Teens drink more during summer before college

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Summertime and the living is easy. But not too easy for parents whose children will head to college in the fall.

University of Rhode Island Psychology Professor Mark Wood, a nationally recognized alcohol researcher, wants parents to be aware that this is a time when teens tend to increase their alcohol consumption.

The URI expert advises parents to monitor their children--know where they are, whom they are with and what they are doing.

"This type of monitoring, particularly in combination with an emotionally supportive parenting style, is associated with less drinking and fewer alcohol-related problems across numerous studies," Wood said.

"It is also important for parents to express clear disapproval of alcohol use and to provide clear and fair consequences associated with breaking the rules. Research shows this combination of factors decreases alcohol use and problems through adolescence and into college," continued Wood who helps create interventions to reduce alcohol related-harm, particularly among college-age students. Results of his recent study bear this out.

Is Wood advocating that parents become helicopter parents--ones who hover over their children and their problems or experiences, especially when they are in college?

"We live in a era when students are texting and talking to parents, sometimes many times a day. Although the term helicopter parent does have a negative connotation, I think conversations about drinking are good whenever and wherever they occur," said the researcher.

But is it too late for parents to begin monitoring teenagers after they have already graduated from high school?

"Most American teenagers begin to drink by age 15. By the time they go off to college, most have considerable drinking experience," explained Wood. "Ideally, parents should be having conversations about alcohol throughout high school. But it's never too late to begin an ongoing dialogue about drinking with teens."

There is good reason to be concerned. It's estimated that more than 1,800 college students die each year in car accidents and more than 750,000 are involved in alcohol related physical or sexual assaults.

Summer before college, first semester

Adolescents tend to increase their alcohol use the summer before entering college and during their first semester at college. This is also true of children who have been consistently monitored and emotionally supported. However, these children don't increase consumption to the levels of kids who didn't have that kind of parental involvement in high school.

"The protective effects that parents exert in high school continue to be influential into college even at a time when the kids have left the home. It's the internalization of those values, attitudes, expectations that seem to continue to exert an effect," said Wood.

Study Intervention

Wood and his team applied some of their research findings to an intervention to reduce the increases in drinking and the negative consequences that typically occur during matriculation and into college. Results of the study were published in the June 2010 issue of the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*.

In this study, which began in 2004, they recruited and randomly assigned 1,000 incoming freshmen to receive either a Brief Motivational Intervention (BMI) or a parent-based intervention, both, or an assessment-only control. The motivational intervention is considered to be the most effective individual alcohol prevention approach with college students.

In contrast to other BMI studies that have focused on heavier drinkers, the URI study recruited students whether they drank or not. In fact, about 28 percent of the 1,000 students in the study didn't drink when they came to college.

Students met with an intervention provider who went over a tailored report compiled from information provided by the students about a range of factors, including their alcohol use patterns, consequences associated with use, and family history of alcohol problems. Students were recognized as responsible adults, and weren't preached to or told not to drink.

Among other things, the report showed the student how his or her drinking compared to others of the same age and gender, correcting misperceptions students have about how much other students are drinking. For example, students often overestimate how much their peers are drinking, and correcting these misconceptions as part of motivational interventions has resulted in lower levels of alcohol use and

problems.

"A message that we would give a student who told us her father was an alcoholic is that we know that alcohol problems run in families. But it's also important for you to know that this doesn't mean that you're destined to become an alcoholic. It just means that you have an increased risk of drinking problems based on family history," says Wood.

The message is different with non-drinkers: "Congratulations, you've made the safest choice in terms of alcohol use at this point. One of the things we want to tell you is that there are more students like you than you think. We'd like to talk to you about ways that you can continue to make the safe choice around drinking now that you're in an environment where there is more drinking."

URI researchers followed up with the students in the spring of their freshman and sophomore years. The team found the intervention was successful for non-drinkers and drinkers. Students who received the BMI were significantly less likely to transition into heavy drinking or begin experiencing alcohol-related problems. For those who were already drinking, the BMI reduced heavy drinking and alcohol problems indirectly by altering students' misperceptions about alcohol use.

Provided by University of Rhode Island

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