

Why do high school seniors drink?

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Most high school seniors drink because they want to experiment with alcohol, some drink for the thrill of it, and others because it helps them relax. A new study finds that a fourth group of high school students share all those reasons for drinking, but they also drink to get away from problems and to deal with anger or frustration issues.

Kids with multiple reasons to drink, including reasons related to coping with life, show the heaviest and most problematic drinking behaviors, according to the study published in the December issue of *Prevention Science*, a peer-reviewed journal of the Society for Prevention Research. The data for the study came from 1,877 students from the national Monitoring the Future survey conducted annually.

“Our study found that for the graduating class of 2004, students who had multiple reasons to drink, including reasons related to coping, were also more likely to begin drinking at an earlier age, more likely to be drunk in the past year and more likely to drink before 4:00 pm, compared to students who drank to experiment with alcohol, to experience the thrill of drinking or just to relax,” according to Donna Coffman, Ph.D., of Penn State.

“It is important to know why high school seniors drink so parents, teachers and high school counselors can pay special attention to the needs of the small but high-risk group of seniors who offer multiple reasons for drinking and who also have anger or frustration issues. Research shows that drinking patterns established during adolescence are likely to continue through adulthood,” according to Coffman.

More than three-quarters of high school seniors have already experimented with alcohol, so it is too late to tell them ‘not to drink,’ or ask them to wait until they are of legal age. Kids who drink to help them deal with anger or frustration issues are not likely to benefit from a prevention program developed for kids who are just experimenting with alcohol, Coffman said.

Coffman and her colleague Lori Palen, also from Penn State, said the purpose of their study was to identify the major motivations for drinking, find out if the motivations were different for boys and girls, and understand how the different motivations for drinking among boys and girls were related to drinking initiation, frequency of drunkenness and daytime drinking.

“Boys were more likely to belong to the higher-risk group of thrill seekers, while girls were more likely to belong to the lowest level of risky drinking, the experimenters. Both boys and girls who drank just to experiment with alcohol were also more likely to initiate drinking at a later age, compared to those who drank for other reasons” Coffman said.

Compared to the experimenters, boys who reported drinking before 4 p.m. were eight times more likely to belong to the highest-risk group that drank for multiple reasons; girls who drank before 4 p.m. were six times more likely to belong to the group that drank for multiple reasons.

Coffman said that their study looked at a representative sample of one graduating class. “We cannot say our results apply to all graduating classes after 2004, but the findings should certainly be useful to educators, prevention experts and parents.”

Previous studies have found that alcohol use reaches its peak level during and immediately after high school graduation. It remains high through

the age of 25, “that is why the senior year of high school is a critical point for which to understand the motives for drinking and to establish healthier alcohol use behaviors,” Coffman said.

Source: Society for Prevention Research

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