

Early maturing girls at great risk of alcohol abuse without close parental supervision

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Inadequate supervision by parents during early adolescence forecasts a host of behavior problems, including problem drinking. The risk of alcohol abuse arising from inadequate parental supervision is particularly high for girls who reach puberty early, according to a new study by researchers at Florida Atlantic University. "Parental Supervision and Alcohol Abuse Among Adolescent Girls," was just published in the journal *Pediatrics*. This study tests the hypothesis that premature autonomy granting at the beginning of secondary school predicts escalating alcohol abuse across the critical ages of 13 to 16, when youth typically begin to consume alcohol.

Brett Laursen, Ph.D., professor and graduate studies coordinator in FAU's Department of Psychology in the Charles E. Schmidt College of Science, and Daniel J. Dickson, lead author and a Ph.D. student at FAU, and their colleagues at Orebro University followed 957 girls in a small city in Sweden for four years, across the ages of 13 to 17. The girls were classified as early maturing (menarche before age 12), on-time maturing (menarche at age 12 or 13), or late maturing (menarche at age 14 or older) on the basis of their age at first menstruation.

This study examined over-time associations between parent autonomy granting and adolescent [alcohol abuse](#) during a developmental period when [alcohol consumption](#) becomes increasingly normative. The researchers were able to determine if early maturing girls are at special risk from problems as a result of a lack of parental supervision. Every year, adolescents completed a questionnaire that described perceptions

of parental autonomy granting (sample item: My Mother lets me decide what time I should be home at night) and a measure that described frequency of alcohol intoxication (sample item: How many times this past month have you drank until you got drunk?).

Results of the study revealed that alcohol consumption increased in all of the girls as they got older. For "on time" and "late maturing" girls, parental autonomy granting did not have much of an impact on rates of alcohol abuse. However, for early maturing girls, parental autonomy granting made a big difference. For early maturing girls whose parents kept a close eye on them, there was an 84 percent increase in alcohol abuse from the seventh to the 10th grade. Those granted average levels of autonomy by parents had a 160 percent increase in alcohol abuse, and finally, those given the most autonomy had the highest rates of alcohol abuse, with intoxication frequency increasing an average of 234 percent.

Another finding showed that the more girls drank at the beginning of adolescence, the more autonomy they were granted by parents over the course of adolescence. Parents tended to withdraw supervision of [adolescent girls](#) with most drinking problems. Specifically, from the seventh to the 10th grade, there was a 12 percent increase in parental autonomy granting at low levels of adolescent alcohol abuse, an 18 percent increase in parental autonomy granting at average levels of adolescent alcohol abuse, and a 24 percent increase in autonomy granting at high levels of adolescent alcohol abuse.

"Early maturing girls are quite distinct from their age mates and often seek the company of older peers, so as not to stand out physically," said Laursen. "Affiliation with older peers creates vulnerability, because influence is not equally distributed between friends, and younger partners tend to adopt the drinking habits of older partners. Another problem is that the groups of older peers who are most likely to welcome early maturing girls into their midst tend to receive little adult

supervision and, perhaps not surprisingly, are often involved in deviant activities."

Early maturing girls are at risk for a host of physical and psychological adjustment difficulties. Dickson notes, "the etiology of escalating problems with alcohol in this group can be traced, in part, to a relative absence of parent supervision during a time when peer interactions assume special significance."

Provided by Florida Atlantic University

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