



Exposure to drinking mediates the association between parental alcohol use and preteen alcohol use



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Parental drinking was associated with explicit exposure to parental alcohol use.
- Exposure to parental drinking was associated with preteen's lifetime alcohol use.
- Exposure mediated the association of parental drinking with preteen's lifetime use.
- This was found for both boys and girls and was most robust for father's drinking.
- Exposure to parental alcohol use should be restricted to prevent preteen drinking.

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of the present study was to test the link between exposure to parental alcohol use (i.e., preteens seeing their parents drinking) and preteen's alcohol use. Specifically, this study aimed to (a) replicate the association between parental alcohol use and preteen alcohol use and (b) test whether alcohol use exposure mediated this association.

Method: Families were recruited from five regions in the Netherlands from 104 schools that agreed to participate. Preteens ($N = 755$, $M_{age} = 11.27$, $SD = 0.56$, 45.8% boys) and their mothers ($N = 755$) participated in the study. Preteens reported lifetime alcohol use and parental alcohol use exposure. Mothers reported on alcohol use for both parents. Structural Equation Modelling was used to assess direct and mediated paths between parental alcohol use, preteen's exposure to alcohol use and preteen alcohol use in one model.

Results: Unexpectedly, father's alcohol use was negatively associated ($\beta = -0.121$, $p = .012$) and mother's alcohol use was not associated ($\beta = 0.056$, $p = .215$) with preteen's alcohol use. A positive indirect effect emerged through alcohol use exposure, showing that exposure to father's alcohol use mediated the association between parent's and preteen's alcohol use ($\beta = 0.064$, $p = .001$). This effect was absent for mother's alcohol use ($\beta = 0.026$, $p = .264$). Gender differences were non-significant.

Conclusions: Parental alcohol exposure positively mediated the association of parental alcohol use with preteen's alcohol use. These effects were found for both boys and girls and were most robust for father's drinking. The findings might provide clues for preventive action, for example, by emphasizing that exposure should be restricted to prevent preteen's alcohol use.

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1. Introduction

Most people start using alcohol during early adolescence, and about 50% of the adolescents start drinking by age 14 (Van Dorsselaer et al., 2016). It is important to focus on early alcohol use, as it is associated with higher levels of drinking later in adolescence (Colder, Shyhalla, & Frndak, 2018; DeWit, Adlaf, Offord, & Ogborne, 2014; Gruber, DiClemente, Anderson, & Lodico, 1996; Hingson, Heeren, Jamanka, & Howland, 2000; Pitkänen, Lyyra, & Pulkkinen, 2005). Early alcohol use often occurs within the family and is influenced by family-related factors (Mayer, Forster, Murray, & Wagenaar, 1998; Rossow, Keating, Felix, & Mccambridge, 2016; Van der Vorst, Engels, & Burk, 2010), such as parental alcohol use (Koning, Engels, Verdurmen, & Vollebergh, 2010), availability of alcohol in home (Komro, Maldonado-Molina, Tobler, Bonds, & Muller, 2007), and alcohol-specific socialization (e.g., rules about alcohol use (Handley & Chassin, 2013)). Although parental alcohol use has been found to be associated with alcohol use in early adolescence (Pedersen & Skrandal, 1998), other factors related to the nature of parental alcohol use might explain this link. The degree to which parental drinking occurs *in sight* of preteens and the association of such exposure to parental drinking with preteens' alcohol use are unclear. In preteens, parents are still the primary socialization agents (Steinberg, 2008). Therefore, this study aimed to a) replicate the parent-adolescent alcohol use link found in previous studies in a 10 to 13 year old sample of preteens and b) investigate whether *exposure* to alcohol use (i.e., parents' drinking in sight of their children) mediates the link between parental alcohol use and preteens' alcohol use.

Early adolescent alcohol use has consistently been associated with parental alcohol use (Alati et al., 2014; Cranford, Zucker, Jester, Puttler, & Fitzgerald, 2010; Pedersen & Skrandal, 1998; Rossow et al., 2016; Van Der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, Deković, & Van Leeuwe, 2005; Van der Vorst, Vermulst, Meeus, Deković, & Engels, 2009). In addition, literature indicated that the parent and adolescent alcohol use link may differ for mothers and fathers (Rossow et al., 2016; Van Der Vorst et al., 2005), with studies indicating that father's use is a more significant contributor to adolescent use (Mares, van der Vorst, Engels, & Lichtwarck-Aschoff, 2011; Seljamo et al., 2006; Van der Vorst et al., 2009, 2013; Yu, 2003; Zhang, Welte, & Wiczorek, 1999). Only few studies have focused on mother's use in the parent-adolescent alcohol use link (Marsden et al., 2005; Walls et al., 2017). Several studies have found no association between parental and adolescent alcohol use (Koning et al., 2010) or indicated that parental use, rather than being a direct predictor, shapes alcohol-specific socialization or drinking motives (Handley & Chassin, 2013; Latendresse et al., 2008; Müller & Kuntsche, 2011), which is subsequently associated with adolescent use. Hence, a different degree of exposure to parental alcohol use may explain intergenerational transference in alcohol use habits from parents to their offspring.

It is hypothesized that young people's *exposure* to parental drinking rather than parental alcohol use per se influences preteens' alcohol use. The social learning theory posits that learning new behaviours occurs through modelling and imitation (Bandura & McClelland, 1977). When preteens see their parents drinking more frequently, they might perceive drinking as being the norm (Kam, Basinger, & Abendschein, 2017), which in turn increases the likelihood of alcohol initiation and progression into risky drinking habits (Dalton et al., 2005; Kam et al., 2017; Van der Vorst et al., 2010). For instance, when parents use alcohol with their colleagues after work, i.e., outside of their children's vision, this should have little to no effect in terms of normative perception and modelling. Other parents may drink at home during dinner or birthday parties in the presence of their preteen children. Since the extant literature has shown that parents' reports of parental alcohol use seem to differ considerably from preteens' and adolescents' reports of parental alcohol use (Jackson, Henriksen, Dickinson, & Levine, 1997; Smith, Miller, Kroll, Simmons, & Gallen, 1998), it is important to assess the degree of exposure to parental alcohol use to enhance our

understanding of modelling effects.

The current study investigated the association between exposure to parental alcohol use (i.e., preteens *seeing* their parents drinking) and preteens' alcohol use. We aimed to replicate the previously reported parent-adolescent alcohol use link in preteens (Alati et al., 2014; Cranford et al., 2010; Pedersen & Skrandal, 1998; Rossow et al., 2016; Van Der Vorst et al., 2005, 2009). Specifically, we hypothesized a positive association of mother's and father's alcohol use with preteens' alcohol use. Additionally, we examined whether alcohol use exposure mediated the associations between parental alcohol use and preteens' alcohol use. In other words, we expected parental alcohol use to be associated with exposure to parental alcohol use, which subsequently increased the likelihood of preteens' alcohol use.

To avoid the confounding of the results, we controlled for the risk factors that are particularly relevant for preteens experimenting with alcohol. Literature has shown that boys are more at risk for alcohol use compared to girls (Epstein, Botvin, & Diaz, 1998) and age is an important risk factor for early alcohol use (Van Der Vorst et al., 2005). Moreover, important family-related antecedents, such as more time spent with the family (Yu, 2003) and having less family relationship support (Ryan et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 1999) were associated with adolescent drinking patterns. Therefore, when testing the hypotheses, we controlled for preteens' gender, age, family activities, and relationship support. As previous findings are mixed regarding the influence of parental alcohol use by gender of the child (Rossow et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2010), we did not formulate any gender-specific hypothesis, however, we did explore whether the parent-preteen alcohol use links differed for boys and girls.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Procedure

To obtain a nationally representative sample, preteens aged ten to thirteen and their mothers were recruited from primary schools in five provinces of the Netherlands (i.e., provinces in the north, east, south, west, and central regions). Primary schools were randomly selected from a list that included all schools in the selected five provinces. Invitation letters were sent to these schools and within two weeks, schools were contacted by telephone and asked to participate in the study. Schools that agreed to participate distributed invitation letters to parents of sixth grade students. In addition, presentations were given in classrooms and at parent-teacher meetings to inform preteens and their parents about the study. To register for the study, preteens and parents had to provide informed consent via the study website (<http://www.vol-onderzoek.nl>).

Paper and pencil questionnaires were administered to pupils in the classrooms. In the same week, mothers were e-mailed and asked to complete the online questionnaire. Mothers and preteens received a check of €10 each (approx. 11 USD) as an incentive for their participation. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any time. The ethics committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences approved the study procedures (ECSW2014-2411-272). The results are reported in accordance with the STROBE guidelines for observational studies (von Elm et al., 2008).

2.2. Participants

Of the 913 contacted primary schools, 123 school boards agreed to participate (13.5%). Reasons for non-participation included being overburdened (76%) or uninterested in the subject (3%). In other cases, reasons were not provided (21%). Families from 104 of the 123 participating schools opted in to the study, resulting in a total of 765 participating families. Overall, 755 preteens (45.6% boys, $M_{\text{age}} = 11.27$, $SD = 0.56$) and 755 mothers (98.7%, $M_{\text{age}} = 42.57$, $SD = 4.66$), who

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