R-rated movies increase likelihood of underage children trying alcohol

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R-rated movies portray violence and other behaviors deemed inappropriate for children under 17 year of age. A new study finds one more reason why parents should not let their kids watch those movies: adolescents who watch R-rated movies are more likely to try alcohol at a young age.

Published in the March issue of *Prevention Science*, a scientific journal of the Society for Prevention Research, the study of 6,255 children examined the relationship between watching R-rated movies and the probability of alcohol use across different levels of "sensation seeking," which is a tendency to seek out risky experiences. The study was funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and conducted by James D. Sargent, MD, a pediatrician at Dartmouth Medical School. The children were surveyed every 8 months for a period of two years from 2003 through 2005.

"The study found that watching R-rated movies affected the level of sensation seeking among adolescents. It showed that R-rated movies not only contain scenes of alcohol use that prompt adolescents to drink, they also jack up the sensation seeking tendency, which makes adolescents more prone to engage in all sorts of risky behaviors" Sargent said.

"There is another take home point in the findings. When it comes to the direct effect on alcohol use, the influence of R-rated movies depends on sensation seeking level. High sensation seekers are already at high risk for use of alcohol, and watching a lot of R-rated movies raises their risk

only a little. But for low sensation seekers, R-rated movies make a big difference. In fact, exposure to R-rated movies can make a low sensation seeking adolescent drink like a high sensation seeking adolescent." Sargent explained.

The Dartmouth pediatrician said that one possible explanation is high sensation seeking adolescents tend to get their experiences out on the street. They hang around other high sensation seekers, who are also engaging in risky behaviors, so there is less room for movies to make a difference in their risk for alcohol use.

R-rated movies and alcohol

"The message to parents is clear. Take the movie ratings literally. Under 17 should not be permitted to see R-rated movies," Sargent said.

The study was based on telephone surveys of 6,522 adolescents aged 10-14 years. Parental consent and adolescent consent was obtained prior to interviewing each respondent. To protect confidentiality, adolescents indicated their answers to sensitive questions by pressing numbers on the telephone, rather than speaking aloud. The study sample mirrored the U.S. adolescent population with respect to age, sex, household income and census region, but with a slightly higher percentage of Hispanics and a slightly lower percentage of Blacks.

Sensation seeking was based on how individual subjects identified with statements like: "I like to do scary things, I like to do dangerous things, I often think there is nothing to do, and I like to listen to loud music." Adolescents were also asked if they had ever tried alcohol that their parents were not aware of. This excluded adolescents who initiated drinking with sips of alcohol provided by parents. R-rated movie watching was measured by asking respondents if they had watched a random selection of movie titles drawn from box office hits during 2003

that had grossed at least $15 million. The movie titles included movies that had G (general audience), P/G (parental guidance) and R (restricted) ratings.

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