

# Personality differences linked to later drinking have roots in early childhood

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Most risk and protective factors for alcohol use have roots in early childhood. In other words, an individual enters adolescence with personality characteristics and life experiences that have accumulated during the first decade of life. An evaluation of measures of temperament from children six months through to five years of age has found that childhood temperament prior to age five predicts adolescent alcohol use and problems at age 15.5 years, even after controlling for socio-demographic factors and parental alcohol problems.

Results will be published in the December 2013 issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at Early View.

"Most scientists who study [alcohol](#) use start studying people in adolescence, since that is when alcohol use is usually first initiated/experimented with," explained Danielle Dick, associate professor of psychiatry, psychology and human and molecular genetics with the Virginia Institute for Psychiatric and Behavioral Genetics at Virginia Commonwealth University, as well as corresponding author for the study. "But people don't enter adolescence as blank slates; they have a history of [life experiences](#) that they bring with them, dating back to [early childhood](#). This is one of the most comprehensive attempts to understand very early childhood predictors of adolescent alcohol use in a large epidemiological cohort."

"A question largely unanswered by the existing literature concerns the

origins of [personality differences](#) in adolescents or adults who do and do not have drinking problems," added Matt McGue, Regents Professor in the department of psychology at the University of Minnesota. "In my opinion, the major contribution of the current study is that it shows that these personality differences emerge very early in life."

Dick and her colleagues used data from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), a large epidemiological sample of pregnant women with delivery dates between April 1991 and December 1992. The children (6,504 boys, 6,143 girls) were followed longitudinally. Temperamental characteristics were assessed at six time points from six to 69 months of age. Alcohol use and problems were assessed at age 15.5 years.

"Some of the most interesting findings to emerge from this study are that, one, we can identify childhood temperamental styles that emerge prior to age five that predict alcohol use and problems in mid-adolescence," said Dick. "Two, the early childhood temperamental styles that predict alcohol use are very different and largely uncorrelated – that both kids who show consistent emotional and behavioral problems early on are at elevated risk and kids who are consistently sociable at a very early age are also at risk. This indicates very different pathways to alcohol involvement/patterns, that emerge early on, which has important implications for prevention efforts."

"Temperament is considered to represent the biological foundations of later personality and is manifested in terms of basic reactivity and regulatory process," said McGue. "This study differs from other studies in two significant ways. First, other studies have typically focused on personality, which is normally assessed by self-report. This study indicates that those personality factors are the result, in part, of early temperamental expressions. Second, ALSPAC is a large and very well characterized longitudinal study. This allows the investigators to

rigorously evaluate their hypothesis as well as provide them with the statistical power they need to explore important ancillary questions, such as whether the nature of personality risk differs in males and females, a gender effect they did not find in this study."

"Interestingly, the association between sociability and alcohol use/problems was more significant than the association found between emotional and conduct difficulties and later [alcohol problems](#), said Dick. "This underscores the fact that drinking during adolescence is largely a social phenomenon. However, this doesn't mean it's less problematic; we know from other studies that most adolescent drinking is high risk – for example, binge drinking – and can lead to numerous negative consequences."

Both Dick and McGue noted the importance of searching for what may lead to adolescent drinking when trying to understand the development of patterns of alcohol use, such as predictors that emerge very early in life.

"That said," noted McGue, "while I think the most important finding concerns tracing personality differences back to preschool differences in temperament, we cannot, from these findings, predict with much accuracy which preschoolers will have problems with alcohol as adolescents and which will not." McGue spoke favorably of unrelated Canadian research that targets personality risk factors for substance abuse; rather than trying to change the personalities of [adolescents](#), scientists are attempting to teach them how to deal with their personalities.

"All things considered," said Dick, "it's not just 'problem kids' who get involved in alcohol use. It's also the highly sociable kids as well. Parents should be aware of this."

## Provided by Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research

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