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Zero Tolerance Alcohol Policy Good Choice for Parents

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While restaurants in Germany legally sell alcohol to teenagers after their sixteenth birthday and French children drink wine with dinner at an early age, new research suggests that U.S. parents who follow this relaxed European example could be increasing the likelihood that their children may binge drink in college.

Research conducted by Caitlin Abar, with Penn State's Prevention Research and Methodology Centers, found that there is no scientific basis to the common belief that prohibiting alcohol turns it into a "forbidden fruit" and encourages abuse. Abar presented her results at the 2009 meeting of the Society for Prevention Research in Washington, D.C. and they appear in the current issue of Addictive Behaviors.

In 31 states, parents can legally serve alcohol to their underage children. New Hampshire is NOT one of the 31. New Hampshire does not have a parental exception in its possession or sales statutes.

Though U.S. teenagers drink less often than adults, they tend to drink more at a time — on average, five drinks in a sitting, which is considered “binge drinking.” About 87 percent of college students try alcohol, and 40 percent say that they regularly engage in some type of binge drinking.

To see if parents permitting underage alcohol use might be an underlying cause of binge drinking, Abar surveyed almost 300 college freshmen and related their drinking habits to their parents' modeling and permissibility of alcohol use. Those students whose parents did not permit them to drink underage — about half of the group — were significantly less likely to drink heavily in college, regardless of gender. Whether the parents themselves drank, on the other hand, appeared to have little effect on predicting their children's behaviors when accounting for the permissibility they exhibited toward teen alcohol use.

Abar cautioned, however, that further research is needed to confirm the preliminary study and that they need to determine if the setting where parents provide the alcohol changes the results. A previous study in 2004 by Kristie Foley, Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center, North Carolina, showed that teenagers who received alcohol from their parents for parties were up to three times more likely to binge drink within a month, while those who drank only with the family were less likely to binge. So the context in which a parent provides alcohol could be key.

While the sample group used in Abar's study was comprised primarily of Caucasian college students, previous research uncovered a similar effect in low-income African-American and Hispanic students. A 2007 study of 1,388 children by Kelli Komro, and the University of Florida, showed that schoolchildren who were permitted alcohol in the home by their parents in sixth grade were up to three times more likely to get drunk and almost twice as likely to drink heavily (five or more drinks) at ages 12-14.

We know that underage drinking is associated with a number of health risks, including risky sexual activity, injuries, drowning, suicide, violence, crime, alcohol poisoning and even death. Research from the American Medical Association (AMA) indicates that teenagers who drink alcohol may be permanently damaging their still developing brains. The damage from underage drinking may affect teens' memory, cognitive abilities and decision making skills for the rest of their lives. Recent medical research has proven that underage drinking causes chemical changes that can also "hardwire" the teen brain for addiction.

To avoid the serious health and safety risks outlined above, the best policy is zero tolerance to underage drinking. For more science-based facts on the effects of underage drinking, visit the CADY web site at www.cadyinc.org.

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