

What influences 11-year-olds to drink?

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Around one in seven 11 years olds in the UK have had at least one drink of alcohol, according to a study published in the open access journal *BMC Public Health*, which analyzed data from 10,498 children aged 11.

The study, by researchers from University College London and the London School of Economics and Political Science, is the first to examine drinking behaviors in very early adolescence in relation to a wide range of factors that are associated with alcohol consumption in [children](#), such as family, friends and the young person's views about alcohol.

The researchers found that nearly 14% of 11 year olds had drunk more than a few sips of alcohol at least once. It is not possible to make statements regarding cause and effect with this sort of study, but the numbers do show a strong association between 11 year olds drinking and their friends' and mothers' behavior. Children whose mothers drank heavily were 80% more likely to drink than children whose mothers did not drink and boys were more likely to report drinking than girls. Children whose friends drank were five times more likely to drink than those whose friends did not drink. It was also found that friends' drinking had a stronger association with children's [alcohol consumption](#) than parents' drinking. Other factors associated with drinking were having started puberty, being a second or later born child, having socioemotional difficulties (e.g. sustaining positive relationships, experiencing, managing or expressing emotions) and antisocial behaviors.

Positive perceptions of alcohol were associated with increased odds of a child drinking. These include perceptions that alcohol makes people feel better about themselves or that it makes it easier to make friends. Other factors associated with increased odds of a child drinking were a lack of parental supervision on weekends and weekdays, and not being happy with family relationships.

Children were less likely to drink if they had heightened perceptions of the harms of drinking and negative expectations towards alcohol, such as that it makes it hard to get along with friends or that it impacts school work.

Lead author Yvonne Kelly, from University College London, said: "Drinking in adolescence is considered a 'risky' behavior, it often co-occurs with other 'risky' behaviors and it is linked to educational failure and to premature mortality, for example via accidental deaths. Improving our understanding of the factors that influence drinking is important as it has implications for the development of policies and interventions aimed at reducing 'risky' behaviors."

To assess factors that may influence drinking in this age group the researchers analyzed data from 10,498 11 year olds collected as part of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS). The MCS is a UK-wide study of children born between September 2000 and January 2002. Data was collected from cohort members at five time points between nine months and 11 years of age. Interview data, collected during home visits, was available for 69% of families when cohort members were aged 11.

Questions 11 year olds were asked included "Have you ever had an alcoholic drink? That is more than a few sips?" Parents were asked how often and how much they drank. Friends' drinking was assessed by asking cohort members whether their friends drank alcohol. Further questions evaluated perceptions of risk due to alcohol, positive or

negative expectations of alcohol and parental supervision and family relationships.

Data on the drinking behaviors of cohort members and their friends were self-reported and may therefore be prone to over- or under-estimation. Due to the phrasing of questions, it was impossible to distinguish children who only ever had one alcoholic drink from those who drink more regularly. Because this was an observational study, no causal relationship between children's drinking and friends' or parents' drinking, perceptions of harm or expectations towards drinking could be inferred.

The researchers suggest that while the vast majority of children at the age of eleven are yet to explore alcohol, investigating in more detail the context in which children drink - who they drink with, where, when, what they drink and how they acquire alcohol - could help inform effective policy and [alcohol](#) harm prevention strategies to mitigate the risk associated with drinking in youth.

Yvonne Kelly said: "Our findings support the need for interventions working at multiple levels, including family and school, to help shape choices around risky behaviors including drinking."

More information: Yvonne Kelly et al. What influences 11-year-olds to drink? Findings from the Millennium Cohort Study, *BMC Public Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-016-2847-x](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-016-2847-x)

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