



## Full length article

# When parents supply alcohol to their children: Exploring associations with drinking frequency, alcohol-related harms, and the role of parental monitoring



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Youth obtain alcohol from many sources, including friends, siblings, parents and other adults. Whether parental supply, relative to other sources, is associated with experiencing a negative alcohol-related outcome is an area of considerable debate. Less well understood is whether the observed association is further contextualized by level of parental monitoring of the child.

**Objectives:** This study has two main objectives: 1) determine if there is a relationship between parental supply, drinking frequency, and alcohol-related harms among youth; and 2) assess whether parental monitoring moderates this relationship.

**Methods:** Participants were drawn from the 2012 Student Drug Use Survey in Canada's Atlantic Provinces, an anonymous cross-sectional survey of high school students (ages 15–19 years). Adjusted regression models assessed the association between drinking frequency, experiencing alcohol-related harms, and four different sources of supply. Additional analyses stratified on levels of parental monitoring.

**Results:** Relative to receiving alcohol from friends, parental supply was associated with lower odds of experiencing any alcohol-related harm (AOR 0.42; 95% CI 0.28–0.61) and loss of control (AOR = 0.42; 95% CI 0.29–0.62). Drinking frequency did not differ by source of supply. Associations between parental supply and harm were absent among youth reporting low levels of parental monitoring.

**Conclusions:** Youth who receive alcohol from parents' report fewer alcohol-related harms relative to those who obtain their alcohol from friends, despite no observed differences in drinking frequency. Understanding how parents may help to minimize experiences of alcohol-related harm among youth beyond the simple promotion of abstinence from drinking is warranted.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Youth and alcohol-related harms

Alcohol-related harms are commonly experienced by young people who consume alcohol, and these harms pose a considerable public health and economic burden (Health Canada, 2005; Shield et al., 2012). There are many different harms that have been linked to drinking among youth, including acute physical harm such as alcohol poisoning, injury, road trauma, and violence (Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, 2014; Fuller-Thomson et al., 2013; Neighbors et al., 2006; Talley et al., 2012).

Both internal and external forces shape the likelihood that a young person will experience harm from their drinking. Risk-taking

propensity, impulsivity, poor mental health, low self-control, and other psychosocial indicators are all important individual characteristics that increase the risk that drinking will produce harm (Bellis et al., 2007; Villarosa et al., 2014; Wilson, 2016). Similarly, youth drinking cultures, peer and friendship networks, alcohol accessibility, and social marketing of alcohol products all represent important environmental influences that affect drinking harms (Borsari and Carey, 2001; Iwamoto and Smiler, 2013; Snyder et al., 2006). One important environmental influence is the role of parents in the young person's drinking experience, and whether they provide alcohol to their children or enable its consumption (Kelly et al., 2016).

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### 1.2. Sources of alcohol supply and the role of parents

Underage youth access a variety of sources to obtain alcohol, including using fake identification to purchase from commercial outlets, and being supplied by friends, siblings, and other adults (Friese et al., 2011; Hearst et al., 2007; Scholte et al., 2008). Obtaining alcohol directly from parents or guardians is another common approach for underage drinkers in many countries (Hearst et al., 2007). In the United States, just under one-quarter of drinkers aged 12–20 reported that they obtained alcohol from a parent, guardian or other adult family member the last time they consumed alcohol (Delcher et al., 2013). In Australia, parents were the second most common source of alcohol, behind friends, with nearly one-third of students reporting that their parents supplied them with alcohol the last time they consumed alcohol (Gilligan et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2016). Meanwhile, in a Swedish community alcohol trial, between 40 and 70% of young people reported receiving alcohol from their parents (Hallgren and Andréasson, 2013).

Parents indicate a variety of reasons for providing their children with alcohol, often believing that they can play an important role in teaching young people about responsible or controlled alcohol consumption, and act as models for safe drinking practices (Donovan, 2007; Jackson et al., 2012; Jones, 2016; Roberts et al., 2010; Dietze and Livingston, 2010). Parents' concerns with alcohol typically gravitate towards the short-term physical harms produced by alcohol use (Graham et al., 2006). By supplying their children with alcohol, parents may believe they can mediate or reduce the risk of these short-term harmful consequences (Gilligan and Kypri, 2012; Graham et al., 2006; Kaynak et al., 2014; Lundborg, 2002). Supplying alcohol to adolescents may be accompanied by other strategies to reduce the risks of such harms, including transporting teenagers to parties, hosting supervised parties, ensuring access to untampered beverages, and establishing guidelines about alcohol use (Graham et al., 2006). Evidence of the effectiveness of these strategies in reducing the risk of negative consequences of alcohol use is not well established (Kaynak et al., 2014).

### 1.3. The consequences of parental supply on youth

Research on the impact of parental supply of alcohol to youth has produced mixed results to date, largely due to differences in research design, confounding, and measurement. Some studies have found that parental supply of alcohol leads to an increase in the frequency of youth drinking (Dent et al., 2005; Jackson et al., 1999; Komro et al., 2007; Lundborg, 2002), while others note that it precipitates more risky and harmful drinking among young people (Jackson et al., 1999; Komro et al., 2007; Lundborg, 2002; McMorris et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2010; Ward and Snow, 2011). A handful of studies have observed that parental supply was not linked with more harmful alcohol consumption, and in some cases, parental supply was associated with a lower quantity of alcohol consumed in each encounter and less frequent consumption (Bellis et al., 2009b; Dietze and Livingston, 2010; Foley et al., 2004; Gilligan et al., 2012; Habib et al., 2010; Kelly et al., 2012; Reboussin et al., 2012).

A systematic review and meta-analysis of the literature on parental supply of alcohol and risky drinking confirms the heterogeneity of studies in this area (Sharmin et al., 2017). While meta-analyses noted that parental supply doubled of the odds of risky drinking (broadly defined), it was observed that estimates were likely inflated due to a lack of control for known confounders, and the variability in the definition of parental supply (context of use, amount consumed). Moreover, comparisons were drawn between youth who accessed parental supply and a broad category of youth who were not exposed to parental supply, which might include youth not supplied alcohol at all, as well as those who obtained alcohol from other sources including siblings, friends, and other adults. A recent longitudinal study of adolescents in Australia, the most comprehensive study to date, found that youth supplied alcohol by parents had a higher likelihood of drinking whole

beverages than those not supplied by parents, yet had a lowered risk of binge drinking and drank fewer drinks per occasion. Supply from other sources was strongly linked to binge drinking (Mattick et al., 2017). Again, however, comparisons between parental supply and specific sources of supply were not directly assessed.

### 1.4. The role of parental monitoring

Despite the increasing influence of peers as adolescence progresses, parents and family still have considerable impact on decisions related to alcohol use that extend across the lifespan (McMorris et al., 2011). The nature of this effect, however, is inconsistent. For example, strong parental monitoring and attachment has been shown to have protective effects on youth drinking (Bahr et al., 2005; Beck et al., 2004; de la Rosa et al., 2012; Diclemente et al., 2001; Habib et al., 2010; Labrie and Sessoms, 2012; Ledoux et al., 2002; Mattick et al., 2017; Piko and Kovács, 2010; Ryan et al., 2010), though some studies find no effect on drinking frequency and youth intentions to drink (Crawford and Novak, 2002; Danielsson et al., 2010; van der Vorst et al., 2006a), or conditional effects, such that monitoring and attachment affect harmful consumption but not consumption per se (Hoffmann and Bahr, 2014; Lac et al., 2013; McKay, 2015; van der Vorst et al., 2006b).

Much of this speaks to the quality of the relationship between the parent and the child. A strong relationship with parents may hold both direct and indirect effects on youth substance use behaviour; a direct impact may be felt in terms of reduced opportunities to engage in drinking, a greater acceptance and understanding of parental messaging regarding drinking practices, and decision to initiate substance use; indirectly a strong relationship may facilitate a young person's choice of friends, or decisions to partake in risk taking (Danielsson et al., 2010; Gilligan and Kypri, 2012; Ryan et al., 2010). Further exploration of these direct and indirect effects is warranted.

### 1.5. The current study

While some studies have examined drinking frequency and acute outcomes such as binge drinking and impaired driving, few have looked at a broader set of alcohol-related harms in youth and how they are linked to consumption patterns. Importantly, most research does not distinguish between the effects of parental supply of alcohol on drinking relative to that of other adults, friends, or self as unique sources of supply. This distinction is important, given observed differences in alcohol-related behaviours among youth exist based on source of supply (Bellis et al., 2009a; McMorris et al., 2011; Reboussin et al., 2012). Finally, the relationship between parental supply and youth drinking is complex, where context such as the relationship between parent and child plays an important role (Mattick et al., 2017).

This study draws on a sample of high school students from Atlantic Canada to answer the following questions: (a) what is the relationship between the parental supply of alcohol at last drink (compared to friends, other adults, or self-supply) and frequency of alcohol use, experiencing alcohol-related harms, and loss of control? and (b) does parental monitoring moderate these relationships?

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Data source

Data for the present study were taken from the 2012 Student Drug Use Survey in the Atlantic Provinces (SDUSAP). This was the fifth iteration of an anonymous, cross-sectional survey of grades 7, 9, 10 and 12 students (aged 13–18 years) attending school in three provinces in Atlantic Canada – Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador.

The sample design of the SDUSAP was a two-stage stratified cluster sample of randomly selected classes containing at least 20 students in

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