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Parents' rules about underage drinking: A qualitative study of why parents let teens drink

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Abstract

Results from a qualitative study with parents about underage drinking are presented. Semi-structured interviews (n=44) were conducted with parents of teens to investigate whether and why parents permit underage drinking. Parents had three primary reasons for allowing underage drinking: deliberate, spontaneous and harm reduction. Deliberate reasons included passing on knowledge about drinking responsibly and appreciating alcohol. Parents also spontaneously decided to let their teen drink. Some of these spontaneous situations involved feeling pressure from other adults to let their teen drink. Another reason was a desire to reduce potential harm. Parents feared that forbidding underage drinking would harm their relationship with their teen and potentially lead to drunk driving. Prevention efforts aimed at parents should take into account parents' motivations to let teens drink.

Keywords

parents; adolescents; alcohol; alcohol; rules

Introduction

Parents constitute a source of alcohol for some teens (Hearst, Fulkerson, Maldonado-Molina, Perry, & Komro, 2007; Ward & Snow, 2011). About 20% of 12-14 year old drinkers report getting alcohol from a parent in the past month (Paschall, Grube, Black, & Ringwalt, 2007). Youths often have their first taste of alcohol in the form of a sip given to them by their parents (Donovan & Molina, 2008). Many parents believe that underage drinking at special occasions in the home is harmless (Kypri, Dean, & Stojanovski, 2007).

The rules that parents set for their children concerning the consumption of alcohol may influence teens' drinking behaviors. Some researchers have found that parents' providing alcohol to children is associated with earlier onset or increased drinking. For example, sipping or tasting alcohol by the age of 10 has been shown to be predictive of early onset drinking (Donovan & Molina, 2011). Other researchers have found that parental provision

of alcohol, as well as availability of alcohol in the home, are linked to increased intentions to drink among teens (Komro, Maldonado-Molina, Tobler, Bonds, & Muller, 2007; Livingston, Testa, Hoffman, & Windle, 2010). Parents' strict rules concerning alcohol use may help to prevent drinking by their teens (Spijkerman, Van den Eijnden, & Huiberts, 2008; Van den Eijnden, Van de Mheen, Vet, & Vermulst, 2011; Van der Vorst, Engels, Dekovi, Meeus, & Vermulst, 2007).

Other researchers, however, have found that drinking with parents may have a protective effect. In one study having parents and adult relatives provide alcohol was protective of underage drinking, but that protective effect was dependent on the social setting within which the alcohol was supplied (Foley, Altman, Durant, & Wolfson, 2004). Having parents provide alcohol for a party was related to a higher likelihood that a teen would report consuming alcohol in the past 30 days, whereas drinking with parents had a protective effect on drinking behaviors. In another study it was found that parents providing the first drink to adolescents reduced subsequent alcohol-related risks compared to those who got their first drink from other sources (Kelly, Chan, & O'Flaherty, 2012).

Parents' communication with teens about alcohol may also influence underage drinking. For example, parents who communicate in a way that makes teens feel comfortable may prevent their teens from drinking alcohol (Spijkerman et al., 2008). However, others have found that frequent communications between parent and teen about alcohol are positively associated with teen alcohol use (Van der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, Dekovi, & Van Leeuwe, 2005). Perceived consequences have been linked to drinking behavior. Teens who expect that their parents would talk with them or take away privileges if they were caught drinking are less likely to drink and less likely to drink heavily (Foley et al., 2004).

This paper includes results from a qualitative study that examined parental rules concerning permissive drinking of underage family members. The study examines the circumstances under which parents let their teens drink and the reasons why parents let their teens drink.

Methodology

Parents of teens, ages 15-18 living in Northern California, were recruited for this qualitative study. The youths were participants in a large (N = 1,312) survey study (Paschall, Grube, Thomas, Cannon, & Treffers, 2012) and were selected for this qualitative study because they had reported drinking alcohol on at least four occasions within the past 12 months and lived within 150 miles of the San Francisco Bay Area. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with their parents. One parent per household was interviewed and the first available parent was selected for participation. In total, 44 parents (31 mothers/female guardians, 13 fathers/male guardians) out of a total number of 60 households that were contacted were interviewed, resulting in a response rate of 73%.

The purpose of the interviews was to investigate under what circumstances parents allow their teenager to drink at home. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and imported into ATLAS.ti (Muhr, 2009). The transcripts were first coded for *a priori* themes created in conjunction with the interview guide, such as *rules*, *reasons for providing*

alcohol, drinking location, drinking context, and perceived inevitability of teens drinking (fatalism). One team member coded the transcripts for these themes, and every fifth transcript was double coded by another team member for reliability testing. Discrepant codes were resolved through discussion. Data were analyzed using pile sorts, in which four researchers grouped coded segments for thematic similarity and then wrote descriptions of how the groupings were related. This process required discussion and consensus on resulting clusters of coded transcript segments. Brief quotations illustrative of prominent and recurring themes were identified. The research protocols were approved by the IRB of the authors' institution.

Results

Rules about teen drinking

When parents were asked whether they allowed their teen to drink alcohol, most parents' initial response was that they did not condone underage drinking. About two third of parents (69%) indicated that they did not think it was a good idea to allow their teen to drink at home. However, during the course of the interviews parents revealed a number of exceptions to their initially stated opposition to underage drinking. These contradictions were revealed when parents were asked: *Some parents who do not normally allow their teenagers to drink allow them to drink on special occasions. Think of an occasion when you allowed your youth to drink.* Parents were then prompted to think about any other occasions when they allowed their teen to drink. **Parents indicated numerous exceptions to their no drinking rule.** Some exceptions that parents made to underage drinking rules were on special occasions, such as family celebrations, during moments of instruction when parents attempted to teach their teen about drinking, and in cases where parents were trying to preserve family and cultural traditions. Exceptions were also made when parents felt pressured to allow their teen to drink. **The findings illustrate the underlying reasons why parents may let their teen drink, including a sense of inevitability, the fear that being too strict could harm the relationship with the teen, and the fear that forbidding drinking alcohol would lead to teens rebelling and possibly endangering themselves.**

Drinking on special occasions—Most of the parents (n = 36) allowed their children to drink on special occasions. Special occasions included family celebrations such as weddings, birthday parties, holidays, and family vacations. Parents reported feeling more comfortable allowing their teenager to drink when their family was around them. For instance, one mother decided to let her daughter join in on the family celebration by permitting her daughter to drink champagne with orange juice: *“It was just recently, I let her have a mimosa. We had a celebration, my mom's 75th birthday. And it was all adults and we were all dressed up and we were doing it and I let her because her cousins were also having mimosas.”* One father discussed allowing his son to drink alcohol at a family wedding: *“Yeah, at their cousin's wedding. I don't think too much at holidays, but you know, the weddings 'cuz there's so much booze flowing ... and then we're driving [th]em home. What could be a better situation?”*

Some parents (n=15) stressed moderation when drinking in a family setting. Drinking was permitted as long as the teen did not “*overdo it*” as one parent explained. An example of this was a parent who disregarded his son overindulging in alcohol at an anniversary dinner as long as he did not embarrass the family: “[He] was fifteen or sixteen. We weren't keeping a tab on him. We were spending the night there so it was no big deal and he was definitely drinking. He was drunk. And I pulled him aside and said, ‘[name of teen], just don't embarrass the family. I want you to maintain.’ And he didn't do anything really stupid. He wasn't barfing in the bushes or anything, so I guess it was okay.”

Holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year were also described as special occasions when teens were allowed to drink alcohol. One mother discussed a family holiday party where teens were allowed to drink: “*Last New Year's Eve we had a big party here at the house and we let the kids have a flute or two of champagne...New Year's we'll let them have some and Christmas Eve we usually let them. Thanksgiving not usually because it's pretty low key.*” Another mother reported offering wine to her children during a Thanksgiving dinner: “*Oh, just, maybe offering them a glass of wine at Thanksgiving, when everybody's sitting around.*”

Other special occasions when some parents (n = 10) permitted their teens to drink were family vacations. In particular, parents allowed their teenagers to drink in locations where drinking by youths is more accepted, such as Europe. One parent described a family trip to Spain and pointed out that drinking alcohol was part of enjoying the foreign culture: “*Yeah, I would say [my daughter] tried almost every [wine]...and I wouldn't say we encouraged it, but it was really fun to enjoy the culture. Maybe let [her] see a little bit what Spanish wine is [like] versus others. So, yeah, I think we were a little more free when we're on vacation, definitely.*” One father discussed allowing his teen to drink when they went to Paris on vacation: “*We were in Paris in November and we had a bottle of Dom[Pérignon ®] and so we said ‘everyone, who wants some?’ and they all said ‘yeah.’*”

Domestic vacations in the U.S. were also occasions for some parents to allow their teens to drink. For example, family trips to Las Vegas or camping trips to Lake Tahoe were cited as occasions when the parents allowed their teens to drink. One parent who did not condone underage drinking in the home discussed monitoring her teen's drinking while on vacation: “*We don't let [our son] drink at home, maybe when we're on vacation, like in Tahoe. Obviously, you can't do it in public, so when we're in Tahoe to have a beer or two. But in excess, absolutely not. And frequently, absolutely not.*” Another parent discussed her reasons for allowing her daughter to drink beer on a camping trip: “*We went to Yosemite this year and we took my nephew who's the same age as my daughter...I noticed that beer was disappearing out of my ice chest so I said something to [my daughter] and she laughed. She goes, ‘That would be [nephew].’ [My daughter] asked if she could have a beer...I said, ‘Sure.’ [my nephew] looks at me and I said, ‘You know, all you had to do was ask. You're camping. You don't have to steal it out of my ice chest.’ ...I wouldn't let them drink excessively, but I don't care if we're camping and she wants to have a beer and she's with us. She's not driving. She's not going anywhere. She's with us.*”

The teens' safety and the parents' ability to monitor their teens' behavior appeared to be two underlying reasons for allowing their teen to drink on special occasions. Teens were usually with their parents during these occasions, and therefore, parents did not worry about their teens driving or getting into other trouble. Parents also believed that their teen was in a safe environment with family members.

Teaching drinking practices—Teaching teens how to drink alcohol was another reason why parents said that they allowed their teen to drink. Some parents (n = 13) reported letting their teen drink alcohol in order to teach them to drink responsibly, including teaching how to drink in moderation, how to minimize drunkenness, and how to appreciate certain types of alcohol.

In particular, parents wanted to teach their teen how to drink appropriately before being exposed to outside influences such as peers or before going off to college. One parent mentioned: *“I figure that I'd rather have 'em learn how to drink properly at home, with us, than learn with a bunch of teenagers who just guzzle beer ... and throw up. So that was my reason and I figure it's just sort of a family thing and it just seems like a pretty harmless thing.”* Another parent expressed her belief that drinking at home with parents could minimize teens' interest in drinking excessively by introducing them to alcohol: *“Those kids that get drunk in college, if they had one beer with their dad or mom when they were 15 or 16, they wouldn't be doing that.”* Another parent mentioned that allowing teens to drink small amounts of alcohol with dinner would reduce alcohol problems later in life: *“The kids who grow up in a house where they get a sip of wine or, watered down glass of wine with dinner, it actually seems to help prevent alcohol abuse.”*

Some parents (n = 10) reported that letting children try alcohol would demystify it. One parent noted this: *“By letting them taste beer and letting them taste wine ..., at least they're not like thinking 'oh gosh, I've never had that before,' and it's something that they can experience in a controlled safe setting.”* Another parent explained that letting children taste wine would teach them how to appreciate it. The parent explained: *“If you allow your children to drink and taste wine, they're not going to tend to overuse it or abuse it. You teach them that it's something of value. ... Wine is not something that's this forbidden fruit, but rather something that is to be enjoyed and to be used in a way to make your meal more enjoyable.”*

Drinking to preserve tradition—Another reason why some parents (n = 14) allowed their teens to drink alcohol was because it was part of the family culture. In particular, parents who were of Latin American or European background referenced their childhoods and the drinking culture that existed in their family when they were growing up. One mother whose family was originally from Mexico explained why she lets her teen drink: *“Like here in the United States it's like a no-no, ... socially not accepted. But in our culture ... we don't tend to see it as a problem You can drink in your house, with your family. You don't get drunk. You have one or two beers.”* Parents who referenced their family background often wanted their children to share the same experiences that they had when they were growing up. For example, one parent of European descent said: *“I come from a European background where if you drink it's not that big a deal. My mother's English. We always tried*

to sort of, I mean not promote drinking, but, when I lived in England for a while, I'd go to the pubs with my uncles and have those Shandies [lemonade mixed with beer] and so, we do the same with our kids."

A few parents (n = 8) expressed a belief that European customs teach children how to drink in moderation. One parent said that he noticed a difference in the drinking behavior of the European kids that he has hosted: *"They all start drinking when they are 10 or 12 years old and it's a moderation thing, it's social, we're having a glass of wine with dinner. Most of them don't drink very much, and they certainly never had problems with alcohol in terms of finding empty bottles around the house [laughter], tucked under the bed or something like that. It just seems that they have a better sensibility about alcohol."*

Parents feeling pressure to let their teens drink—Some parents (n = 10) reported that they were opposed to letting their teen drink alcohol, but have been in situations where another adult offered their teen alcohol without their consent or where they felt some pressure to let their child drink. One mother who did not condone underage drinking was overruled by her husband who allowed their daughter and her friends to play a game of beer pong in the home. When asked why she let it happen she said: *"Um, because I was outnumbered. My husband thought it was okay and my daughter really wanted to do it."* Another mother described how her son was offered alcohol at a family celebration without her consent. She said: *"We were at a [holiday] celebration once and the other parents determined that it's okay for their kids to drink because they would prefer their kids drink in their presence, rather than secretly and I watched [son] drink more at that time than ever before and I felt really uncomfortable. I wished the other parents hadn't said that was okay [...] but I felt that because there were other teenagers there and I couldn't say ... and other parents who I respected ... But what they did is they sort of announced it at the table and I felt like I couldn't notch it back in that situation."* Having older children may also make withholding alcohol from younger children more difficult. A mother allowed her younger son to drink beer because his older sibling was allowed to drink: *"[L]ast Thanksgiving [my older son] and his roommate from college were here. They were both 20, ... and we were at grandma's house, and so we said, 'oh, you guys can have beer.' We knew they drank all the time at [college], and then I said [my younger son] could have one and, so it was kind of ... 'ooh [he] can have one,' and we made a big deal, a lot of jokes about, 'well, it's nice I'm here for your first drink.'"*

Parents' belief that underage drinking is inevitable—Underlying parents' stories of exceptions and reasons why they let their teen drink alcohol was a sentiment that teen drinking was unavoidable. This was reported by more than half of the parents (n = 25). One parent said: *"I think underage drinking is just a horrible thing, but kids are going to experience it."* Parents noted how widespread underage drinking was due to the availability of alcohol. One father explained: *"Availability has never been a problem [whether] the age [is] 18, 21, or 14. Alcohol is going to get to kids."* Parents talked about not being naïve about what their children did, regardless of the parent's stance on underage drinking. One mother discussed: *"[daughter's] running around with several different groups of friends and some of them I can trust her with a little more than others [because] I know their family and*

their background. But like I said, I'm not gonna sit here and be real naïve and go, 'I told her not to drink, she's not gonna drink.'”

A few parents (n = 3) also expressed the belief that their teens were going make mistakes, but that it was best for them to make mistakes before they left home. For instance, one mother said: *“These kids are gonna be 18 years old. You gotta let them make their own mistakes and I'd rather they make their mistakes when they're at home than when they're away. ... but ... I have to give her the rope until she hangs herself ... and in 18 years she's only hung herself twice. I think that's pretty good.”*

Fear of harming their relationship with their teen—Some parents (n = 8) mentioned that being too strict was not the best tactic to use. They expressed their belief that forbidding teens to drink would have negative consequences. One mother stated it was best to find a middle ground between forbidding them to drink and allowing them to drink: *“If you're too strict with your kid, they're just going to rebel. So there's kind of a happy medium you have to find... and [son] taught me over the years that you can't just shut them down and not let them do anything 'cuz then they're just going to be angry and it's going to make my life miserable.”* Moreover, parents stressed that open communication with teens was essential in order to help them should they get into trouble while drinking alcohol. One mother reported: *“It's rampant everywhere. ... it's going to happen and you got to keep an open verbalization with your kids. If you don't do that, then they're going to do it either way, but if they go do it and you have an open path of communication then you can assist them more when there is trouble 'cuz there [will] be and you're not going to stop it.”*

Some parents (n = 6) felt that it was best to teach their teen how to make good decisions. In particular, parents were very concerned about drinking and driving. For instance, one mother stressed that all that she could hope for was that her son used good judgment while under the influence of alcohol: *“If you put in a rule that's really firm, it's not realistic. If you say, for example, to a kid 'You can't have sex until you get married,' it's not necessarily they're going to hold to that. They're going to have sex when they want to and they're just not going to talk to you about it. So, you have to raise them with wisdom. I feel the same about drinking. If you say, 'don't drink until you're 21' and you're so rigid about it, they're just not going to talk to you. So, you have to kind of raise them with wisdom like, 'You know, if you ever get into a situation, call me,' because I'd rather have a drunk kid alive than a dead kid.”*

Harm reduction—Believing that teens are likely to drink alcohol, many parents (n = 24) wanted to offer harm reduction approaches to avoid dangerous situations. Thus, creating a safe place for open discussion was important to parents. Parents' fear of their teen not telling them what was going on led some parents to not expressly forbid drinking. However, parents were clear about their rules concerning drinking and driving. Parents preferred that their teen call them for a ride if they were inebriated or stay overnight at a friend's rather than drive home. A parent elaborated on her stance about her teen's drinking and expressed the contradictions parents deal with when telling their children not to drink but at the same time want to make sure that they are safe if they do drink. She said: *“If my children did [drink], that would have to be on their own conscience because they know how I feel about*

[underage drinking], and they would be going against what I [said]—and they aren't going to call me and say, 'Hey Mom, can I drink?' It's hard because I'm not going to okay it, but then on the other hand, I'm not naïve [about] what children are doing today. There is a lot of underage drinking, but I will tell my children if you are going somewhere and if alcohol is there, I don't want you to get in anybody's car, or if you need me to pick you up. On one hand, you are telling them don't do this, but if you do I want them to know that [they] can call me. I'm not going to be mad, no questions. Because I just want to make sure that they are safe. So it's hard, but it's just that kids will be kids and we can tell them don't do this but they are still going to maybe do it."

Discussion

Findings from this study reflect a new perspective into the often contradictory reasoning process that parents employ in situations where their children are exposed to alcohol. Even though parents' initial response to questions about underage drinking indicated that they do not allow it, further questioning revealed that many will allow drinking in specific circumstances. In addition, the findings from this study indicate the reasoning parents use as to why they allow underage drinking. Some parents discussed allowing drinking during holidays, vacations, and other special occasions. They felt that drinking during these occasions could be used to teach teens how to drink responsibly and how to appreciate alcohol. In some cases allowing their teen to drink was seen as carrying on a family's cultural tradition. Researchers have shown that some parents perceive drinking at special occasions in the home as harmless (Komro et al., 2007; Kypri et al., 2007). However, this study shows that some parents see actual benefits in letting youths drink in certain situations. Specifically, some of them see it as an opportunity to teach teens about alcohol and drinking and as a way of letting teens experience alcohol in a safe environment. Even though alcohol provided in a family setting may have a protective effect on underage drinking (Foley et al., 2004), some of the parents' beliefs were based on misinformation. For example, some parents justified letting their teens drink based on the belief that youths in Europe drink in moderation. Literature suggests that this is not the case, and that young people in many European countries are more likely to report drinking and drinking heavily than do youths in the U.S. (Friese & Grube, 2010).

Data from this investigation illustrates why some parents think it is difficult to prohibit underage drinking. Parents discussed situations where they felt pressure from their spouse or other adults to let their teen drink. The decisions to let their teen drink were made in the moment, and sometimes went against a parent's previously set rules. Parents also revealed it was more difficult to say no to underage drinking in cases where there were older siblings present who were allowed to drink. They appeared to be concerned that they not make their teen feel excluded on such occasions. Other researchers have found that fathers may be more likely than mothers to have a non-restrictive attitudes towards underage drinking, possibly increasing the likelihood of parents' disagreeing about letting teens drink (Pettersson, Linden-Bostroem, & Eriksson, 2009).

Some parents also expressed concerns that saying no to underage drinking would harm their relationship with their child and potentially lead to unsupervised drinking and thus to

associated problems, particularly drunk driving. For example, parents worried that if they forbid drinking their teen would not call them for a ride if he or she needed one. Open communication was seen as very important and some parents were worried that if they were too strict about their underage drinking rules, their teen would rebel and drink anyway or not tell them what was going on in the teen's life. It is noteworthy that some parents primarily discussed drunk driving as the harm that could come to their teen. Other dangers such as exposure to violence, sexual assault, and unprotected sex were rarely considered.

It is important to point out that providing alcohol to minors in California is illegal. In California, unlike some other states, the law does not permit an exception for providing alcohol to a minor who is a family member or providing alcohol to a minor in a private residence (APIS, 2012). California is one of 20 states that does not allow for either exception. This means that parents furnishing alcohol to a minor, even if that minor is their own child, and even if the alcohol is provided in a private residence, could be cited and fined. Parents participating in this study did not indicate any concern about provision of alcohol to their teen being illegal, suggesting that they may not know that it is illegal or that there is little concern about this law being enforced.

Limitations of this study are that the parents interviewed are not a representative sample and therefore their experiences may not be representative of experiences of other parents. In particular, all of the families were selected because their teen had reported on a telephone survey that he/she had consumed alcohol on four or more occasions in the past 12 months. Thus, parents who let their teen drink are likely overrepresented in this sample. A small subset of the parents interviewed in this study was consistently opposed to giving minors alcohol in any situation. Because this paper focused on reasons why parents may let their teen drink, these parents' views are not represented in this paper. In addition, parents in Northern California may not be representative of parents in other areas of the US or other countries. Also, parents interviewed were of relatively high socio-economic status with 67% of mothers having completed college or higher. Thus, teaching children an appreciation of alcohol or allowing drinking when on vacation may be particular to our study population. Because this is a qualitative study with a non-representative sample it is unclear how pervasive these reasons for providing alcohol or allowing teen drinking are. A quantitative study with a representative sample is needed.

In spite of its limitations, the findings of this study are important because they provide in-depth information about when and why parents allow their teens to drink alcohol. These findings suggest that prevention efforts aimed at parents should take into account the different motivations they have for letting their teens drink. Parents who allow their teens to drink and who see benefits of letting their children drink, should be educated about the misperceptions those parents may have, such as the view that teens in Europe do not drink as much as teens in the United States. Parents who make spontaneous decisions to let their teens drink or who have been pressured into letting their teens drink will likely need a different intervention than parents whose provision of alcohol is more deliberate. Such parents may benefit from interventions on how to communicate their rules concerning underage drinking to other adults and to their teen before being placed in a situation where they feel they need to let their teens drink. Parents who are motivated by a concern to reduce

harm and who are primarily concerned with drunk driving should be educated about other dangers associated with alcohol consumption, such as sexual assault and unprotected sex. The effectiveness of such tailored prevention approaches should be investigated in future research

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