

# Young children's sipping/tasting of alcohol reflects parental modeling

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Previous research had determined that whether or not a child sips or tastes alcohol is associated with the child's attitude toward sipping and with a family environment supportive of alcohol use. This study extends this former research to examine antecedent predictors of childhood initiation of sipping or tasting alcohol. Findings indicate that initiation of sipping/tasting was less related to psychosocial proneness for problem behavior and more related to perceived parental approval.

Results will be published in the September 2014 online-only issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at Early View.

"We currently do not have a good handle on how common sipping or tasting alcohol is among [children](#) less than 12 years old in the U.S.," said John E. Donovan, associate professor of psychiatry and epidemiology at the University of Pittsburgh as well as corresponding author for the study. "There is no ongoing federal surveillance study that asks about child sipping or child drinking. All we really have are data from several community-level surveys which suggest that sipping or tasting alcohol is very common among children. Our own research has found that by age 12, 66 percent of children had sipped or tasted alcohol."

"The first 'regular drink' is often not the first experience that many children have with alcohol," noted Robert A. Zucker, director of the Addiction Research Center at the University of Michigan. "In fact, although survey data indicate that only seven percent of 12-year-olds

have had a first regular drink, community surveys indicate that more than half of 12 year olds have already had a sip, and even about one third have by age eight. The question for parents will be: 'Does that matter?'"

"We don't really know yet whether childhood sipping or tasting has any negative consequences," added Donovan. "Our previous research found that sipping or tasting by age 10 was significantly related to early-onset drinking, that is, having more than a sip or a taste before age 15. And previous research has found that early-onset drinking is associated with numerous negative outcomes in both adolescence and young adulthood, such as alcohol abuse and dependence, illicit drug use, prescription drug misuse, [delinquent behavior](#), risky sexual behavior, motor vehicle crashes, job problems, etc. So, logically, childhood sipping may relate to these later problems as well, but it may not be the case that sipping in childhood has any negative outcomes. We just don't know yet."

For this study, the researchers used data drawn from the first 14 waves of an ongoing longitudinal study of the risk factors for early onset of alcohol use (the Tween to Teen Project). A sample of 452 children (238 girls, 214 boys), aged 8 or 10 years, and their families were drawn from Allegheny County using targeted-age directory sampling and random digit dialing procedures. The children were interviewed using computer-assisted interviews. Antecedent variables collected at baseline (Wave 1) were examined as predictors of the initiation of sipping/tasting alcohol in childhood (before age 12) among Wave-1 abstainers (n=286).

"There are two main findings," said Donovan. "First, children who sipped alcohol before age 12 reported that their parents were more approving of child sipping or tasting alcohol, and more likely to be current drinkers than did children who did not have a first sip of alcohol before age 12. Their parents reported the same things. Thus, there was a significant relationship between both child perceptions and parents' own reports of their drinker status and level of disapproval of child sipping

and later child initiation of sipping or tasting alcohol before age 12. Second, children who started sipping before age 12 did not differ from children who did not on variables that have been shown in previous research to relate to involvement in other kinds of problem behavior in adolescence, such as problem drinking, marijuana use, other drug use, delinquent behavior, and risky sexual behavior. This finding suggests that sipping during childhood is not itself a problem behavior like delinquent behavior or drug use."

"In other words, first sipping is not an early indicator of issues that would be of concern to parents, namely problem proneness," added Zucker. "At the same time, the study does demonstrate that earlier sipping is related to a familial culture of more alcohol use, expressed via parental approval of sipping in their children, and by greater alcohol consumption by the parents. However, although the majority of early sippers do not go on to be early drinkers, one third of them do so. This research tends to suggest that early sipping may not be a causal factor in this progression, but their current data do not allow them to definitively rule that out. Thus, the important question of concern is the one following from this research: do the tastes or sips offered by parents operate in a similar fashion as the first drinking experience with a 'real' drink? That is, is early sipping also a pathway into [problem behavior](#) in a more general sense?"

"Parents and school are the most likely sources of social influence concerning whether it is appropriate for children to drink alcohol," said Donovan. "This research suggests that if children do not see their parents as strongly disapproving of child sipping, the children will be more likely to take a first step into alcohol use. More than that, however, it shows that if parents drink in front of their children, their children will be more likely to sip or taste alcohol as a child. I would hope that this research would make parents be a bit more cautious about drinking in front of their children and about the messages they are sending to their children

about drinking. They also need to be aware that there is no research that establishes that 'teaching' children to drink or letting them drink in the home protects them from later involvement in binge drinking or [alcohol](#) problems."

Zucker agreed. "There is a considerable body of vocal opinion that has in recent years advocated early first drinking experiences for children with their parents in a social context, as the best way to socialize the children to normal drinking, and to therefore protect them from later risk," he said. "In other words, some think that early drinking with parents might be a protective parental strategy. It would be a significant mistake to misinterpret the Donovan and Molina study as evidence in favor of resurrecting this old position. The fact that the majority of early sippers are not problem children, and that the majority of them do not go on to early regular use, is not evidence supporting the early introduction of drinking with family as protective. Its long-term effects remain still to be charted."

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