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In this reply, the authors address the comments of L. Chassin and E. D. Handley (2006) and of K. Fromme (2006) on the authors’ article, “Parental Attachment, Parental Control, and Early Development of Alcohol Use: A Longitudinal Study” (H. van der Vorst, R. C. M. E. Engels, W. Meeus, M. Deković, & A. Vermulst, 2006). Further, the authors elaborate on some topics in the area of parenting and substance use—for example, testing bidirectional associations between parenting and adolescents’ substance use, the importance of measuring substance-specific socialization, and the relevance of using within-family designs and multi-informant data.

Keywords: parenting, alcohol use, longitudinal

We would like to thank Chassin and Handley (2006) and Fromme (2006) for their interesting comments on our article, in particular for their suggestions about new directions of research on alcohol use among adolescents. Both groups of scholars mentioned the lack of support for the effect of parental attachment on the development of adolescents’ drinking in our study. We agree that this finding is remarkable, given that many studies have shown the importance of parental attachment in the development of juvenile problem behavior. However, in most previous studies, researchers used a cross-sectional design and did not pay attention to the bidirectional relations between parental attachment and adolescents’ behavior. Cross-sectionally, we also found that parental attachment and adolescents’ drinking were related. Longitudinally, however, we found only that adolescents’ alcohol use affects parental attachment, not the other way around. We are pleased that Fromme underlined the importance of using longitudinal designs examining bidirectional effects instead of cross-sectional designs examining solely unidirectional associations. She stressed that the association between parenting and adolescents’ problem behavior, such as substance use, is not unidirectional—the direction estimated in most empirical studies—but that adolescents also are influencing their parents’ behavior. This association has been shown in our study and in others (e.g., Kerr & Stattin, 2003; Stice & Barrera, 1995).

Furthermore, in line with Chassin and Handley (2006), we would like to note that results such as our lack of findings regarding parental attachment could differ depending on the particular substance. The fact that we did not find support for parental attachment predicting adolescents’ drinking does not mean that parental attachment does not affect the development of other substance-use patterns such as smoking (Harakeh, Scholte, De Vries, Vermulst, & Engels, 2004) or other drug use (Allen, Hauser, & Borman-Spurrell, 1996; Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998). This issue could be illustrated further by a study on smoking-specific socialization conducted by Den Exter Blokland, Hale, Meeus, and Engels (2006) and by studies on alcohol-specific socialization conducted by Jackson, Henriksen, and Dickinson (1999) and van der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, and Deković (2005). Jackson et al. and van der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, and Deković (2005) found that alcohol-specific rule enforcement strongly prevents adolescents from taking up drinking. In contrast, Den Exter Blokland et al. did not find empirical evidence for the assumption that enforcement of smoking-specific rules (a.k.a., house rules) lowers the odds on smoking 1 year later. Thus, parents seem to have very differential effects depending on the specific substance involved.

Chassin and Handley (2006) discussed some other important issues for research focusing on familial factors and the development of substance use and substance-use disorders. They argued that the effects of general parenting style might differ from the effects of parents’ specific attempts to socialize their children’s substance use. Although it is surprising that substance-specific parenting hardly has been a topic of thorough study, some empirical evidence underscores this line of reasoning. In our study, we found significant, although marginal, effects of (general) strict control on adolescents’ alcohol use, although in another longitudinal study among adolescents (van der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, & Deković, 2005), the preventive effects of alcohol-specific strict control on adolescents’ future drinking were much stronger, espe-
cially for adolescents who had not yet started to drink regularly (see also Jackson et al., 1999).

Another issue that Chassin and Handley (2006) addressed is that research might reveal different results regarding parental influences because of different reports used. Results based on parental reports could differ from those based on adolescents’ reports (Deković, Noom, & Meeus, 1997). For instance, it seems that parents and adolescents often underestimate each others’ alcohol involvement (Engels, van der Vorst, Meeus, & Deković, 2005; Smith, Miller, Kroll, Simmons, & Gallen, 1999) and smoking behavior (Harakeh, Engels, Scholte, & De Vries, in press). A study by van der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, Deković, and Van Leeuwe (2005) that was based on multi-informant data (a within-family design with both parents and two adolescent children) showed that fathers, mothers, and adolescents experience alcohol-specific socialization differently. For instance, both parents reported that they communicated more often about adolescents’ drinking than the adolescents reported that the parents did. However, it is fascinating that the effects of alcohol-specific socialization practices on adolescents’ drinking were comparable between the family members.

In addition, most researchers have concentrated on adolescent substance use in general, perhaps not explicitly realizing that parents may distinguish between offspring or that the effects of parenting may differ between siblings. Thus, in the vast majority of studies, researchers have focused on differences between families instead of within families (Engels & Bot, 2006). Examining the interactions within families concerning substance use is important because parents treat each of their youngsters differently (Hetherington, Reiss, & Plomin, 1994; van der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, & Deković, 2005). Siblings perceive these differences in parental treatment (Kowall, Krull, & Kramer, 2004), and siblings seem to differ in their substance use, at least in their drinking (van der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, & Deković, 2005). Thus, to clearly understand the role of family factors in the development of substance use, it is essential to use research designs that also take into account the complex interactions in families.

Furthermore, adolescents spend a lot of time with their peers, who are assumed to have a strong impact on adolescents’ substance use (e.g., Bot, Engels, & Knibbe, 2005). The family and the peer environment are not two separate worlds for adolescents. Parents might, for example, influence the peer environment by affecting the peer selection processes of their offspring (Engels & Bot, 2006; Mounts, 2004) and the susceptibility to peer pressure. Parents influence peer selection processes indirectly by, for instance, choosing the neighborhood in which they live or the school that their offspring attends; parents influence peer selection processes directly by, for instance, expressing their thoughts and worries about specific friendships. In our opinion, to estimate the full impact of parents, researchers must focus not only on parents’ direct impact on adolescents’ attitudes, motivations, or behaviors related to drinking but also must focus on parents’ indirect impact on the peer relations of their children.

In sum, Chassin and Handley (2006) and Fromme (2006) highlight the importance of longitudinal research examining reciprocal associations between parenting and substance use on the basis of longitudinal multi-informant data. Recent studies have shown that the issues Chassin and Handley and Fromme raised should be taken into account by researchers focusing on substance use and substance-use disorders.

References


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