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How Parents of Adolescents Store and Monitor Alcohol in the Home

Bettina Friese, Ph.D., Joel W. Grube, Ph.D., and Roland S. Moore, Ph.D.

Prevention Research Center, Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation

Abstract

This study explores how and where parents store alcohol in the home and how they monitor this stored alcohol. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents of youths, ages 15–18, in Northern California. We found that parents typically stored alcohol in unsecured locations easily accessible to the adolescents. Parental monitoring of alcohol included counting or marking bottles, or hiding alcohol. However, parents reported that they relied primarily on their memory and intuition to monitor alcohol and admitted that they would not notice if small amounts of alcohol disappeared.

Keywords

alcohol; parents; youth; monitoring; alcohol access

Introduction

There is substantial evidence that alcohol availability and easy access to alcohol are related to greater consumption of alcohol and alcohol-related problems among adolescents (Dent, Grube & Biglan, 2005; Paschall, Grube, Black & Ringwalt, 2007). The home may represent one important source of alcohol for underage youths. Access to alcohol in the home and obtaining alcohol from parents have been linked to intentions to drink and increased alcohol consumption (Komro et al., 2007) and to greater risk for alcohol-related problems among adolescents (Van Den Eijnden et al., 2011). Given these relations, understanding how parents store and monitor alcohol in the home may thus have significant implications for interventions to reduce drinking and drinking problems among youths.

Availability of alcohol and monitoring of alcohol in the home has been primarily explored in quantitative survey studies (e.g., Komro et al., 2007; Van den Eijnden et al., 2011; Spijkerman et al., 2008). For example, one study (Komro et al., 2007) asked parents whether they kept track of the alcohol supply in their home. This type of question does not provide information about how alcohol is stored in the home, the type of monitoring that takes place, or whether monitoring is consistently used. One mixed methods study found that parents reported in in-depth interviews that it was difficult to limit youths' access to alcohol in the home, even though they indicated in a quantitative survey a high level of confidence in their ability to limit access to alcohol (Bryant et al., 2006). However, this study did not examine how parents store alcohol and what, if anything, they do to monitor it. In response to this lack of information, we conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with parents to explore these issues.

Methods

We recruited parents of youths, ages 15–18 living in Northern California for a qualitative study. The youths were participants in a large ($N \approx 1,500$) NIAAA-funded survey study (Environmental Approaches to Prevention, NIAAA 2 P60 AA006282-25, PI: P. Gruenewald) and were selected for the qualitative study because they had reported drinking alcohol on at least four occasions within the past 12 months and because they lived within 150 miles of the San Francisco Bay Area. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with their parents. One parent per household was interviewed, and the first available parent was selected for participation. In total we interviewed 44 parents (31 mothers/female guardians, 13 fathers/male guardians) out of a total number of 60 households that were contacted, resulting in a response rate of 73%. Table 1 shows parent characteristics, as well as their teen's drinking behavior based on the youth survey study.

Parents were asked to describe the availability of alcohol in their home, how alcohol was stored and monitored, how they prevented youths from taking alcohol from the home without asking, and if there were any instances when their children had done so. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and imported into ATLAS.ti (Muhr, 2009). The transcripts were first coded for *a priori* themes created in conjunction with the interview guide. These broad themes included the sources of alcohol and drugs, how they were acquired, and where and with whom they were consumed. One team member coded the transcripts for these themes, and every fifth transcript was double coded by another team member for reliability testing. Discrepant codes were resolved through discussion. Data were analyzed using pile sorts, in which four researchers grouped coded segments for thematic similarity and then wrote descriptions of how the groupings were related. This process required discussion and consensus on resulting clusters of coded transcript segments. Brief quotations illustrate some of the prominent and recurring themes we identified. The codes most relevant for this study were: *monitor, storage, type of alcohol, amount of alcohol, and theft*.

Results

Alcohol in the home

Out of the 44 parents interviewed, 41 kept some form of alcohol in the home. Thirty-one parents (70%) had beer in the home, 35 (80%) had wine, and 34 (77%) had liquor. The amount of alcohol stored in the home ranged from a few bottles of wine to fully stocked bars and wine cellars. One parent described his collection of alcohol: *"[I have] just about every kind of distilled liquor, [...] gins, vodka, rum, tequila, [...] a bunch of liqueurs that I use in a lot of cooking, you know, pretty much anything. If my friends want a drink I could probably make it."* Another parent reported: *"I have a whole cabinet full. The cabinet above the refrigerator is full. All kinds of liquors, regular vodka, rum, gin, whiskey, whatever, because I like to entertain, and I'm making a liquor [infused vodka] that I am giving as Christmas gifts."*

Common storage locations were refrigerators, liquor cabinets, wine racks in the kitchen, kitchen cabinets, hallway closets and wine cellars. Only three parents reported that they kept some of their alcohol locked up. One parent locked up wine, but kept beer unlocked; one parent locked up liquor and beer, but not wine; and one parent locked up liquor, but not the beer or wine. One of these parents reported that his wife installed a lock, although he disagreed: *"She just did it, bought this lock and put it on there. [...] I have a much greater level of trust than she does."* One parent reported locking up alcohol in the home after some of it had been replaced with water: *"[My wife] and I went to a party and brought our own tequila and vodka, and both bottles turned out to be water. [...] It was a \$40 bottle of tequila."*

[...] It didn't occur to us that they [their teens] would raid the liquor cabinet. We didn't make a big deal out of it. [...] We immediately took everything out and put it under lock and key." Another parent reported that she started to lock up alcohol when her older son was a teen: *"We put a lock on the closet when [my older son] was a teenager because, number one, we didn't trust him, and number two, when he would have friends sleep over here, we wanted him to have an out and be able to say, 'The cabinet's locked.'"*

As an alternative to locking up alcohol, some parents tried to hide the alcohol or move it to less easily accessible locations. For example, one parent, after an incident that involved her daughter and friends getting drunk at a party, decided to hide the alcohol: *"We put it into the master bedroom and covered it up with a jacket [in the big master bedroom closet]."*

Another parent gathered up all of the alcohol in the home, put it in a suitcase and hid it in a closet. Other parents moved alcohol from easily accessible locations, such as a refrigerator in the garage, to locations that they felt would be easier to monitor: *"I don't have a lot of room in my kitchen so we would store it in the garage, but we moved everything that was stored in the garage into the house because the kids come and go through the garage, and we're not always out there to see if they grab something, you know? You can't see what they're doing in the garage so we moved everything into the house where we can see what's in their hands."* One parent felt that storing the liquor above the refrigerator would keep it out of her teen's hands: *"the hard alcohol in my fully stocked bar is up above my refrigerator so they can't easily get to it. Some of their very tall friends could."*

The reasons given for not locking up alcohol were that their children should know not to drink the parents' alcohol, the teen is not a problem child, there is trust between parent and child, and that there are plenty of other places where youths can access alcohol. One parent stated: *"I feel like trust is a really good foundation we've built with our kids, so they know I would be really disappointed if they did something stupid."* Some parents were not concerned about their youth taking alcohol from home because their teen indicated to them that alcohol did not taste good. Parents believed that therefore the youth would not drink alcohol. For example, *"Today I let [son] have a little sip of [liquor], and he didn't like it. Why would you drink that when it doesn't even taste good?"* One parent acknowledged that his alcohol is in a location where it could be taken, but did nothing to secure it: *"my two to three bottles of whiskey and gin are out, unlocked. We get a case of beer at Costco every two weeks. It's out there in the garage [...] and it could be pilfered."*

Monitoring alcohol in the home

For the most part, parents reported having little concern about adolescents taking alcohol from home, and were relying on their intuition to alert them if significant quantities of alcohol went missing. One parent reported: *"I'm kind of aware of what's around the house. So, even though I don't lock it up, I think I would notice if there were a lot that were missing. I probably wouldn't notice one beer."*

A small number of parents used pencils to mark how much is left in liquor bottles, though this was not done consistently. One parent stated that her husband was going to put marks on the liquor bottles: *"He was going to, [...] but sometimes he doesn't pay attention, and then we'll have a party and he'll bring them out and then I don't know if he re-marks it or looks at where it is. Sometimes it's hard to remember if it's been six months since you've used a bottle."* Some parents reported counting bottles, but this was difficult, especially if there were numerous bottles to track. One parent who noticed that one bottle of Mike's Hard Lemonade went missing started counting bottles. However, she admitted: *"I can't do it with the beers. I just have no idea. [husband] drinks them every day or most days. [...] He shares them with the neighbors, so there would be absolutely no way for me to monitor that."* Tracking alcohol was also difficult for parents who did not drink regularly: *"If I use [liquor]*

it's usually when a bunch of my friends are over and we make margaritas. Well, I just noticed that [bottles] were gone, and I don't know when they disappeared because I never really look for them on a regular basis." A couple of parents stopped buying alcohol altogether, as echoed in this parent's response: *"I lost a bottle of rum, a bottle of tequila, [...] a bottle of vodka. Yeah, it's all gone. [...] my trust was very, very strong. So, I just don't buy [...] it anymore."*

How parents have caught youths taking alcohol

Parents often discovered by accident that their teens were taking alcohol from home. One parent reported finding empty cans in the recycling bin after her son and his friends took them out of the refrigerator in the garage. Another parent reported how she found out that her daughter had replaced vodka with water: *"It was funny because when my brother-in-law is coming, he likes to make martinis, and so, a lot of times, I'll take his vodka and put it in the freezer. And so, he was coming, so I took the vodka and put it in the freezer. Well, [daughter] didn't know that alcohol doesn't freeze, and I took the bottle out and I went, "Okay. Who was drinking the vodka?"*

Discussion

Alcohol was common in the homes of the parents that we interviewed. For the most part it was kept unlocked in locations easily accessible to the adolescents in the home. Monitoring took a variety of different forms, though it rarely included locking up alcohol. Parents relied primarily on their memory and intuition and admitted that they would not notice if small amounts of alcohol disappeared.

There are a few limitations to the study. Most importantly, the parents interviewed are of relatively high socioeconomic status (Table 1) and are not a representative sample; therefore their experiences may not be typical of experiences of other parents. As a result, it is unclear how pervasive unlocked alcohol in the home is and how most parents monitor it. Despite these limitations, this study is important because it provides in-depth information about the different ways in which parents attempt to monitor alcohol in the home. Future research should explore these issues quantitatively with a representative sample. The findings from the present study could inform the design of such a study. For example, survey questions to assess alcohol availability in the home, such as "do you keep track of the alcohol supply in your home" may not have a simple answer as parents may use strategies inconsistently or use strategies that are not effective.

Findings of this study are consistent with those from another qualitative study on this topic in suggesting that it is difficult for parents to limit access to alcohol in the home (Bryant et al., 2006). We found that the vast majority of parents kept alcohol in the home because they wanted alcohol available when they wanted to have a drink and because they enjoyed serving drinks to guests. Monitoring open alcohol was difficult because of parents' own drinking habits and because it was difficult to track multiple open bottles and monitor alcohol in multiple locations. In addition, we found that there was disagreement between some partners about whether precautions should be taken to limit access to alcohol. Overall, parents expressed little concern about their teens accessing their alcohol and steps to limit access to alcohol in the home were only taken when parents felt they could not trust their children.

The primary implication of this study is that parents should be encouraged to monitor the alcohol that they keep in the home in a systematic and reliable manner. Locking up alcohol or storing it in a location where youths would not be able to access it would be a potential way to limit access to alcohol in the home. This strategy may be particularly useful for

liquor because it is hard to monitor once bottles are open. Keeping alcohol in the home inaccessible to youths may also send a message that underage drinking is not acceptable. However, this study also highlights that many parents do not see a need to monitor their alcohol. Parent-child trust was mentioned as a reason for not limiting access to alcohol. Parent education efforts should focus on making securing alcohol a safety issue rather than one of trust between parents and teens.

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Table 1

Demographics and characteristics of participants and non-participants

	Participants (N=44)	Non-Participants (Refusals) (N=16)
Race		
White	72.7%	87.5%
African American	6.8%	--
Asian	4.5%	--
Hispanic	31.8%	12.5%
Other	15.9%	12.5%
% of mothers/female guardian who completed college or higher	67.4%	68.5%
Youth Gender		
Female	45.5%	31.3%
Youth Age	15.1	15.0
Youth had consumed alcohol in the past month	75.6%	81.2%
Youth reported having gotten alcohol from home without permission	50.0%	68.7%
Youth reported having gotten alcohol from home with permission	11.4%	25.0%