

Adult-Supervised Drinking with Young Teens May Lead to More Unsupervised Alcohol Use and Harmful Consequences

Original research presented in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*

Allowing adolescents to drink alcohol under adult supervision does not appear to teach responsible drinking as teens get older. In fact, this type of “harm-minimization” approach may actually lead to more drinking and alcohol-related consequences, according to a study recently published in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

In general, parents tend to take one of two approaches toward teen drinking. Some allow their adolescent children to consume alcohol in small amounts on occasion if an adult is present. The thinking is that teens will learn to drink responsibly if introduced to alcohol slowly in a controlled environment. This has been the predominant approach in many countries, including Australia.

A second approach is one of “zero tolerance” for youth drinking, meaning that teens should not be allowed to drink alcohol under any circumstances. This less permissive position is predominant in the United States, with local laws and national policies often advocating total abstinence for adolescents.

To test how these different approaches are related to teen drinking, researchers from the Social Development Research Group at the University of Washington in Seattle, WA, and colleagues from the Centre for Adolescent Health in Melbourne, Australia surveyed more than 1,900 seventh graders as part of the International Youth Development Study (IYDS). About half of the youth were from

Key Findings

- Parents tend to take one of two approaches toward teen drinking:
 - * Occasional supervised use, or
 - * Zero tolerance for teen drinking
- By ninth grade, teens in this study who drank occasionally with an adult present were more likely to drink without adult supervision
- Teens who drank under adult supervision in eighth grade reported experiencing more harmful consequences of alcohol use, such as not being able to stop drinking, getting into fights, or having blackouts in ninth grade
- Findings suggest the importance of a zero-tolerance policy for young teen drinking

Victoria, Australia, and the rest were from Washington State.

From seventh to ninth grade, investigators asked the youths about such factors as alcohol use, problems they had as a result of alcohol consumption, and how often had they consumed alcohol with an adult present.

By eighth grade, about 67% of Victorian youths had consumed alcohol with an adult present, compared to 35% of those in Washington State, reflecting differences in

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- ◆ conduct research on factors that influence development;
- ◆ develop and test the effectiveness of interventions;
- ◆ study service systems and work to improve them;
- ◆ advocate for science-based solutions to health and behavior problems; and
- ◆ disseminate knowledge, tools, and expertise produced by this research.

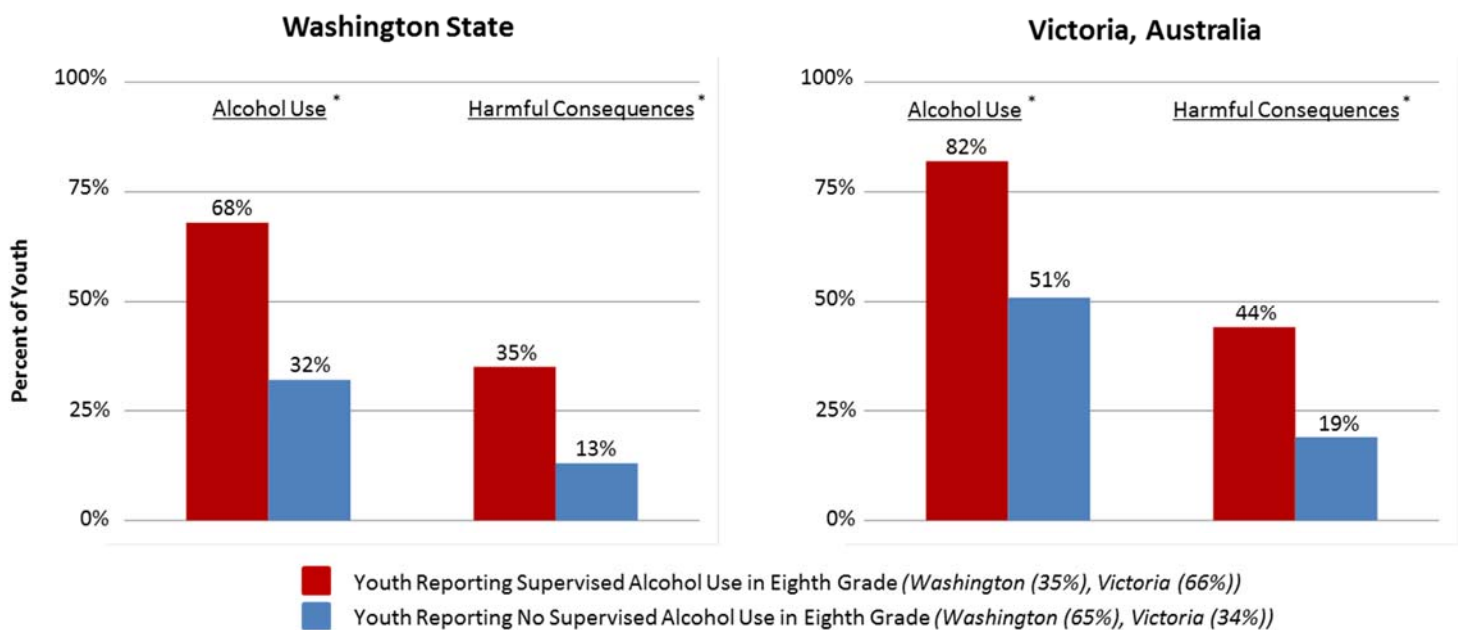
general cultural attitudes. In ninth grade, 36% of Australian teens, compared with 21% of American teens, had experienced alcohol-related consequences such as not being able to stop drinking, getting into fights, or having blackouts. However, regardless of whether they were from Australia or the United States, youths who were allowed to drink with an adult present had increased levels of alcohol use and were more likely to have experienced harmful consequences by the ninth grade (see Figure 1).

The authors of this article suggest that allowing adolescents to drink with adults present may act to

encourage alcohol consumption. According to these researchers, the results of this study suggest that parents adopt a “no-use” policy for young adolescents. Youth need messages that will help reinforce limits as teens get older and have increased opportunities to drink. Allowing adolescents to drink with adults present may send mixed signals.

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Figure 1. Ninth-Grade Alcohol Use and Harmful Consequences from Alcohol in Relation to Eighth-Grade Supervised Alcohol Use



* Differences in ninth-grade outcomes for youth reporting supervised vs. no supervised alcohol use at eighth grade were compared using chi-square. All differences were significant at the $p < .01$ level.

For additional information on this topic, refer to the original article:

McMorris, B. J., Catalano, R. F., Kim, M. J., Toumbourou, J. W., & Hemphill, S. A. (2011). Influence of family factors and supervised alcohol use on adolescent alcohol use and harms: Similarities between youth in different alcohol policy contexts. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 72(3), 418-428.

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