

Parents open door to drinking for many teens

April 17 2007

The gateway to drinking often swings open at home. Instead of keeping their kids locked out of the liquor cabinet, parents turn out to be the primary suppliers of alcohol to young adolescents, according to a new study from the University of Florida and the University of Minnesota.

Until now, many suspected older friends were the source of the booze the middle-school set imbibes. Although some young teens do discover beer or whiskey with friends or at parties, most kids get their first drink from mom and dad at home, the study states. The findings appear in the current online issue of the journal *Preventive Medicine*.

Researchers surveyed 4,000 12- to 14-year-olds in Chicago between 2002 and 2005. About 17 percent of 12-year-olds said they had consumed a full alcoholic drink within the past year — and 33 percent of them reported their parents gave them their last drink. That didn't include teens who just had sips of alcohol or the 4 percent of children who took it from home without their parents' knowledge, said Kelli Komro, a UF associate professor of epidemiology and health policy research and the paper's senior author.

“This study clearly shows it's very important to educate parents about the consequences of the early onset of drinking, to try to prevent them from being a source of alcohol for their children,” Komro said. “There's a whole long list of alcohol-related problems that are related to young people drinking.”

Alcohol is the most abused drug in the United States, and drinking at a

young age heightens the risk of being involved in car crashes, sexual assault and violence, UF researchers say. According to a 2007 U.S. Surgeon General report, adolescents who drink by the time they are 15 — about half of all teens — are more likely to have trouble in school, suffer from alcohol dependence later in life and smoke cigarettes and use other drugs than those who don't. Even worse, exposure to alcohol at a young age may damage the developing brain, the report states.

In most states, parents can legally provide alcohol to their children inside the home. Some parents may do this because of cultural or religious events, but Komro said she thinks parents should be cautious about the message this sends to teens.

Although parents are the primary source of alcohol for 12-year-olds, other adults over 21 are more likely to be a 14-year-old's main supplier. By the time adolescents reach 14, 33 percent reported having a drink within the past year, and the largest percentage of these teens said they got their last drink from another adult over 21.

Although prevention programs have significantly curbed smoking and drug use in adolescents, alcohol use among adolescents has dipped only slightly, Komro said.

“It's one of the toughest behaviors to change in our culture because it's so culturally accepted among adults,” Komro said. “For prevention researchers such as myself, it's one of our challenges to try to get those rates reduced.”

Education programs need to be designed to target both younger children and their parents, said Rhonda Jones-Webb, an associate professor of epidemiology at the University of Minnesota who was not involved with the study.

“The perception has been that kids get alcohol from other kids or older adults,” said Jones-Webb, also co-chairwoman of the health disparities work group at the university. “Perhaps some parents aren’t even aware of the problem.”

Jones-Webb said she thinks the study will help researchers find ways to tackle teen drinking in part because of the children researchers studied. As part of a broader prevention research initiative called Project Northland Chicago, the researchers surveyed children from 63 schools who were from multiple ethnic backgrounds, primarily black and Hispanic, and from mostly low-income households. Other studies have focused mainly on one ethnic group, but for prevention efforts to work they have to be applicable to multiple races, Jones-Webb said.

Although law enforcement officials can target stores and other commercial sources of alcohol to help prevent teens from getting alcohol there, rooting out the social sources of teen drinking is a little trickier, Komro said. Aside from designing educational programs, policy and additional enforcement efforts may help, too, she said.

“For parents, of course, the important message is for them to understand that it’s risky to provide alcohol for their children,” Komro said. “It increases the risk of (teen drinking), which in turn increases a young person’s risk for alcohol-related problems all the way into adulthood.”

Source: University of Florida

Citation: Parents open door to drinking for many teens (2007, April 17) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2007-04-parents-door-teens.html>

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