

The DRAM, Vol. 3(1) - It runs in the family: Maternal and paternal influence on adolescent drinking

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Evidence related to family factors and adolescents' decisions about using alcohol is mixed. Brody, Ge, Katz, and Arias (2000) found that parental alcohol-related norms and alcohol use was related to children's drinking. However, Yu (2003) found that parents' attitudes about alcohol and alcohol use had no impact on their children's alcohol use; however, this study also found that spending time with parents who drank related positively to adolescent drinking. Thus, to clarify the specific factors that are involved in adolescents' decisions regarding drinking, it is important to explore further the relationship between parents and teen drinking. For example, parental gender differences might influence adolescent drinking. In this week's DRAM, we review a longitudinal study that examined several parental factors and their relationship to teen drinking (Seljamo et al., 2006).

Seljamo et al. recruited participants from health care clinics in South Western Finland. During 1986-1987, the first wave of data collection, 1,287 (i.e., a 75% response rate) parents answered questions about their alcohol use while pregnant with the child participant. Seven years later, 846 of these parents answered questions about their alcohol use (66% of Wave 1 participants responded); eight years after that both parents and children completed a final survey (75% of the Wave 2 participants responded). The parents answered questions about their age of first alcohol use and the frequency of their drinking during the past six months; they also completed items about sociodemographic factors (e.g., education, employment, marital status and if there were new adults in the child's life). The teen participants answered questions about alcohol use and alcohol-related injuries. The researchers conducted several multivariate analyses to assess the relationship between adolescent drinking (dependent variable) and mothers' alcohol-related behavior, fathers' alcohol-related behavior, and socio-demographic variables (independent variables).

Mothers				Fathers		
	n	P-value	COR ¹	n	P-value	COR
<i>Age of parents first alcohol experience</i>						
		<0.001**			0.002**	
<13 years	97		1.7	133		2.5
14-16 years	375		0.7	246		1.1
>17 years	122		1.0	97		
<i>Units of alcohol consumed (3rd wave)</i>						
					0.042*	
>5 units				118		1.8
<5 units				200		1.2
1-2 units				158		1.0
<i>Frequency of drunkenness during the past 6 months (3rd wave)</i>						
		<0.009**				
More frequently than once a month	48		2.4			
Once a month or less frequently	271		1.8			
Never	230		1.0			

*P < 0.05, **P < 0.01

¹COR = Cumulative odds ratio

Only statistically significant variables are included.

Figure. Independent predictors of children's problematic alcohol use: significant mother-related and father-related variables (adapted from Seljamo et al., 2006). Click image to enlarge.

The results showed that 83% of girls and 79% of boys used alcohol by the age of 15. Forty-two adolescents reported alcohol-related injuries of their own or their friends. Children whose parents, both mothers and fathers, were early drinkers were more likely to drink than children with parents who drank later in life (see Figure) (mother's odds ratio = 1.7, .07, 1.0, $p < 0.01$; father's odd ratio = 2.5, 1.1, $p < 0.01$). The father's consumption of alcohol (father's odd ratio = 1.8, 1.2, 1.0 $p < 0.05$) and mother's drunkenness during the past 6 months (mother's odds ratio = 2.4, 1.8, 1.0, $p < 0.01$) were positively related to adolescent drinking (see Figure). In addition, parental separation was a strong general predictor of adolescent drinking (odds ratio = 1.9, 1.0, $p < 0.01$).

This study has several limitations. First, the study lacked any measure of alcohol dependence. More items assessing alcohol dependence would better indicate whether problem drinking was present. The study also could have included questions about alcohol attitudes and beliefs, since there are contradictory reports about how these impact teen drinking. Another limitation was the self-report data; for example, both parents and children might have under or over reported alcohol use due to the perception of social norms. The findings might not

generalize to adolescents from other regions due to the lack of variation among the sample, as well as geographic variations associated with legal drinking age (i.e., the legal drinking age in Finland is 18) (Poikolainen, Tuulio-Henriksson, Aalto-Setälä, Marttunen, & Lönngqvist, 2001). This study also experienced declining participation rates, a common limitation in longitudinal studies. This problem might have biased the data because dropouts could have been different from remaining participants. In addition, teens who reported no drinking could still be using other drugs like marijuana; further research should ask additional questions about other drug use.

This study illustrates the importance of parents' influence on their children's drinking behavior. Public health prevention workers need to consider these findings when implementing prevention programs as well as treatment for alcohol misuse. For example, there are differences in how drinking behaviors of mothers versus fathers relate to adolescent drinking. Researchers need to examine the reasons for these gender differences and further explore their implications. In addition, investigators need to examine closely how structural changes in family (e.g., separation and divorce) relate to teen drinking. Future research focusing on this complex relationship might yield important information that can help prevention programs develop strategies to effectively target at-risk adolescents. We encourage health organizations and families to work together in their efforts to combat alcohol misuse.

—Sarbani Hazra

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