

Kids allowed to 'sip' alcohol may start drinking earlier

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Children who get a taste of their parents' wine now and then may be more likely than their peers to start drinking by high school, according to a new report in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

Researchers found that, of 561 students in a long-term study, those who'd "sipped" [alcohol](#) by sixth grade were five times more likely than their peers to down a full drink by the time they were in high school. And they were four times more likely to have binged or been drunk.

The findings do not prove that early sips of alcohol are to blame, said lead researcher Kristina Jackson, Ph.D., of the Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies at Brown University in Providence, R.I.

"We're not trying to say whether it's 'OK' or 'not OK' for parents to allow this," Jackson said.

Still, she noted, some parents do believe in the "European model"—the idea that introducing kids to alcohol early, at home, will teach them about [responsible drinking](#) and lessen the "taboo" appeal of alcohol.

"Our study provides evidence to the contrary," Jackson said.

The findings are based on 561 Rhode Island [middle school students](#) who were surveyed periodically over three years. At the beginning of sixth grade (around age 11), almost 30 percent of students said they'd ever sipped alcohol. In most cases, their parents provided it—often at a party

or other special occasion.

By ninth grade, 26 percent of those early "sippers" said they'd ever had a full alcoholic drink, versus less than 6 percent of their peers. What's more, 9 percent had either gotten drunk or binged—compared with just under 2 percent of "nonsippers."

Of course, there are many factors that influence [underage drinking](#), Jackson noted. Her team tried to account for as many of those factors as they could—including parents' [drinking](#) habits and any history of alcoholism, as well as kids' disposition (such as whether they tended to be impulsive and risk taking in general).

Even then, Jackson said, there was still a connection between early sipping and risky drinking by [high school](#).

According to Jackson, it's possible that those little tastes of alcohol send young kids a "mixed message."

"At that age, some kids may have difficulty understanding the difference between a sip of wine and having a full beer," she explained.

That said, she stressed that [parents](#) shouldn't be alarmed if they've already let their child have a taste of wine.

"We're not saying your child is doomed," Jackson said.

But, she added, the findings do highlight the importance of giving [kids](#) "clear, consistent messages" about drinking and making sure they can't get a hold of any alcohol kept in the house.

More information: Jackson, K. M., Barnett, N. P., Colby, S. M., & Rogers, M. L. (March 2015). The prospective association between

sipping alcohol by the sixth grade and later substance use. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 76(2), 212-221.

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