

Is it ok to allow teenagers to drink at home under supervision?

Q Dear counsellor, Should I allow my teenage children to drink alcohol at home? I was told that children who are permitted to drink at home by their parents, under supervision, are less likely to become alcoholics in adulthood, because they learn responsible drinking early in life? Stanislaus, Nebbi

A Dear Stanislaus, While many people are of the view that permitting some kind of supervised drinking for teenagers promotes responsible drinking, a study published this year argued that it might have

the opposite effect.

The study, which was published in the journal Addictive Behaviours, found that such early exposure to alcohol, even under parental supervision, is linked to heavier drinking and alcohol-related issues later in life.

"A robust relationship was found between parental permission to use alcohol during adolescence and increased alcohol use frequency and quantity, alcohol use disorder symptoms and alcohol-related harms in young adulthood," the study said.

The study also found that the age at which children got exposed to alcohol,

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with permission from their parents, was not associated with later alcohol use outcomes, meaning the risk was uniform for children of all ages.

Psychologists are of the view that supervised underage drinking is likely

to have a negative effect on children, despite its popularity.

"There was this long history of people thinking that if you taught your kids how to drink, then they wouldn't have problems with drinking," said Lindsay

Squeglia, a researcher at Medical University of South Carolina, in Charleston, South Carolina. "Research over the past couple of decades has really shown that is not true."

Generally, many studies show that teenagers whose parents allow them to drink end up drinking more often, and more heavily, than their peers whose parents don't allow it. This applies to drinking at home, where they are being monitored by their parents, as well as drinking outside the home without adults present.

"When parents allow their kids to drink, their kids end up drinking in all kinds of contexts more heavily,"

says Rutger Engels, a researcher at Erasmus University Rotterdam in Netherlands. "It's related to norm setting."

One of the benefits of delaying drinking for one's children is the fact that a teenager's brain is still developing. This process continues until the age of 25, with the brain areas such as the frontal cortex, which is responsible for executive functioning, still developing.

Parents can have a major influence on their teenager's relationship with alcohol, especially if they model responsible drinking behaviours and establish firm boundaries.