

Original article

Early Adolescent Alcohol Use and Sexual Experience by Emerging Adulthood: A 10-Year Longitudinal Investigation

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Abstract

Purpose: The current study examined the long-term relationship of early adolescent alcohol use to number of sexual partners by emerging adulthood.

Methods: Using data from a 10-year longitudinal study, we collected data on sixth- and seventh-grade students' alcohol use and their lifetime number of sexual partners 10 years later.

Results: We found a significant effect of early alcohol use in the sixth and seventh grades on lifetime number of sexual partners 10 years later, controlling for gender, age, race, peer norms, and sensation seeking. Early age at first intercourse mediated the association between early alcohol use and number of sexual partners.

Conclusions: Interventions focused on preventing use of alcohol at an early age may have the potential to reduce risks for sexually transmitted diseases during adolescence and emerging adulthood.

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Keywords:

Alcohol use; Emerging adulthood; Sexual behavior; Adolescence; HIV/AIDS; STD

The majority of girls and boys engage in sexual intercourse at some point during adolescence, many with multiple sexual partners [1], putting them at greater risk of having unplanned pregnancies and contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) including HIV [2,3]. Adolescent sexual activity is an important health concern, as almost half of all STDs each year are among people between the ages of 15 and 24 [4]. Given these threats to the sexual health of adolescents, it is critical to identify early predictors of sexual risk-taking in adolescence and emerging adulthood.

Problem behavior theory suggests that risky behaviors adopted during childhood or early adolescence put youth on a developmental trajectory that leads to other risky behaviors later in life [5,6]. Risky sexual behavior is viewed as a violation of a social norm affected by an individual's attitudes, and this behavior often covaries with other

norm-breaking behaviors such as substance use and delinquency [7]. Alcohol use in early adolescence is a particularly relevant risk behavior, as youth are more likely to drink than use other drugs [8], and national surveys show that drinking behavior usually increases between the 7th and 10th grades [9].

Alcohol impairs judgment [10], and may increase the risk for unplanned, casual sex by diminishing an individual's ability to consider adverse consequences [11]. Studies have shown that early use of alcohol is associated with an earlier age of first intercourse [12,13] and engaging in sexual activity with multiple sex partners [14]. However, methodologic features of these studies limit the ability to draw temporal, if not causal, inferences about the association between alcohol use and risky sex. First, many of these studies were cross-sectional in nature, sampling youth at only one point in adolescence [15,16]. Second, some of the existing longitudinal studies either did not assess alcohol use early in adolescence when drinking behavior typically begins [17,18] or did not follow students beyond the high

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school years [19]. Third, several of these studies concentrated on alcohol use during the past month [17], but given that only 7% of eighth-grade adolescents report being drunk in the past month [9], total lifetime use of alcohol may be a more representative measure of the drinking behavior of young adolescents. Similarly, previous studies have typically assessed number of sexual partners during the past year [20–22]. Because half of adolescents report having sex at least once by the 12th grade [23], lifetime sexual experience may be a more valid indicator of sexual experience from adolescence to the early adult years. Fourth, although research has established an association between alcohol use and early intercourse initiation, few studies have had the benefit of an extended longitudinal design and tested early age at first intercourse as a mechanism by which early adolescent drinking influences later sexual behavior. Finally, several studies have suggested that other variables may mitigate the relationship between early drinking and later sexual behavior, including sensation seeking [24], and peer norms about alcohol use [25], suggesting that longitudinal studies should consider these important factors.

The current study evaluated the long-term relationship between early adolescent alcohol use and sexual behavior in emerging adulthood 10 years later using cumulative measures of alcohol use (i.e., total lifetime drinking behavior) and sexual behavior (i.e., total number of sexual partners by emerging adulthood) and tested early age at first intercourse as a critical mediator. Because these data do not involve experimental manipulation, significant findings can only support particular causal pathways, but cannot rule out the possibility that an unknown “third variable” accounts for significant associations among the variables. Accordingly, we included several important covariates to eliminate alternative explanations for our results, including gender, age, race, peer norms about drinking, and sensation seeking.

Method

Participants

This study was reviewed and approved by the institutional review board at the University of Southern California. Two longitudinal samples were derived from an ongoing drug abuse prevention trial, the Midwestern Prevention Project, which has been implemented since 1984 in Kansas City and since 1987 in Indianapolis, Indiana. The program was introduced into schools during the initial grant period of the study between grades 6/7 and 12 (from 1984–1992). Details of the program intervention are described elsewhere [26]. All students in these schools gave full active parental and self-consent prior to participation (response rate >96%). The Kansas City sample (N = 1002) was based on entering sixth- and seventh-grade students from eight schools, and the Indianapolis sample (N = 1206) was based on entering sixth- and seventh-grade students from 57

schools. Both samples were demographically matched, randomly assigned to a program or control condition, and targeted for follow-up through emerging adulthood. The current study used data from Time 1 (i.e., approximately age 12) and a follow-up assessment 10 years later (i.e., approximately age 22). Details of follow-up sample selection, attrition, population, and experimental group representativeness are reported elsewhere [27], which showed slightly greater loss of males, but no differential loss of alcohol users or program group over time.

Time 1 measures: early adolescence

Demographic variables. Gender (0 = female; 1 = male), race/ethnicity (0 = nonwhite; 1 = white), grade at Time 1 (0 = sixth grade; 1 = seventh grade), and experimental intervention group (0 = control; 1 = program) were included as covariates.

Early alcohol use. To assess lifetime alcohol use, participants were asked: “How many alcoholic drinks (beer, wine, or liquor) have you ever had in your whole life?” (*none, only sips, part or all of one drink, 2 to 4 drinks, 5 to 10 drinks, 11 to 20 drinks, 21 to 100 drinks, more than 100 drinks*). The mean was approximately one drink, consistent with previous research on early adolescent drinking [9]. Ten percent of the sample reported never having a sip of alcohol, 37% only sips, 31% part or all of one drink, and 22% 2 or more alcoholic drinks in their lifetime. Thus, 90% reported some lifetime alcohol use, a rate also consistent with previous research [9]. Because we were primarily interested in distinguishing adolescents who would be willing to engage in unsanctioned alcohol consumption, we compared participants who reported having no alcohol or only sips (47% of sample; coded as 0) to those who reported having at least part of a drink or one or more drinks (53% of sample; coded as 1).

Peer norms about alcohol use. The alcohol use of participants’ peers was assessed with one item: “How many of your close friends drink alcohol (beer, wine, or liquor)” (*none; 1, 2, 3 or 4; 5 to 7; 8 to 10; more than 10*). The mean response was .72 (SD = 1.21), representing approximately one close friend engaging in alcohol use. To simplify the data analysis, we compared participants with no friends using alcohol with participants with equal to or more than one friend using alcohol.

Sensation seeking. Two items adapted from the Sensation Seeking Scale [28] were “Do you like to take chances?” and “Is it worth getting into trouble if you have fun?” Both items were measured on a four-point scale (1 = *never* to 4 = *most of the time*), and were aggregated to create a composite variable (correlation between the two items = .40, $p < .001$) with a range from 1 to 8. The mean composite sensation seeking score was 4.41 (SD = 1.55).

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