



Can parents prevent heavy episodic drinking by allowing teens to drink at home?

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined whether permitting young women to drink alcohol at home during senior year of high school reduces the risk of heavy drinking in college. Participants were 449 college-bound female high school seniors, recruited at the end of their senior year. Participants were classified into one of three permissibility categories according to their baseline reports of whether their parents allowed them to drink at home: (a) not permitted to drink at all; (b) allowed to drink with family meals; (c) allowed to drink at home with friends. Repeated measures analysis of variance was used to compare the drinking behaviors of the three groups at the time of high school graduation and again after the first semester of college. Students who were allowed to drink at home during high school whether at meals or with friends, reported more frequent heavy episodic drinking (HED) in the first semester of college than those who reported not being allowed to drink at all. Those who were permitted to drink at home with friends reported the heaviest drinking at both time points. Path analysis revealed that the relationship between alcohol permissiveness and college HED was mediated via perceptions of parental alcohol approval.

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1. Introduction

Heavy episodic drinking (HED) among college students is pervasive and has been associated with a myriad of negative outcomes. Although HED can have adverse consequences for both males and females, young college women are particularly vulnerable to being sexually assaulted following HED (e.g., Parks, Romosz, Bradizza, & Hsieh, 2008). Indeed, nearly 75% of college sexual assaults occur as a result of the woman drinking to the point of unconsciousness or incapacitation and being unable to resist sexual advances (Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss, & Wechsler, 2004; Testa & Livingston, 2009). The potential for HED and its consequences to adversely impact adult development and well-being, especially for young women, makes prevention of underage college drinking a public health priority (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2007). One possible conduit for prevention of HED is through parents. Families play an instrumental role in socializing adolescents into adult drinking practices and parents continue to exert influence on their children's drinking behavior even in late adolescence, extending into college (Abar & Turrisi, 2008; Martino, Ellickson, & McCaffrey, 2009; Turrisi, Jaccard, Taki, Dunnam, & Grimes, 2001; Wood, Read, Mitchell, & Brand, 2004).

Entry into college is a significant transitional period in the lives of parents and their children. It is also a period in which teen alcohol

consumption tends to escalate (Borsari, Murphy, & Barnett, 2007; Parks et al., 2008; White et al., 2006; Wood et al., 2004). Just as teen alcohol use starts to accelerate during the transition from high school to college, parents may begin to loosen their controls and become more tolerant of drinking behavior (Martino et al., 2009; van der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, Dekovic, & Van Leeuwe, 2005). As the end of high school draws near, parents may even begin to provide alcohol or allow their teen to drink at home, rationalizing that they are teaching their children to drink responsibly and thereby reducing risk of alcohol-related consequences (Livingston et al., 2009; Peele, 2007). The goal of the current study was to test this popular belief in order to determine whether permitting supervised drinking during high school reduced HED among emerging adult women as they transitioned from high school to college.

The question of whether allowing teens to drink at home under adult supervision can indeed reduce HED among adolescents and emerging adults has been the subject of controversy. On the one hand, the argument that permitting supervised drinking in a controlled environment promotes low-risk alcohol use among teens has intuitive and popular appeal (e.g., see Peele, 2007) and can be supported theoretically. For example, the principles of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) would dictate that when parents model and permit light drinking in low-risk contexts, such as having a glass of wine with dinner, they are socializing their adolescent child to engage in low-risk drinking behavior. According to social learning theory, it is the social context in which drinking is modeled and permitted that influences future behavior rather than the permissiveness itself. Permitting drinking in settings where heavy drinking is normative

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(e.g., a party) is unlikely to be protective since the adolescent would be exposed to heavy drinking models. Consistent with this, [Foley, Altman, Durant, and Wolfson \(2004\)](#) found that adolescents who drank with their parents at home were less likely to regularly use alcohol or binge drink in the two weeks preceding the assessment as compared to adolescents whose parents allowed them to drink at parties.

Alternatively, it could be argued that by allowing adolescents to engage in any drinking, regardless of context, parents may be inadvertently communicating that they condone drinking, thereby spurring drinking in less restrictive contexts. Adolescents infer parental alcohol approval from various parent behaviors and permitting adolescents to consume alcohol is an overt expression of such approval. Adolescents tend to believe that their parents are more accepting of underage drinking than the parents report that they are ([van der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, & Dekovic, 2006](#)) and perceived parental approval of drinking has been linked to heavy drinking among high school and college students (e.g., [Abar, Abar, & Turrissi, 2009](#); [Barnes & Welte, 1986](#); [Wood et al., 2004](#)). In support of the argument that permitting drinking at home promotes drinking in other contexts, [van der Vorst, Engels, and Burke \(2010\)](#) found that adolescents who were permitted to drink at home also were more likely to drink outside of the home and to report more alcohol problems over a two-year period than those who were not permitted to drink at all.

In addition to parental alcohol permissiveness, a variety of other alcohol socialization factors influence underage drinking as well. Strong parent–child communication about alcohol use and general communication about the adolescent's activities (i.e. monitoring) have been associated with lower rates of college HED (e.g., [Borsari et al., 2007](#); [Testa et al., 2010](#); [Wood et al., 2004](#)). On a global level, parental drinking also has been positively associated with adolescent drinking (e.g., [Jackson, Henriksen, & Dickinson, 1999](#); [Windle, 2000](#)). One explanation for this is that adolescents are influenced directly by parental modeling of heavy drinking; however, multivariate models suggest that the influence may be indirect, occurring via mechanisms such as peer selection, positive alcohol expectancies, perceived approval of drinking, reduced monitoring, or tolerance of underage drinking behavior ([Borsari et al., 2007](#); [van der Vorst et al., 2006](#); [Windle, 2000](#)). Effects of parental drinking may also be moderated by gender. For example, father's drinking, but not mother's, is predictive of the drinking behavior of adolescent boys, suggesting that the behavior of the same-sex parent may be particularly relevant to establishing drinking norms ([Zhang, Welte, & Wiczorek, 1999](#)).

1.1. Study framework

The current study examined the role of parental alcohol permissiveness and other parental alcohol socialization factors on the alcohol use of young women making the transition from high school to college. Data collection was prospective, beginning as the young women graduated from high school in June and following them through spring of their first year in college for a total of three assessment points, conducted at baseline and at the end of each semester. Because the study focused on how mother–daughter interactions can influence underage drinking, data were collected from mothers as well. In this study, parental alcohol permissiveness is defined as allowing or permitting adolescent daughters to consume alcohol, regardless of whether or not the alcohol is provided by the parent. Because drinking behavior can vary according to the context in which drinking is permitted (e.g., [Foley et al., 2004](#)), three permissiveness groups were considered in these analyses: no drinking permitted, permitted to drink with family meals and permitted to drink at home with friends. If permitting moderate drinking at home (i.e. with meals) is protective as is commonly believed, it would be expected that adolescent girls who were allowed to drink at home with meals would engage in less frequent HED at baseline and in college than those who were allowed to drink at home with friends. It was anticipated

that drinking across all groups would increase as the young women transitioned to college (e.g. [Parks et al., 2008](#)), with the highest rates of HED occurring among those permitted to drink with friends. To the extent that being allowed to drink at family meals is protective, we would expect a permissiveness context by time interaction, such that HED should increase least among the group allowed to drink at meals.

Recognizing that group membership was not randomly assigned, the three permissiveness groups were also compared to determine whether they differed on other alcohol socialization factors that have been associated with adolescent drinking including mother–daughter communication, parental monitoring, and mother's alcohol use. It was expected that parent alcohol socialization behaviors previously associated with heavier adolescent drinking (i.e., poor communication, low monitoring, and greater parental alcohol use), would be linked to heavier drinking at baseline and in college, and would be more characteristic of permitting drinking with friends than of no drinking or permitting drinking with meals. While the role of father's drinking on their son's drinking has been examined in previous research (e.g., [Zhang et al., 1999](#)), there is little data examining mothers' influence on daughters' drinking during college. The current study allowed the opportunity to examine the role of mothers' drinking on their daughters' college drinking behavior.

We were also interested in examining mothers' perceptions of their daughters' drinking and how this was related to permissiveness and daughters' actual drinking over time. Because mothers tend to underestimate their children's drinking ([Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, Turrissi, Johansson, & Bouris, 2006](#)), we anticipated that mothers' reports of daughters' drinking would be lower than daughters' reports of their own drinking at both baseline and follow-up. Given the exploratory nature of the analyses, there were no predictions about the relationship between parental alcohol permissiveness and mothers' perceptions of daughters' drinking.

Finally, we explored the association between permissiveness and perceived parental approval. It is well known that perceived parental approval of drinking is positively associated with actual drinking (e.g., [Abar et al., 2009](#); [Wood et al., 2004](#)). However, it is not known how parental permissibility around alcohol in the home might influence perceived parental approval. For example, women whose parents allowed them to drink with friends were expected to report higher perceived parental alcohol approval than those not allowed to drink at all. However, it was not known whether being allowed to drink with meals (but not with friends) would convey similarly higher parental approval of drinking. Moreover, we explored whether perceived alcohol approval served as the mechanism by which permissibility was associated with daughters' HED.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and recruitment

Participants were 449 female college freshmen and their mothers who served as a control group for a randomized controlled trial (see [Testa et al., 2010](#)). They were recruited by telephone, just prior to high school graduation, from households in Erie County, NY. At the time of recruitment students were on average 18.1 (.33) years old. The majority were Caucasian (90.9%, compared to 82.2% Caucasian for the county) and came from households with a median income of \$75,000, which is close to the median income of \$74,000 for college freshmen nationally ([Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007](#)). In the fall semester students attended over 100 different colleges; however, the majority of students attended colleges in Western New York.

2.2. Procedures

Potential participants were selected at random from yearbook photos from local city and suburban high school graduating classes of

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