Parents often think that letting their children have a sip of alcohol at home is a safe way to promote responsible drinking but this could put their child at future risk.

A new study from Yale University shows that the earlier a child is introduced to alcohol, the greater their chances of developing a drinking problem later in life.

The study, which was published in the journal, Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research, interviewed 1,160 college freshmen.

Those that participated in the study answered questions on the age they started drinking, how often they drank, how much they drank and if they had any problems with alcohol. The results of the study showed that the earlier a child sampled alcohol, the greater their chances of alcohol abuse in college.

Study author Meghan Morean said, "As expected, beginning to use alcohol at an earlier age was associated with heavier drinking and the experience of more negative consequences during senior year of college." "Quickly progressing from first alcohol use to drinking to intoxication was also an important predictor of heavy drinking and the experience of alcohol related problems during senior year of college," she added.

The research shows that people who had their first drink at age 15 are at a greater risk of alcohol problems than people who waited until they were 17. That is a big problem, as most American children have their first drink between 14 and 15 years of age.

Morean said, "Quickly progressing from first alcohol use to drinking to intoxication was also an important predictor of heavy drinking and the experience of alcohol related problems during senior year of college."

While neither abstinence nor education campaigns have been able to effectively stop high school and university students from drinking, it is important to provide them with information. The more people know about alcohol, the more able they are to make wise and informed decisions. That does not guarantee they will not abuse alcohol, but with the right information, students can make smarter choices.

"It is also extremely important to remember that heavy drinking during adolescence and early adulthood is not confined to college campuses. Most adolescents begin drinking during high school, a significant portion of whom begin drinking heavily," Morean said. "To help address this, we suggest that new alcohol prevention and intervention efforts targeting high school students be developed with the goal of delaying onset of heavy drinking among those at increased risk due to an early onset of drinking."

Parents who wish to learn how to talk with their children about the dangers of alcohol should click here.