



## Providing Alcohol for Underage Youth: What Messages Should We Be Sending Parents?

[Övgü Kaynak](#), Ph.D.,<sup>a,\*</sup> [Ken C Winters](#), Ph.D.,<sup>a,b</sup> [John Cacciola](#), Ph.D.,<sup>a,c</sup> [Kimberly C Kirby](#), Ph.D.,<sup>a,c</sup> and [Amelia M Arria](#), Ph.D.<sup>a,d</sup>

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### Abstract

#### Objective:

There have been conflicting findings in the literature concerning the risks to adolescents when parents provide them with alcohol. Studies have examined various ways in which parents directly affect adolescent alcohol consumption through provision (e.g., parental offers, parental allowance/supervision, parental presence while drinking, and parental supply). This review synthesizes findings on the direct ways parental provision can influence a child's alcohol consumption and related problems in an effort to provide parents with science-based guidance. We describe potential mechanisms of the relationship between these parental influences and adolescent problems, suggest future directions for research, and discuss implications for parents.

#### Method:

Twenty-two studies (a mix of cross-sectional and longitudinal) that empirically examined the association between parental provision and adolescent drinking outcomes were reviewed.

#### Results:

Parental provision was generally associated with increased adolescent alcohol use and, in some instances, increased heavy episodic drinking as well as higher rates of alcohol-related problems. Data in support of the view that parental provision serves as a protective factor in the face of other risk factors were equivocal.

#### Conclusions:

The nature and extent of the risks associated with parental provision, and the potential mechanisms underlying this association, are complex issues. Although more rigorous studies with longitudinal designs are needed, parents should be aware of potential risks associated with providing adolescents with alcohol and a place to drink. It is recommended that parents discourage drinking until adolescents reach legal age.

Not surprisingly, the NIH paper is dense. It looked at 22 cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, excluding qualitative studies. Beyond the Abstract, here are key findings and excerpts:

#### Key Findings:

"Research has consistently shown that indirect parental influences (e.g., permissiveness of drinking) are associated with increased drinking, heavy episodic drinking, and negative alcohol-related consequences ([Abar and Turrise, 2008](#); [Abar et al., 2009](#); [Walls et al., 2009](#); [Wood et al., 2004](#)). Parents imposing strict rules related to

adolescent alcohol use is overwhelmingly associated with less drinking and fewer alcohol-related risky behaviors ([Mares et al., 2012](#); [Van der Vorst et al., 2006, 2007](#))."

"A study of 1,050 pairs of mothers and elementary-aged children ([Jackson et al., 2012](#)) found that between 15% and 40% of mothers believed that allowing their children to sip alcohol can be protective in the future (e.g., making children less likely to drink as adolescents, more likely to refuse peer pressure). **Despite these beliefs, there is little research evidence to support the notion that it is even possible to 'teach' children to drink alcohol responsibly.**" (Emphasis added).

Under "Parental Allowance/Supervision of Alcohol Use":

"... [A]ll of the longitudinal studies observed that parental allowance of drinking at home was related to a higher likelihood of drinking during adolescence ([Jackson et al., 1999](#); [Komro et al., 2007](#); [Shortt et al., 2007](#)), heavy episodic drinking ([Komro et al., 2007](#); [Livingston et al., 2010](#)), or the frequency of alcohol-related problems ([McMorris et al., 2011](#); [Van der Vorst et al., 2010](#))"

Under "Social Hosting/Furnishing":

Three U.S. studies of adolescents (one longitudinal and two cross-sectional) overwhelmingly linked hosting and furnishing to negative alcohol-related outcomes. Adolescents whose parents (or friend's parents) allowed them to drink at home with friends or hosted a party were significantly more likely to consume alcohol ([Foley et al., 2004](#)), engage in heavy episodic drinking ([Foley et al., 2004](#); [Livingston et al., 2010](#); [Reboussin et al., 2012](#)), and experience alcohol-related problems ([Reboussin et al., 2012](#)). **Most notably, [Reboussin et al. \(2012\)](#) found that adolescents who had attended a party where parents supplied the alcohol were at increased risk for drinking and driving or riding with a person who had been drinking.** (Emphasis added).

Under "Limitations and Future Directions":

"A recent study found that, among college students, zero-tolerance messages conveyed by parents were more protective against alcohol use and consequences when compared with mixed messages or the absence of a message ([Abar et al., 2012](#)). A zero-tolerance approach was related to safer outcomes than other messages, even if students were already using alcohol. Although conducted with older adolescents, the findings are important to consider because they contradict the assumption that with the right communication, parents can socialize their children to alcohol use and reduce risky drinking in other settings."

Under "What Messages Should We Be Sending to Parents?":

First, allowing children to drink underage, even when supervised by the parent, is always associated with a greater likelihood of drinking during adolescence over time. Parents should understand this connection and avoid allowing their children to drink.

**Finally, social hosting is never a good idea. Parents might believe they are keeping their children and their children's friends safe by allowing them to drink in their home. This is not the case. Adolescents who attend parties where parents supply alcohol are at increased risk for heavy episodic drinking, alcohol-related problems, and drinking and driving** ([Foley et al., 2004](#); [Livingston et al., 2010](#); [Reboussin et al., 2012](#)).

Finally, under "Conclusion": Parents should "continue to discourage drinking until adolescents reach legal age."

**Other:** NIH National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism -

<https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/parenting-prevent-childhood-alcohol-use>