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Parents Can Help Their Children Avoid Alcohol Pitfalls During Transition from High School to College

Prior research has shown that the transition from high school to college is a particularly vulnerable time, associated with increased alcohol use and risk of negative alcohol-related consequences.

While studies have examined the effectiveness of prevention programs to address this problem, few have examined which students may benefit the most.

A study of student characteristics has found that parent-based interventions (PBIs) can be effective even among those students feeling high peer pressure to drink alcohol.

Results will be published in the September 2013 issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at Early View.

"College matriculation is a vulnerable transition for many youth for many reasons," said Michael J. Cleveland, research assistant professor at the Prevention Research Center at The Pennsylvania State University and corresponding author for the study. "Increased freedoms and autonomy -- from parental control and from the structure of high school -- as well as instability -- as new friendships and romantic relationships form -- may lead to increased opportunities, and social pressures, for young people to experiment with alcohol and other substances."

Rose Marie Ward, associate professor of health promotion at Miami University, Ohio, agreed. "The transition from high school to college is constantly marked as a crucial time for alcohol interventions," she said. "PBIs stress that during this crucial transition period, communication between the parent and teen ... is highly important."

"The PBI we examined is designed to encourage parents to maintain communication with their son or daughter, consisting of an informational handbook that is distributed to parents of incoming students during the summer before matriculation," said Cleveland. "The handbook is fairly short -- about 22 pages -- and includes an overview of college student drinking, strategies and techniques for communicating effectively with teens, and tips on discussing ways to help teens develop

assertiveness and resist peer pressure. The last section of the handbook is an in-depth discussion of the major reasons teens drink alcohol, including information about how alcohol affects the body. This section also addresses the issues of parent norms and permissibility with respect to alcohol use in their teens."

The researchers used data from a randomized control trial delivered to 1,900 incoming college students (988 females, 912 males) divided into four groups: non-drinkers, weekend light drinkers, weekend heavy episodic drinkers, and heavy drinkers. Student characteristics were: injunctive peer norms, which measured participants' perceptions of their friends' approval or disapproval of four specific drinking activities; descriptive peer norms, which asked participants to write how many drinks they thought were typically consumed on each day of the week by their close friends; and personal attitudes toward alcohol use.

"We examined these particular student characteristics because there is strong evidence that links these characteristics to increased risk of alcohol use," said Cleveland. "We wanted to see if these characteristics could help explain why the intervention works better for some students compared to others."

Results showed that injunctive peer norms were key, as was the timing of the PBI.

"Our study found the effectiveness of the PBI at preventing escalation to risky drinking was different for certain groups of students, and that these effects depended on when the PBI was delivered and whether or not parents were given a 'booster,'" said Cleveland. "We found that the strongest effects of the PBI were among students who -- although they themselves reported light to moderate use of alcohol -- reported very high levels of their friends' approval for drinking alcohol."

"These results demonstrate that during the transition into college, parents can still influence their teens' alcohol consumption patterns," added Ward. "Specifically, peer approval interacted with, or combined with, the PBI to predict drinking transitions. However, this study indicates that a PBI prior to the enrollment of college, and sometimes with booster information provided during the first year of college, is more effective than one provided after the teen starts college. PBIs are effective. This study emphasizes that their effectiveness may be determined by the beliefs of the teen."

"Our findings should be placed in the context of other evaluations of the PBI, all of which show that

this intervention is a low-cost but effective tool that prevents escalation of drinking during this transition," said Cleveland. "The materials covered in the handbook are all strategies that parents can do. Both parents and peer groups are among the strongest influences on young adults transitioning to college; both continue to have influence even as young people transition from adolescence to young adulthood."

"Parents should remember that their opinion still influences their teen," said Ward. "Even if the teen has an established drinking pattern, the parent's communication concerning drinking can impact or alter the teen's alcohol consumption. At the same time, clinicians should remember that teens are still listening to their parents. When guiding a teen about their alcohol use, the clinician might encourage the teen to share materials with their parent and to have discussions concerning alcohol use, driving under the influence, drinking enough to pass out, or frequent heavy drinking. In short, the clinician might elicit the help of the parent."

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