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Letting teen drink under parent's watch backfires

Those who drank with supervision more prone to problems than those told to wait, study says

By **Linda Carroll**

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updated 4/29/2011 8:37:51 AM ET

As prom night approaches and parents begin to worry about what might happen during after hour parties, some might be tempted to try to teach their high schoolers to drink responsibly – by allowing them to consume alcohol under supervision.

That approach, scientists now say, is dead wrong.

A new study shows that teens who drink with an adult supervising are more likely to develop problems with alcohol than kids who aren't allowed to touch the stuff till they hit age 21.

“The study makes it clear that you shouldn't be drinking with your kids,” said Barbara J. McMorris, lead author and a senior research associate at the School of Nursing at the University of Minnesota.

An [AmericanMedicalAssociation](#)

study reported in 2005 that 25 percent of teens acknowledged they had been at a party where underage drinking was occurring in the presence of a parent. Those are the parents McMorris and her colleagues are hoping the

study will reach and teach.

For the new study, she and her colleagues rounded up 1,945 seventh graders and then tracked them for three years. Half of the teens were from Victoria, Australia, the other half from Washington State.

Each year the kids were given questionnaires that asked about their experiences with alcohol and about their relationships with their parents. The teens were asked how often they'd consumed more than a few sips of any alcoholic beverage each time they were surveyed.

When they hit the eighth grade, the teens were asked how many times in the past year they'd consumed alcohol “at dinner, or on a special

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occasion or holiday, with adult supervision” or “at parties with adult supervision.” They were also asked how many times they’d experienced harmful consequences, such as “not able to stop once you had started,” “became violent and got into fight,” “got injured or had an accident,” “got so drunk you were sick or passed out,” “had sex with someone you later regretted,” or “were unable to remember the night before because you had been drinking.”

Poll: Do you let your teen drink alcohol at home?

Australian teens were more likely than their American counterparts to be drinking with adult supervision by eighth grade — 66 percent versus 35 percent — and they were more likely to have experienced harmful consequences from their drinking — 36 percent compared to 21 percent.

No matter which continent kids and parents came from, it was clear that the strategy to teach teens responsible drinking habits through supervised consumption was backfiring.

That finding didn’t surprise the experts.

“I think the study says something pretty important,” said Patrick Tolan, director of Youth-Nex: The University of Virginia Center to Promote Effective Youth Development. “Parents need to make it clear that it’s not OK for kids to drink until they reach the legal drinking age – a line has to be drawn.”

Still, many parents seem to have a particularly difficult time drawing lines when it comes to alcohol, said Mary O’Connor, a professor in the department of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at the University of California—Los Angeles. “There are people I know who are very responsible parents in many ways who think that this is part of being a responsible parent,” O’Connor said.

TODAY Moms: Should parents lock up their liquor?

That may be related to our own mixed feelings about a substance that is actually a legal, mind-altering drug.

What parents tend to forget is that teens are not just smaller versions of us. Their brains have not finished developing and studies have shown that alcohol has a very different effect on the unfinished brain, O’Connor said.

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“We know from both animal and human studies that alcohol affects brain development,” O’Connor said. “The teenage brain is much more vulnerable to begin with and we now know that repeated drinking can lead to long term deficits in learning and memory.”

Parents should model moderation

Beyond this, there’s mounting data showing that it can be dangerous to start drinking young, said Dr. Brian Primack, an assistant professor of medicine and pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. Studies have shown that kids are four times more likely to become alcoholics if they start drinking before age 15, Primack said. So, is it enough to simply draw the line and tell your kids they can’t touch a drop till they’re 21? Will that glass of wine with dinner — made all the more necessary by rebellious teens you live with — encourage them to drink too much?

Not necessarily, experts say.

“You want to model moderation,” Tolan explained. “You don’t want to be drinking a lot in front of them – or inviting them to parties where your friends will be drinking a lot. That will confuse them and lead them to think that it’s OK to drink a lot.”

You don’t have to lock down the liquor cabinet, he added, but “that said, you should remember that kids experiment.”

Parents should know exactly what and how much alcohol they’ve got, O’Connor said.

“And you want to taste it periodically to make sure it’s not been diluted,” she added.

That’s well and good for when your kids are at home. But what about that prom night situation?

The solution might be a simple one — let your teen host the party at your house. “I think alcohol free parties are a great idea,” McMorris said.

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