong negative association (Koning, Engels, Verdurmen, & Vollebergh, 2009; Payne, Govorun, & Arbuckle, 2008; Stacy, Bentler, & Flay, 1994; Van der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, & Dekovic, 2006). Since strict parental attitudes towards alcohol use of their adolescents are positively associated with general parenting strategies like parental support and monitoring (Wood, Read, Mitchell, & Brand, 2004), a positive link between strict alcohol-specific attitudes and more alcohol-specific communication is to be expected, but has yet to be shown.

1.2. Factors related to adolescents' excessive drinking and alcohol-related problems

There is a large body of research on the association between parenting, parental alcohol use and adolescent alcohol use. It is well known that, for example, parental alcohol use increases the risk of initiation and the intensity of later adolescent alcohol use (Tildesley & Andrews, 2008; Van Zundert et al., 2006). The same has been shown for the association between parental alcohol-related problems and adolescent drinking (Blackson et al., 1999; Van der Zwaluw et al., 2008). In addition, when parents endorse negative alcohol-specific attitudes it prevents engagement in excessive alcohol use of their adolescent offspring (Aas & Klepp, 1992; Miller & Plant, 2003). Regarding the association between alcohol-specific communication among parents and their children and the alcohol use of the adolescents, inconsistent findings have been shown (Ennett et al., 2001, 2008; Martyn et al., 2009; Van der Vorst et al., 2010). Further, these studies examined non-problematic alcohol use of adolescents. It is essential to further assess the association between alcohol-specific communication and adolescents' alcohol use. Since excessive alcohol use leads to most deviance during adolescence and later adulthood (e.g., Brown et al., 2008), it is important to examine alcohol-specific communication in relation to excessive alcohol use and alcohol-related problems of adolescents.

1.3. Distinction between paternal and maternal effects

Studies that focus on parental alcohol use and alcohol-specific parenting have shown clear distinctions between maternal and paternal behaviors (Van der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, Dekovic, & Van Leeuwe, 2005). For example, women use alcohol less frequently and intensively and encounter fewer problems due to their drinking than men (Cooper, Russell, Skinner, Frone, & Mudar, 1992; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004). Besides their alcohol use, parents' strategies to prevent their children from using alcohol differ. Mothers are more likely to initiate conversations about alcohol (Van der Vorst et al., 2005, 2010) and show more understanding towards the opinion of

their children (Noller & Callan, 1990). In contrast, fathers have more lenient attitudes towards adolescent drinking (Pettersson, Linden-Bostrom, & Eriksson, 2009). In addition to general gender differences in parental drinking and parenting, the impact of them on adolescent drinking can also vary for fathers and mothers. Paternal alcohol use seems to have a stronger positive impact on adolescent alcohol use as compared to maternal alcohol use (Chassin, Curran, Hussong, & Colder, 1996; Van der Vorst, Vermulst, Meeus, Dekovic, & Engels, 2009; Zhang, Welte, & Wieczorek, 1999), while attitudes of fathers and mothers regarding adolescent alcohol use do not differ in effectiveness in reducing adolescent drinking (Van der Vorst et al., 2006). All together, these findings indicate that it is relevant to test for paternal and maternal differences in relation to alcohol-related behaviors.

1.4. Present study

The present study examined the role of parental alcohol use, parental alcohol-related problems, and alcohol-specific attitudes towards youth alcohol use in alcohol-specific communication. Subsequently, the association of alcohol-specific parent–child communication with adolescent excessive alcohol use and alcohol-related problems was examined.¹ We expected that more parental alcohol use, more parental alcohol-related problems and tolerant alcohol-specific attitudes of parents are related to less alcohol-specific communication with adolescents. In turn, we expected that more frequent alcohol-specific communication leads to more excessive alcohol use and alcohol-related problems in adolescents. Besides these indirect effects, the direct effects of all independent variables on adolescent excessive alcohol use and alcohol-related problems were tested. We hypothesized that more parental alcohol use, more parental alcohol-related problems, and tolerant alcohol-specific attitudes lead to more excessive alcohol use and alcohol-related problems in adolescents. Finally, these models were tested for mothers and fathers separately. See Fig. 1 for both the indirect and the direct path model.

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

Data used in this study come from a longitudinal project called "Family and Health" (De Leeuw, Engels, Vermulst, & Scholte, 2009; Harakeh, Scholte, de Vries, & Engels, 2005). A total of 5400 Dutch families including at least two children aged 13–16 years were mailed to ask for their participation in the study. The addresses of these families were obtained from the records of 22 Dutch municipalities. All of the 885 families who agreed to participate were phoned to ascertain whether they fulfilled the criteria of (I) parents living together or being married, (II) parents and adolescents being biologically related, (III) siblings not being a twin, and (IV) none of the children being physically or mentally disabled. Families with members that were not able to read or write in Dutch were also excluded, resulting in a sample of 765 families who fulfilled all entry criteria. On the basis of adolescents' education level and sibling dyads (i.e. boy–boy, boy–girl, girl–girl, and girl–boy), a further selection was made resulting in an equal division of both criteria. The final sample

¹ The association between alcohol-specific communication and adolescent alcohol use has been previously examined using data from the "Family and Health" study (Van der Vorst et al., 2005, 2010), while this study takes a new perspective by looking at parental alcohol use and alcohol-specific attitudes in relation to adolescent excessive drinking and alcohol-related problems. Data of wave 5 instead of waves 3 and 4 was used due to lack of information on adolescent excessive drinking and alcohol-related problems on these two waves.

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