

To Keep Kids From Drinking Alcohol In Classrooms, Make Sure Students Know Policies Will Be Enforced



Researchers found new ways of getting high school students who drink while in class to stop, and they don't include suspension or expulsion.

With adolescents trying alcohol at younger ages, schools have taken measures to prohibit its consumption, particularly within the school. But school policies will do nothing to curb teenage drinking, unless school's officials are enforcing them, a new study confirmed.

"Whatever your school policy is, lax enforcement is related to more drinking," Richard Catalano, a professor of social work at the University of Washington, said.

Catalano and his team of researchers looked at enforcement policies among eighth and ninth graders in public and private schools throughout Washington state and Australia's Victoria state. Specifically, they looked at how students' reports on alcohol policies and their drinking habits matched up to self-reported alcohol use in eighth and ninth grade.

Researchers found that 44 percent of Victoria eighth graders and 22 percent of Washington eighth graders said they drank alcohol. Binge drinking was also prevalent among many more Victoria students. They found that both adolescents in each state had similar behaviors, even though in Washington — where the legal drinking age is 21 — policies were focused more on a zero-tolerance approach, whereas in Victoria — where the legal drinking age is 18 — policies were more about minimizing harm.

The researchers also found that such behaviors were reduced when students thought they would have to undergo counseling by teachers if they were caught drinking, rather than being expelled or suspended. Catalano said the students could be reminded of this in personal messages about abstinence or harm minimization.

This tactic is much more positive, since suspension or expulsion can have long-term negative effects.

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"What we've seen in other studies from this sample is suspension policies actually worsen the behavioral problem," he said. "What that says to me is, although you want policies and you want enforcement of policies, there are other ways of responding than suspension, expulsion, and calling the police."

A recent study found that kids and adolescents are trying alcohol at even earlier ages. At eight years old, 37 percent of 452 children studied, had tried alcohol. Up until age 12, most kids were either drinkers or non-drinkers, but from 13 to 18 years old, a third group emerged: the drinkers who experienced drunkenness. At 14 years old, 75 percent of the teens had tried alcohol, 19 percent were drunk a significant quantity, and 3 percent had at least three drinks on a single occasion. By 18 years old, 96 percent of the group had tried alcohol and a third of them had alcohol related problems.

"Schools should focus on zero-tolerance and abstinence in primary school and early middle school, Catalano said, "but sometime between middle school and high school they have to blend in zero tolerance with minimization. By the time they get into high school, they need new strategies."

Underage drinking results in almost 5,000 deaths each year, and may contribute to brain impairment, liver damage, and abnormal growth and hormone production during puberty, according the the National Institutes of Health.

Source: Evans-Whipp T, Plenty S, Catalano R, et al. The impact of school alcohol policy on student drinking. Health Education Research. 2013 and Medical Daily.

Donovan J, Molina B. Types of Alcohol Use Experience From Childhood Through Adolescence. Journal of Adolescent Health. 2013.