Giving teens alcohol to teach them responsible drinking may backfire

It’s common to hear about parents giving their teens alcohol, hoping that if they learn about responsible drinking at home they’ll be less likely to binge drink when they’re on their own. But a new study suggests that this method doesn’t seem to protect teens from the risks of alcohol abuse.

Australia scientists followed 2,000 teens for six years and found that parents providing alcohol not only doesn’t prevent binge drinking, it was actually linked to teens finding alcohol through other sources. The study, the first to analyze the long-term effect of parents providing alcohol, was published this week in the journal *Lancet Public Health.*

Every year for six years, teens and their parents filled out different surveys about alcohol habits. The survey asked about alcohol abuse symptoms, binge drinking levels, and how the teens got alcohol. To be clear, “binge” drinking was defined as drinking more than four drinks at once, which the authors acknowledge is a somewhat conservative estimate. And the sources of alcohol included parents, not from parents, and both.

The teenagers in the study were, on average, 13 years old at the beginning and 18 at the end. Unsurprisingly, more parents gave alcohol to their children as the children aged – from 15 percent of parents at the beginning of the study, to about 60 percent at the end.

By the end of the study, 81 percent of teens who received alcohol both from their parents and other sources were binge drinking. In contrast, 62 percent of teens who *only* got it from other people (and were not given alcohol by their

parents) were binge drinking. (Also, 25 percent of teens who were given alcohol only by their parents binged, which is a strange finding.) And teens who got alcohol only from their parents one year were twice as likely to get it from other people the next year.

This is an observational study, so it can’t prove that giving alcohol to your kid causes them to seek it out and binge. There are other limitations too: Self-reported surveys are rarely the most accurate way to measure anything. Teens from low socio-economic status backgrounds weren’t well-represented, and the results are from Australia, and we don’t know how broadly they generalize. Still, it’s an interesting result, and it’s worth thinking about how it’s possible for some well-meaning tactics to backfire.

https://www.theverge.com/2018/1/27/16936134/alcohol-drinking-parents-teenagers-health