

Parents more lenient about alcohol with teens who experience puberty early

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Parents of teens who went through puberty early may be more lenient when it comes to letting them consume alcohol, according to a new Penn State study. But the researchers said that even if adolescents appear more

mature, drinking alcohol is still not safe for them.

Rebecca Bucci, a Ph.D. candidate in criminology at Penn State, said the study—published today (April 28) in *Child Development*—aimed to discover why adolescents who go through puberty early are more likely than their peers to drink [alcohol](#).

"A surprising proportion of parents in our study allowed their early-developing children to drink alcohol at the age of 14—in fact, one in seven," Bucci said. "It is important to remember that [early puberty](#) does not mean the child is more advanced in cognitive or brain development. They are not older in years or more socially mature. So allowing them freedoms common for [young adults](#) is risky."

According to the researchers, previous studies have found that adolescents who go through puberty early compared to their peers are at a greater risk for problem behaviors, including being two to three times as likely to drink alcohol.

While prior studies often didn't delve into why these heightened risks exist, the researchers said there are theories. For example, adolescents who develop earlier than their peers may have weaker relationships with their parents or have less parental supervision.

To this point, Bucci said there are conflicting theories about how to parent adolescents who are more physically mature than their peers.

"Parents want to do what is best for their children, and some may wonder whether a child who starts looking older should begin to have some adult freedoms," said Jennifer Maggs, professor of human development and family studies. "Ultimately, we wanted to understand why adolescents who experience puberty at younger ages drink more than others, including factors involving the parents."

The researchers used data from more than 11,000 adolescents in the Millennium Cohort Study—a nationally representative sample of children in the United Kingdom. Data was collected at various checkpoints throughout the children's lives, including information on whether they'd ever drunk alcohol, how often they drank and whether they had ever drunk five or more drinks on one day.

They also gathered information about whether the parents permitted alcohol use, as well as the adolescents' "perceived pubertal timing."

"In our study, the measure of pubertal timing is based on adolescents' reports of their own pubertal changes," said Lorah Dorn, professor of nursing. "Adolescents were asked a series of questions about their physical development and we averaged these scores for each person and compared them to the scores of same-sex adolescents who were very close to them in age."

The researchers then grouped participants into three perceived pubertal timing groups—early, on-time and late.

After analyzing the data, the researchers found that adolescents who experienced early puberty were more likely to drink at age 14 than their on-time peers.

Girls who went through puberty early were 29% more likely to have ever drunk and 55% more likely to frequently drink. Among boys, the results were 22% and 61% more likely, respectively. Boys who developed early were also 78% more likely to have binge drunk compared to boys who went through puberty on time.

Additionally, the researchers found that adolescents who experienced earlier puberty were more likely to be allowed to drink by their parents.

Specifically, while 15 percent of parents overall allowed their adolescents to drink alcohol at age 14, this was largely driven by parents of adolescents who went through puberty early—20 percent of those parents allowed their children to drink. Teens who developed early were also more likely to have friends who drank and more likely to be allowed to hang out with peers without adult supervision.

According to the researchers, these factors partially explained why adolescents with early [puberty](#) had higher rates of drinking.

Bucci said the results suggest that parents can have a hand in helping their teens avoid early [drinking](#).

"This further instills the idea that parents should consider not allowing their child to drink alcohol, even if they appear more physically mature," said Jeremy Staff, professor of sociology, criminology, and demography. "Even if their child starts to look like a teenager or adult at a young age, [parents](#) should maintain the level of support and structure that matches their child's actual age and developmental maturity level."

More information: Pubertal Timing and Adolescent Alcohol Use: The Mediating Role of Parental and Peer Influences, *Child Development* (2021). [dx.doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13569](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13569)

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