Dear Editor:

In their recent Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs article on adolescent drinking, van der Vorst and colleagues (2010) made recommendations for policy and parenting that are unsupported by their own data and are, I would argue, potentially harmful.

The article was presented as a refutation of the idea that parents should model moderate/mealtime drinking for their adolescent offspring (as by permitting the adolescent a few sips of an alcoholic beverage with dinner). Van der Vorst et al. (2010) concluded:

"Our findings yield substantial evidence that adolescents’ alcohol use leads to more drinking over time and problem drinking, regardless of the context [emphasis added], with whom adolescents are drinking, or their age. Based on this, we think that alcohol prevention programs should recommend that parents prohibit their children from drinking at home and outside the home and make parents more aware of their possible preventive role in the initiation phase of drinking. (p. 113)

The authors’ claim that their conclusions apply “regardless of the context” is unwarranted because their assessment of “drinking with parents” did not distinguish among contexts at all. Moderate/mealtime drinking (assuming that some of it occurred) was lumped together with drinking under unspecified circumstances and in unlimited amounts—as long as a parent was present. The unsurprising finding was that “the more the older adolescents drank at home, the more they drank outside the home” (p. 109). Of course, unlimited provision of alcohol to one’s adolescent offspring has never been seriously recommended as a way to inculcate social learning. In addition, to my knowledge, no one has suggested that the amount of drinking an adolescent does at home will be monotonically and inversely related to the amount of drinking the adolescent does elsewhere—yet that appears to be what is addressed in the analysis. The question of interest to both science and public policy is whether appropriately supervised adolescents drink differently from other adolescents.

This brings us to the authors’ conclusion that parental “supervision” of adolescents’ drinking did not deter an overall increase in drinking. The operational definition of “supervision” here was whether parents cross-examined the adolescents before and after a night out with friends—not whether the parents provided alcohol for moderate, directly monitored consumption at family meals or gatherings. Thus, the authors’ broad conclusions about “supervision” do not mean what they might appear to mean. What is especially frustrating is that van der Vorst and colleagues cited an article (Foley et al., 2004) that spelled out the relevant unanswered questions: “It would be especially helpful to know the full context surrounding parental alcohol provision to a minor. Was the alcohol provided for a special celebration or occasion or during a meal? Do these parents set limits regarding how often and how much alcohol can be consumed at home?” (p. 345.e25; emphasis in original). Van der Vorst and colleagues have addressed none of those questions.

Another troubling aspect of the article is that it encourages readers to draw incorrect conclusions about current policy recommendations. The introduction of van der Vorst et al. (2010) states:

"The orientation of some alcohol prevention efforts has shifted to the role of parents in adolescents’ alcohol use (Dusenbury, 2000; Perry et al., 2000; Spoth et al., 2004). One of the current tendencies in The Netherlands is to advise parents to supervise the drinking of their adolescent children at home. Parents are also told to drink with their children at home as the children enter adolescence. The underlying reason is that parents can socialize their children’s alcohol use, and therefore they will limit their children’s future drinking in other situations. This advice has also been suggested by non-Dutch European scholars (e.g., Bellis et al., 2007). (p. 105)

The first three articles cited (Dusenbury, 2000; Perry et al., 2000; Spoth et al., 2004) describe abstinence-oriented programs in which parental provision of alcohol to minors is either not mentioned or is specifically rejected. In other words, these articles have nothing to do with the subsequent..."
unsupported assertion that parents are being “told to drink with their children at home” (p. 105). The one cited article in which such recommendations are made (Bellis et al., 2007) states that parents should “perhaps even moderately consume alcohol with [their children], educating them about its use and providing positive role models for responsible consumption” (p. 8; emphasis added). The same article states: “More research is needed on any positive effects of consuming alcohol in family environments. In the meantime, however, it is essential that public health messages do not discourage parents from consuming modest amounts of alcohol with their children as such changes may actually increase drinking behaviours most damaging to youths’ health” (p. 8; emphasis added). These conclusions are stated in measured terms and are supported by Bellis and colleagues’ data. But if they have been formally incorporated into prevention programs, then van der Vorst and colleagues should cite the names of those programs.

I do not claim that parental modeling of responsible drinking will eliminate adolescents’ experimentation with excessive drinking. In fact, one of the seminal writings on the matter specifically states it will not (Zinberg, 1984). As van der Vorst and colleagues correctly note, increased drinking during adolescence is the norm, and this increase will be most manifest when parents are not physically present (Foley et al., 2004; Mayer et al., 1998)—a finding that comports well with a large body of empirical literature suggesting that personality development is remarkably unaffected by parenting styles (Harris, 1998). But what social learning about alcohol may do is impart a knowledge base and a set of skills that adolescents can decide to use after experimenting with the heavier drinking they see among peers (Zinberg, 1984). If adolescents have not engaged in moderate/mealt ime drinking at home, they may be slower to choose it, if they choose it at all. A definitive study of the issue would need to control for genetic similarities between parents and offspring (Harris, 1998), but appropriate assessment of drinking contexts would at least be a step in the right direction.

Meanwhile, all of us need to avoid drawing unsupported conclusions that can lead to extreme behaviors—including extremely restrictive behaviors that might have their own negative consequences. “Study Says Parents Shouldn’t Drink With Their Teens” and “Drinking Under Parental Supervision Promotes Alcoholism”—these are two headlines under which the van der Vorst et al. study has been reported in the popular press. The headlines cannot be written off as sloppy journalism, because they echo statements in the published article itself. A formal clarification from the study authors would be a good first step toward limiting the damage.

References


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The authors respond

Dear Editor:

We appreciate the opinions of Dr. Epstein and take this opportunity to address the main issues raised in his letter to the editor. The first issue involves the implications of our findings on current policy recommendations. Despite the effectiveness of abstinence-based family intervention programs in the United States (see Smit et al., 2008), until recently in the Netherlands health-promotion organizations advised parents to drink with their teenagers at home to help adolescents develop nonproblematic drinking patterns (at home and somewhere else; STAP, 2010). This idea has an intuitive appeal because, by allowing children to drink at home, parents can monitor their children’s drinking behaviors. However, the effectiveness of this strategy had not previously been tested over time. We attempted to address this gap in the literature with our recent publication by examining the role of factors related to this advice (van der Vorst et al., 2010). Based on the findings of this study as well as of other previous findings (e.g., Koning et al., 2009; van der Vorst et al., 2009), Dutch health-promotion organizations changed their policies to promote
abstinence until age 16 (Stichting Alcohol Preventie-STAP, 2010; Trimbos Institute-Alcohol Infoline, 2010).

Previous cross-sectional findings indicated that adolescents drink less and are less involved in heavy episodic drinking at home, under parental supervision, and when they drink with their parents (e.g., Foley et al., 2004; Forsyth and Barnard, 2000). In contrast to these studies, our study among Dutch families was based on longitudinal data enabling us to examine whether these family factors would actually lower the development of adolescent alcohol use and the risk for problem drinking. That is, we are one of the first that examined whether these parental factors lower the normative increase of adolescent drinking at home and places outside the home, as well as problematic drinking behaviors. Our findings clearly raise questions about whether drinking with parents can reduce the development of adolescent alcohol use and their risk of having problems with alcohol. Our study showed that youth drinking at home (or outside the home) was associated with an increased risk for heavier and problematic drinking patterns in these settings 2 years later. We did not find differences between parents who drank in the presence of their child versus parents who did not or between parents who supervised their children's alcohol use versus parents who did not. Nevertheless, as we acknowledge in the Discussion section of our article, these results need to be replicated. We do not know the amount of alcohol parents drank with their children or whether they actually taught their children to limit their alcohol use. Still, our longitudinal study is a good first step in understanding more about whether what parents can do or not do in their own home affects the development of alcohol use.

A second issue raised in the letter to the editor concerned the operationalization of parental supervision of adolescent alcohol use. Our project utilized a commonly used measure of parental supervision (e.g., Keijser et al., 2009; van der Zwaluw et al., 2008) as adapted to alcohol use, namely the parental control scale of Kerr and Stattin (2000). As those authors argued, parental supervision or monitoring of adolescent behaviors is not as clear as one might believe. The efforts that parents make to know adolescents’ whereabouts and their subsequent knowledge may not be as important as what adolescents disclose about their behaviors to their parents (Stattin and Kerr, 2000). This might be the case for drinking as well. On the other hand, for alcohol use, it might be important that adolescents consume alcohol solely in the presence of parents who are not drinking at that moment to reduce future alcohol involvement. More specifically, Dr. Epstein seems to think that allowing adolescents to drink moderately or sip or taste alcohol during dinnertime under parental supervision might lower the normative increase of adolescent alcohol use. This is an interesting issue and one deserving future investigation. However, we are unaware of empirical evidence supporting this particular statement. Cross-sectional studies related to this subject showed that children of parents who provide them alcohol had more experiences with drinking (Foley et al., 2004; Hearst et al., 2007; Komro et al., 2007). If parents drank alcohol with their children, this was associated to less alcohol use (Foley et al., 2004). Although these findings are intriguing, they do not prove that parental supervision of drinking during mealtime lowers the rate of increase in adolescent alcohol use over time. Further, letting adolescents drink, for example, during dinner might be interpreted by the adolescent as parental approval of their alcohol use. As some studies have demonstrated, parental approval of adolescent alcohol use is related to increased involvement of adolescents in alcohol use and heavy episodic drinking (e.g., Callas et al., 2004; Miller and Plant, 2003). Another question is whether moderate sipping of alcohol by minors is harmless. For instance, Jackson (1997) found a relation between sipping a parent’s drink, or being allowed to have a drink of their own at home, and children’s initiation and experimenting with alcohol. Although more empirical verification for those results is warranted, it might indicate that sipping with parents at a younger age is a potential risk factor for drinking, particularly in countries like The Netherlands, where heavy drinking is the norm of youths.

In conclusion, longitudinal research focusing on the development of adolescent alcohol use reveals that when parents do not drink with their children (e.g., Fang et al., 2009; Koning et al., 2010; van der Vorst et al., 2009; Walls et al., 2009) and do not allow their children to drink at home (Jackson et al., 1999) or at other places, their children are less likely to start early and drink heavily later in adolescence. Until future empirical evidence says otherwise, we think it is worthwhile to invest time and energy in helping parents to delay the age at adolescent alcohol onset by making parents more aware of the role of being strict about adolescent alcohol use in any setting.

References


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