

Students who think their parents approve of drinking may drink more

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Teens may act like they're not listening, but students who think their parents are more accepting of drinking tend to drink more in college, according to researchers.

The researchers asked students about their drinking habits and how

much they believed their [parents](#) were accepting of them drinking during their first four years of college. They found that the more students thought their parents approved of drinking, the more alcohol the students tended to drink .

Jennifer Maggs, professor of human development and family studies, said the study—recently published in the journal *Addictive Behaviors*—suggests that parents can still influence their children into young adulthood.

"In the early years of college, parents can still play a role in providing positive feedback and encouragement for young adult students to make healthy lifestyle choices," Maggs said. "One part of this can be supporting safe choices about [drinking alcohol](#), and not reinforcing or making jokes about college being a crazy time when everyone takes risks without consequences."

Maggs said that as the transition to adulthood—a phase of development that includes the college years—becomes longer, the role parents play in their children's development during this time could also be increasing. The researchers said that risky behavior, including drug and alcohol use, also tends to peak during this time.

While other research has looked at how parent permissibility affects how much their children drink, most studies only looked at these factors at one point in time, often in the last year of high school or early in college. The researchers said that measuring how parent permissibility and drinking changed over time would give a better picture of how the two were related.

"We gathered data on how these attitudes change from the last year of high school through the third year of college. It's interesting because a lot of parents aren't super permissive of drinking during high school,

which makes sense," said Brian Calhoun, graduate [student](#) in [human development](#) and family studies and first author of the paper. "But then when students get to college, they are in a different environment with much less supervision, and they're getting closer to the [legal drinking age](#). It ended up being interesting to see how students' perceptions of their parents' attitudes about alcohol changed as students moved into and through college."

The researchers used surveys from 687 Penn State students that asked about the students' drinking habits and how much they believed their parents would approve of them drinking, gathering data at regular check points across four years of college.

After analyzing the data, the researchers found that the more students believed their parents approved of them drinking, the more alcohol they tended to drink.

"On average, students who thought their parents were more accepting of drinking tended to drink more," Calhoun said. "Many students might have had parents who didn't approve of drinking in high school, but when they went to college or got closer to turning 21, they believed that their parents' attitudes relaxed and students' drinking increased. However, some parents seemed to always be more accepting of their kids drinking, and other parents never seemed to be that accepting of their kids drinking."

To learn more about these patterns, the researchers also arranged the students into four groups or "clusters" according to how students' perceptions of their parents' permissibility changed: one group with parents who consistently didn't approve of drinking, one with parents who consistently approved of high levels of drinking, one with parents who began approving of higher levels of drinking around age 21, and one with parents who began approving of higher levels of drinking when the

students started college.

"When you look at these groups, parents in the most permissive group were perceived as being more tolerant of high levels of drinking across the board, but the other three are at about the same level in the last year of [high school](#)," Calhoun said. "But then when students get to college, there seem to be noticeable differences in when parents were perceived as becoming more accepting of drinking, and those differences in timing were related to how much the students drank."

Calhoun said it's important to point out that while they found an association between how much students thought their parents approved of drinking and how much students drank, they can't say for sure that parent permissibility actually causes increased drinking. He added that it's possible that parents only become more permissive after learning their kids are already drinking regularly. Still, Calhoun said, the study does offer evidence that parents' attitudes toward drinking matter.

"We're seeing that parenting still matters during the college years," Calhoun said. "It's still not exactly clear what parents should be saying to college students about [drinking](#), but what they're saying seems to be linked with [college](#) students' behavior."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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