

Parenting Style Plays Key Role In Teen Drinking

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For teenagers, friends play a big role in the decision to take that first drink. And by the 12th grade, more than 65 percent of teens have at least experimented with alcohol. But what parents do during the high school years can also influence whether teens go on to binge drink or abuse alcohol. Researchers at Brigham Young University have found that teenagers who grow up with parents who are either too strict or too indulgent tend to binge drink more than their peers.

"While parents didn't have much of an effect on whether their teens tried alcohol, they can have a significant impact on the more dangerous type of drinking," says Stephen Bahr, a professor of sociology at BYU, and the author of the study that was published in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

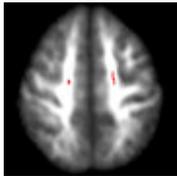
As part of the survey of 5,000 teenagers, Bahr and his colleagues asked 7th- to 12th-grade students a series of questions about their alcohol use.

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"We asked how many had taken five or more drinks in a row in the past two weeks," says Bahr. That's the typical definition of binge drinking. They also asked the kids about their parents: What kinds of rules did they have? Did their parents know where they were on weekends? Did their parents check up on their whereabouts and set curfews? How much oversight and monitoring was typical?

The teens who were being raised by so-called indulgent parents who tend to give their children lots of praise and warmth — but offer little in the way of consequences or monitoring of bad behavior — were among the biggest abusers of alcohol.

"They were about three times more likely to participate in heavy drinking," says Bahr.

The same was true for kids whose parents were so strict that no decision was left to the teenager's own judgment.

"Kids in that environment tend not to internalize the values and understand why they shouldn't drink," says Bahr. They were more than twice as likely to binge drink.

Striking The Right Balance

The parenting style that led to the lowest levels of problem drinking borrowed something from each of

the extremes. From the strict parents: accountability and consequences for bad behavior. From the indulgent parents: warmth and support

Bahr says these parents tend to be more balanced.

"They recognize their kids when they do good things and praise them, but they offer direction and correction when they get off a little bit," he says.

Lots of factors contribute to teenagers' experimentation with alcohol and drugs. Genes play a significant role, as do peer relationships. And the teenage years can be adversarial.

"Parents get really frustrated with teenagers," says Aimee Stern, who has [written a book](#) on delaying teens' first drinks. "I have two of them — and you can't tell them anything they don't already know."

That's why it's important to start talking to kids about alcohol when they're young — as early as fourth grade, recommends Stern. Her [free book](#), published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, is intended as a teaching tool for parents and contains plenty of evidence-based information on drinking and addiction. It explains the science of alcohol, both in terms of what it does to the body and the developing brain.

The guide can be used as a companion to a series of [Science Inside Alcohol](#) lessons developed by AAAS or as a stand-alone tool that parents can use in talking with their children.