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“Just make sure you can get up and parent the next day”: Understanding the contexts, risks, and rewards of alcohol consumption for parents

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Abstract

Little is known about how parents make drinking decisions and weigh the risks and rewards of alcohol consumption in specific contexts. This qualitative study examined two questions: 1. What factors influence parental drinking decisions in different drinking contexts? 2. What do parents perceive as the risks and rewards of alcohol consumption in different drinking contexts? Purposive sampling was used to select sixty parents of children aged 10 or younger living in four mid-sized California cities. Data were collected via in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Many parents viewed drinking at family get-togethers or parties as protective of children, since the presence of multiple adults and children provide buffers when parents become intoxicated. In contrast, parents noted that drinking at home, and particularly drinking alone, transmitted potentially negative messages. Social pressures and contexts influence alcohol consumption among parents and could provide potential avenues for intervention against alcohol-related harms.

Parental alcohol use is associated with several negative outcomes for children, including child substance use behaviors (Bendsten, Damsgaard, Tolstrup, Ersboll, & Holstein, 2013), problem behaviors (Zebrak & Green, 2014), child injury (Bijur, Kurzon, Overpeck, & Scheidt, 1992), and having physically abusive or neglectful parenting (Freisthler & Gruenewald, 2013; Freisthler, Johnson-Motoyama, & Kepple, 2014). While the majority of research has focused on heavy drinking or alcohol abuse or dependence among parents (Berger, 2005; Famularo, Stone, Barnum, & Wharton, 1986; Kelleher, Chaffin, Hollenberg, & Fischer, 1994), emerging evidence suggests that even low levels of parental alcohol use are associated with child alcohol use (Macleod et al., 2008) and physical abuse (Freisthler & Gruenewald, 2013). Additionally, the social context where alcohol is consumed appears to be related to physical abuse, outside of how much alcohol is drunk there (Freisthler & Gruenewald, 2013). This suggests that alcohol-related negative parenting outcomes may be broadly spread across the general population of parents.

Although approximately 64% of adults between 21 and 49 drink alcohol each year (SAMHSA, 2014), little is known about how parents make alcohol consumption decisions. According to social learning theory, behaviors are influenced by interactions between a person's cognitions and their observations of the social environment (Bandura, 1977). In this view, parents base their decisions to drink upon their perceptions of the risks and rewards of alcohol use, which are informed by their past experiences as well as the behaviors of those around them. As observed behaviors in the social environment are important influences of individual behaviors, it could be that parental drinking decisions could vary by drinking context (e.g. a party, family barbecue, or bar), which in turn influence how much alcohol is consumed (Treno, Alaniz, & Gruenewald, 2000). A clearer understanding of both the perceived risks and rewards of alcohol consumption, as well as how these might differ between drinking contexts could inform how parents make drinking decisions as well as provide more targeted information about possible intervention against alcohol-related harms.

Alcohol Use in Parenthood

Parenthood itself appears to be related to alcohol use, as parents drink less frequently than non-parents (Cho & Crittenden, 2006; Paradis, 2011; Paradis, Demers, & Nadeau, 1999). There could be several reasons for this difference, including increased stigma for substance use among parents (particularly mothers of young children) (Benoit et al., 2014), changes in drinking motivations or life responsibilities (Emslie, Hunt, & Lyons, 2012), and differences in the contexts where parents drink alcohol (Paradis, 2011). A qualitative study using focus groups to examine alcohol use among middle-aged (35–50) Scottish adults found that individuals drank alcohol primarily for enjoyment of the taste, relaxation, and sociability (Emslie et al., 2012). Respondents framed these motivations in contrast to their drinking motivation in young adulthood, when they drank with the intent of becoming drunk. Additionally, parents reported changing their drinking patterns to accommodate the responsibilities of parenthood. Specifically, parents noted that the need to care for their children, particularly early in the morning, prevented them from engaging in heavy drinking. Nonetheless, the authors additionally noted that while most of the sample described themselves as moderate drinkers, they also shared narratives about recent heavy drinking (Emslie et al. 2012). This suggests that while parents may generally try to balance their parenting duties with drinking behaviors through moderate consumption, there could be specific drinking contexts in which they feel it is safe to consume more. Because this study did not focus specifically on parents or drinking contexts (i.e. the drinking setting and social environment), it is unknown whether parents view heavier drinking in some contexts as “safer” than others in regards to their parenting duties.

Parent Drinking Decisions & Drinking Contexts

The use of drinking contexts appears to explain some differences in drinking patterns between parents and non-parents (Paradis, 2011). For example, parents are less likely to drink at bars (Paradis, 2011), where heavier drinking is more likely to occur (Herd & Grube, 1993; Kairouz & Greenfield, 2007). Differences in drinking contexts between parents and non-parents may also be related to more frequent heavy drinking among parents. Mothers drink less at restaurants than non-mothers, which is related to higher rates of drunkenness

(Paradis, 2011). This suggests that mothers who go to restaurants less frequently and drink to drunkenness may be doing so either at home or at special events like weddings or parties (Freisthler & Holmes, 2012). Qualitative research examining how parents make drinking decisions in specific contexts could provide more in-depth understanding of how parents balance parenting duties and drinking.

Risks and Rewards of Alcohol Use in Parenthood

Furthermore, little is known about how parents perceive risks and rewards related to alcohol use, or how this varies by context. A qualitative study of Australian parents suggested that parents view their own drinking behaviors as highly influential on their teen's behaviors (Graham, Ward, Munro, Snow, & Ellis, 2006). This indicates that parents could view their own drinking as a transferable risk for alcohol use in their children. Similarly, drug-abusing parents may try to minimize their child's exposure to substance use and paraphernalia, and share fears that children will emulate parent drug use (Klee, 1998). Other qualitative research among middle-aged individuals (Emslie et al., 2012) and pregnant women (Watt et al., 2014) suggests that alcohol is used to help maintain social relationships. Parents may consequently use alcohol to "fit in" at social contexts where alcohol is served. Qualitative studies of drug-using parents indicate that parents see drug use as having potential benefits (e.g. increased energy) as well as potential risks (e.g. yelling or loss of temper associated with "coming down" from drug effects) in regards to parenting (Klee, 1998). Negative stigma about substance use by parents and an abstinence oriented ideal of parenthood also appear to be significant risks for drug using parents (Banwell & Bammer, 2006; Chandler et al., 2013; Radcliffe, 2011; Rhodes, Bernays, & Houmoller, 2010). Nonetheless, while much of this literature has examined illicit drug-abusing parents drawn from treatment populations, it is unknown whether stigma is a large consideration for alcohol use decisions in a general population sample.

A richer understanding of the ways in which parents balance social relationships, drinking, and parenting could help identify touch points for prevention against alcohol-related problems. We examined two questions to fill these gaps in knowledge: 1. What factors influence parent drinking decisions in different drinking contexts? 2. What do parents perceive as the risks and rewards of alcohol consumption in different drinking contexts?

Method

Sample

Sixty individuals were recruited in four mid-sized cities in California's Bay Area. All were English-speaking parents of children aged 10 or younger. Participants were recruited via advertisements online, in local newsletters, or posted in public spaces such as libraries and community centers. The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Interviews

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interview guide consisted of 3 sub-sections, one of which focused on the environmental and social contexts where parents did or did not consume alcohol, as well as how parenting responsibilities and

the presence of children impacted these decisions (10 questions total; e.g. Can you tell me about the last time that you drank alcohol? What do you consider when you decide whether or not to drink?) All interviewees were probed to elicit perceptions about the risks and rewards of alcohol consumption in different contexts (e.g. How did the alcohol make you feel?).

To preserve confidentiality, we obtained a waiver of signed informed consent from the (blinded for review) institutional review board. The first author of the study (initials blinded for review) obtained verbal informed consent from participants and conducted all study interviews. The interviews took place between June and December of 2013 at private or semi-private locations (e.g. home, quiet park) chosen by the study participants, lasted between 35–90 minutes, and were audio-recorded. No other adults or children older than one year of age were present at the interview. Following the semi-structured portion of the interview, a brief structured demographic survey collecting information about age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status (education and income), marital status, and employment status was administered to participants.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded via thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006) in Dedoose software 5.0.11 (2014) by both study authors. Our thematic analysis followed a realist epistemology and involved a multi-step process. First, we read through the complete transcripts to obtain a more holistic perception of each individual respondent and drafted memos summarizing initial thoughts about the drinking identity and drinking beliefs of each participant. Second, the second study author excerpted segments of text that involved alcohol use from the interviews into broad categories such as “risks of alcohol use” or “rewards of alcohol use”. Third, we read through these excerpts, searching for implicit and explicit themes related to our interests (e.g. how risks or rewards of alcohol use vary by context; how parenting impacts drinking decisions). We met regularly during this period of the analysis to discuss developing themes. We determined whether themes were important by examining patterning in the data (i.e. was the theme re-occurring throughout the dataset?), cross-comparisons within the dataset (i.e. was the theme present in different sub-groups of parents, such as women and men?) and how relevant the theme was to our research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For our final stage of analysis, we established a thematic coding framework of 5 themes (e.g. negotiating parenting vs. drinking), which we then used to re-code the alcohol-related excerpts. This stage of coding was led by the second study author, with the first study author double-coding 20% of the dataset [achieving a Chronbach’s alpha of .70–.90 (Landis & Koch, 1977)]. We established the trustworthiness of our analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) through discussion at regular meetings, and member-checking towards the end of the data collection period (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Miller, 2000). For example, after completing the semi-structured interview, the first study author would summarize developing themes to the study participant and provide an opportunity for the participant to discuss whether they found the themes relevant to their own experience.

Results

Social Context Influences Acceptability of Drinking

Many of the participants declared that they drank in front of their children or with their children present, while very few expressed strict boundaries that forbade them from ever drinking with their children around them. That many of the participants have few restrictions about imbibing in front of their children suggests that negotiating drinking and parenting could be a prevalent and commonplace occurrence.

Participants grounded their perceptions of the acceptability of drinking alcohol on the social context. In doing so, they treated social context dichotomously, distinguishing between drinking in large social contexts versus the context of drinking at home. Many participants perceived drinking in large social groups as protective of their children because of their ability to share parenting responsibilities with the other adults present.

Maybe at a social party like that, because there are other adults around. So, if you do get intoxicated, somebody else can watch them. (Respondent #59: male, age 34)

Some participants emphasized their relationship with the other adults in the social context as another factor determining their willingness to drink, positing the presence of trusted family members as strengthening how acceptable it was to drink alcohol.

It's just, I guess, that security, that you have your family there with you. That if you were to get drunk, you know that your kids are going to be okay because they're with your... their uncles and their aunts and their grandmas. (Respondent #47: male, age 24)

The importance placed on the presence of family influenced the type of social contexts in which parents found drinking alcohol more acceptable. Family gatherings, for example, emerged as social contexts in which many participants expressed that it was acceptable to drink.

I'd say probably like at a wedding, something like that, at some type of ceremony, or if it's at like a little family event. Like if you're having a barbecue or something like that, here there's other adults around that are probably not drinking that can actually watch over the kids. (Respondent #37: female, age 34)

Whether the adults were family members or not, what mattered for many of the participants while drinking in large social contexts was that there were other responsible adults present who could act in case of an emergency.

But, if you know, not unlike a barbecue situation, you want to have a couple of beers and the kids are playing. You know, I guess just as long as there's someone that's... if an emergency happened and somebody had to jump in the car, take them... is that person available? As a parent you have to be mature enough to have somebody be sober. (Respondent #10: female, age 40)

Conversely, many participants perceived drinking at home as potentially placing their children in danger, as such contexts did not provide them with the ability to share their parental responsibilities with other adults.

[Y]ou're responsible for their well-being and if you're under the influence, you're not as sharp as you would be if you weren't drinking. I think you have a responsibility as a parent to be at your best. When you're with your kids, you know you have to protect them, keep their well-being in mind all the time. (Respondent #16: male, age 32)

This was especially poignant for participants who did not enjoy a large support network, whether it was because they were single parents, were new to the area and had not established strong social connections, or could not easily count on family members or afford to pay for help.

I think when it comes to the kids it always falls back on the same thing. Nobody should be drinking to the point of being drunk around their kids. You should be a parent at all times. Especially as a single parent having learned that over the years, if you can't get your kids somewhere that they need to get to, you've failed as a parent. (Respondent #6: male, age 40)

Nonetheless, some participants discussed scenarios that did make it acceptable to drink in the home, although these remained dependent on the security of their children.

If I'm at home and my kids are there, and I feel like drinking, I will. I have, for sure. I've even got drunk. They're in bed, you know. Nothing's going to happen. (Respondent #30: female, age 30)

Parenting Obligations Vary by Context, Impact Acceptable Amount of Drinking

Many of the participants spoke about their parenting obligations as the arbiter of deciding how much alcohol to drink, and these again depended on the social context. Many of the participants considered similar factors when judging how much to drink, including the amount of time they had without their children before they needed to return to them, and how safe they perceived their children to be at the time of their drinking.

I think any time we know we're not going to have our kids or when I know I'm not going to be with my kids, I'll have the tendency to drink more. Not driving and not having my kids are probably two key factors that would lead me to drinking more. (Respondent #22: female, age 36)

In the context of being outside of the home and away from their children, some respondents placed a lot of focus on time. They spoke about the importance of considering how much time they had to drink and sober up before needing to return to their parenting obligations.

[I]t just depends if I have to pick them up right away in the morning or if I'm going to be hung-over... what the circumstances are the next day. If I was going to have a babysitter or a friend watch them, I'm going to have to be able to pick them up. But if it was my parents, and they know I'm not going to pick up the kids in the morning, I can actually go to the bar with my boyfriend. (Respondent #58: female, age 33)

When it came to deciding how much to drink at home, some parents judged the extent of their parenting obligations on the safety of their children. The ages of their children and how well they were able to look after themselves emerged as indicators of safety.

I can't drink too much, 'cause I'll get sleepy, and I can't watch the baby at night. Or I can't really be there to watch the baby at night. I think anything in excess will take away from the interaction time between you and your kids. And they're fairly young. You know, if they were older teens, they don't care about you anyway, so... But while they're young, you know, you have to limit it. (Respondent #54: male, age 52)

In determining an acceptable amount of alcohol, many parents spoke about behavior impairment as crossing a line that should be avoided. They perceived behavior impairment as a strong impediment to fulfilling their parental obligations.

I mean, if you can't walk to the bathroom, or if you can't take care of him if he starts to cry, then no, it's not okay. So, the one, or two, or maybe the three drinks, and then probably, that's about it. (Respondent #59: male, age 34)

While these participants agreed the red line was behavior impairment, there was variation in how many drinks it took to reach that line, as people naturally have varying levels of alcohol tolerance and risk aversion.

I choose not to drink more than one glass also because then I don't want to be disoriented. I still have to get my kids ready for bed, even though I'm not driving anywhere. I don't like the feeling of not being..., of being all "loosey-goosey." You know? I like to be efficient. (Respondent #24: female, age 38)

Drinking Outside the Home Required Negotiating More Perceived Risks

Many participants focused on putting their children in physical danger or setting a bad example as major risks of drinking alcohol, and social context both defined these perceived risks and affected how they negotiated these with their desire to drink. Choosing to drink outside the home was perceived as riskier than drinking at home because of the need to drive. Many participants spoke about having to limit how much they drank and the need to be sober when driving home so as not to place their children in physical danger.

[I]t takes an added dimension. I wouldn't want to also have alcohol in my system while I'm driving in a motorized vehicle with my children. I don't want to put them at risk. There are enough people that are already putting themselves doing that stuff and I have to watch out for them on the road. (Respondent #51: male, age 43)

Some participants sought to eliminate the need to negotiate their alcohol intake with the risk of placing their children in physical danger by leaving them at home. They were willing to place themselves in greater risk of drunk driving if their children were not with them.

[I]f you're out and about and if you have a drink, I don't know. To me, I don't feel comfortable with doing that. If it's just me and [my wife], then yeah, you know, I'd probably. But other than that, it's just I'd rather not. I'd rather not risk that. (Respondent #47: male, age 24)

Drinking Inside the Home Perceived to Be a Negative Influence for Children

Many participants perceived drinking at home as riskier for sending the wrong message to their children about alcohol, as drinking in large groups provided some cover for setting a bad example so long as it was not to excess.

[Kids] make a big difference, 'cause it's, you know, that's something they see, and if they see you doing it, they may think it's okay. I don't want them to think it's okay. It's a choice. It's not something that you have to do because you see your parents doing it. (Respondent: 45: male, age 50)

Some participants were particularly sensitive to the images of drinking at home that were likely to negatively impact their children and sought ways to ameliorate them. These participants often spoke about this in relation to personal alcohol addiction experiences from which they wanted to protect their children.

Um, when we drink we... if we have a beer or two, I'll pour beer in a glass and throw away the can or something. My mama was an alcoholic when I grew up, so I really... I try to keep that stuff distant from my kids. (Respondent #55: male, age 43)

The risk of setting a bad example was especially relevant for participants with older children, as many were forced to also consider their children's perceptions of alcoholism and opinions of them drinking in their own decision to drink.

[N]ot to mention my daughter. She absolutely... My dad is a little bit of an alcoholic. He's an alcoholic and so she doesn't like drinking at all and so she doesn't like me to drink at all, and she... it really upsets her. So, I just-I don't. I don't drink not even close to how I used to drink before kids. (Respondent #10: female, age 40)

Still, few parents spoke about taking on the risk of drinking regardless of context not as a personal but a collective choice, and posited drinking as part of a larger standards system centered on the well-being of the entire family.

[E]very decision I make is about family and not just myself and her, and so I don't want her to have that in her life. I don't want to be a role model for addiction for her. I want her to make healthy choices and that starts by seeing us make healthy choices and kind of incorporating that in the family culture. (Respondent #21: female, age 33)

Drinking Outside the Home Required Negotiating More Perceived Rewards

Many of the participants capitalized on their loosened sense of parental obligations in large contexts to enjoy the rewards of alcohol. Enhanced sociability, and relaxation emerged as the most common rewards, all of which were more easily enjoyed in outside the home contexts and were characterized by an escape from parenting.

You know, it's not so much the drink, but part of the trick is just part of the socializing. I think it's just for me, I like to get out and just feel like I'm free, you

know. It's just having this relaxing moment, not having to worry about anything.
(Respondent #48: female, age 42)

Some participants described drinking in contexts outside the home and without their children present as a means to liberating themselves from parenting obligations. They tended to speak about such instances with nostalgia for their younger, pre-parenting days.

It's like I'm actually in the mix. I'm not just at home. It gives me a time to have some social life outside my kids. It makes me feel good, energetic, just happy to get out of the house and be able to... get dressed and the whole nine... [I]t feels like a sense of pride. (Respondent #36: male, age 28)

Even when their children were present, however, some parents spoke about needing to drink in large social contexts for the reward of enhanced sociability. This point was particularly common amongst parents who actively socialized with the parents from their children's social circle.

[A] lot of times it's... my son's friend's parents, and other parents that I don't, I've never met before. It's just the connection that my son has with another two year old. It's all strangers, so you kind of, you're kind of forced into having a conversation. So, [drinking] just makes it a lot easier, that's all. (Respondent #59: male, age 34)

Many participants spoke about drinking alcohol to relax, and they spoke about having to constantly negotiate this need with parenting duties. Some made the time to drink before reentering their parenting environment.

[I]'m a big fan of happy hour and the thing is, the transition from work to home is usually something that is helped if I take a break. Doesn't have to be a drink. Could be the gym. Could be whatever. But I tend to feel that's a useful thing for me so that I can focus. (Respondent #49: male, age 40)

For some participants, the relaxation reward from alcohol was so important that they found it acceptable to drink at home. They perceived the reward of relaxation as a psycho-emotional need that ultimately helped them with their parenting roles.

I think it's... It just provides some relaxation and just some... The opportunity to maybe unwind a little bit. And that's probably all I'm looking for. I'm not looking, I guess, to forget about my day. It's just some relaxation, I guess. (Respondent #17: female, age 31)

Discussion

While previous qualitative studies have examined parent or adult beliefs about the risks and rewards of alcohol or drug use (Graham, Ward, Munro, Snow, & Ellis, 2006; Klee, 1998), our study uniquely examines how these behaviors and beliefs are associated with social and environmental context in a diverse, general population sample. Our findings suggest that parents consider their past experiences (e.g. history of alcoholism in the family), perceived risks and rewards (e.g. need to drive), the environment (e.g. family barbeque), and the behavior of other individuals in that environment when making decisions about where to consume alcohol and how much to drink. These findings are consistent with social learning

theory, which argues that human behavior is guided by a complex interplay between individuals and their immediate social environment (Bandura, 1977).

Parents separated drinking contexts into two categories: drinking outside the home and drinking at home, and ascribed different levels of safety, risks, and rewards to these contexts. No drinking context was viewed as without some risk for parents and children, suggesting that parents forge a complicated balance between their parenting role, their desire to use alcohol, and the contextual environment. Given research that suggests where parents drink (Freisthler & Gruenewald) and low amounts of parental drinking (Macleod et al., 2008; Hung, Chang, Luh, Wu, & Yen, 2015) can be associated with negative outcomes, our findings offer several possibilities for context-specific prevention of harms associated with parental alcohol use.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Drinking at large family or social gatherings was viewed positively for both child safety and parent needs. Parents reported that drinking at barbecues and parties was preferable because the presence of multiple adults (and ideally family members) would ensure that children were being adequately supervised and protected. This suggests that parents consider the safety of children and the drinking environment when making drinking decisions and prefer drinking in contexts where children are engaged in separate behaviors (e.g. playing together in another room separate from the adults) and where there are more adults present to monitor them. While the parents in our sample believed that these larger gatherings were safe places to drink, little research has examined whether there are fewer risks in these environments. For example, it is unknown whether parents make specific plans to ensure that sober adults are watching children, as this was not discussed in our interviews. Additionally, recent quantitative evidence suggests that more frequent drinking at parties is associated with more frequent use of physical abuse (Freisthler & Gruenewald, 2013). While the current research has not established a causal relationship between alcohol use at various contexts and child abuse, they suggest that instead of providing greater protection, parties or large social events could expose children to intoxicated adults and potential harm. Although parents primarily described drinking outside of the home as positive, these contexts were also viewed as risky due to fears about drunk driving with children in the car. Our findings consequently suggest that the same public health strategies used to educate parents about the risks of drunk driving could be effective in reducing risks associated with parental alcohol use at social events. For example, outreach efforts by non-profit or governmental organizations focused on the well-being of families could create public service campaigns urging parents to select a sober “designated parent” or caregiver to monitor children and their interactions with drinking adults during social events and ensure that families arrive home safely. Our findings suggest that there are complex interactions between individual drinking behaviors and the social environment, indicating that case managers or therapists who want to examine the drinking behavior of parent clients should ask about alcohol use in different contexts. If assessments or intake forms ask only for overall average drinking quantity (e.g. How much do you typically drink?) they may fail to identify contexts such as parties or barbecues where parents drink more than their average amount. This information could help practitioners

identify situations where alcohol use might have additional risks and create risk reduction plans with clients.

Parents described alcohol use outside of the home as a social lubricant. Although research suggests that alcohol does not have universal effects on social interactions (Monahan & Lannutti, 2000), parents reported drinking at parties or social events to “fit in” with others, particularly in situations where they were uncomfortable with the social environment. This finding is similar to that of other research (Emslie et al., 2012; Watt et al., 2014) and suggests that the availability of alcohol and the behaviors of other parents in a social context are highly influential on whether parents decide to drink. Schools, sports teams, and parenting groups that hold larger social events where alcohol is served could potentially reduce risks associated with parental alcohol use by providing low-cost or free babysitting at events and sober ride programs. Additionally, these groups could plan activity-oriented parties (e.g. crafts, sports) that provide a structure for social interaction for parents and families. As viewed through the lens of social learning theory, changing the social environment of these events through the use of structured activities would impact the behavior of individual parents, potentially eliminating or reducing socially motivated drinking motivations.

Perceived risks and rewards were heavily influenced by parental obligations, as parents were mindful of how their responsibility to meet children’s needs could be impaired by alcohol consumption. This finding is positive, suggesting that the well-being of children took priority among this sample of parents. Like Graham et al. (2006), our findings also indicate that parents view their drinking as influencing their children’s behavior. This finding is corroborated by quantitative research that suggests that even low levels of parental drinking are associated with substance use in childhood (Macleod et al., 2008) or adolescence (Hung et al., 2015). However, our data also suggests that fears about alcohol use setting a bad example for children may be context-specific and that parents are more concerned about the negative influence of drinking alone or at home than drinking with others. Somewhat surprisingly, this was not always tied to the quantity of alcohol consumed in that many parents viewed any individual drinking at home as problematic, both for their ability to care for children and the possibility of setting a negative influence. Recent quantitative research supports these perceptions, suggesting that more frequent drinking at home is associated with greater use of physical abuse (Freisthler & Gruenewald, 2013), regardless of how much is consumed. However, although parents viewed drinking at home as more likely to set a bad example for children than drinking outside of the home, it is unknown whether children are less likely to notice parental drinking behaviors at social events. Although children’s recognition of parent drinking appears to be correlated with age, with older children more observant of parent drinking (Smith, Miller, Kroll, Simmons, & Gallen, 1999), little is known about how this varies by drinking context. As a result, parent’s alcohol use in social contexts may not be hidden from children, and could instead reinforce drinking as a social behavior.

While many parents viewed drinking at home as risky, some did report drinking at home to relax or relieve parenting-related stress. Parents drinking to cope with parenting stress could potentially benefit from interventions such as respite care, which provide low-cost overnight

or other child-care. These “breaks” from childcare could help relieve parenting stress and potentially offer parents in need of relaxation an opportunity to drink while children are out of the house. Case managers or therapists working with parents might also ask parents about their motivation for drinking, and identify ways to lower stress or improve coping. These interventions could help reduce stress-related parental alcohol use.

Implications for Future Research

Our findings complement recent quantitative research on drinking contexts (Paradis et al., 1999; Paradis, Demers, Nadeau, & Picard, 2011) by providing nuanced understanding of how parents make context-specific drinking decisions. However, while our study provides an exploratory frame for these phenomena in a purposive sample of parents, no inferences about these findings can be made for populations outside of our sample. In addition, as parental substance use is a stigmatized behavior (Banwell & Bammer, 2006; Chandler et al., 2013; Radcliffe, 2011; Rhodes, Bernays, & Houmoller, 2010), parents may not have been truthful about their alcohol-related behaviors or beliefs, producing social desirability bias. This could partially explain why many of our themes suggest that drinking around children is perceived as negative by parents. While we are unable to gauge the extent of social desirability bias in our findings, several parents did report drinking very large quantities of alcohol (approximately 9 beers a day), suggesting that they were answering questions openly. Finally, our study examined only parental drinking decisions and not how those might be related to outcomes for families. While our findings (as supported by social learning theory) suggest that context plays a significant role in parental drinking decisions, our study is not able to examine the nuances of these contexts. Ethnographic research in a parent community could provide rich understanding of the social contexts of alcohol consumption and identify potential context-specific risks of parental alcohol use. This research could also examine potential positive benefits of alcohol use around children that were not present in our findings, such as modeling moderate drinking behaviors. In addition, longitudinal survey research with a generalizeable sample of parents and analyzed via structural equation modeling may be able to examine the relative effects of individual beliefs and the social context on drinking behaviors, as well as assess how these behaviors are potentially associated with negative outcomes for parents and children.

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Appendix 1. Alcohol-Related Interview Guide

We are interested in learning more about the kinds of places where people drink alcohol.

1. Tell me about the last time you drank alcohol. Where were you?
2. Who were you drinking with, if anyone? What is their relationship to you?
3. Can you tell me more about what you were doing? (e.g. How long you were there? How much were you drinking? What time of day it was?)
4. How did drinking alcohol at _____(certain place) make you feel?
5. What were your children doing at the time?
6. What other places have you drank alcohol in the last month? (Repeat questions 2–5 for each location)
7. What do you think about when you decide whether or not to drink? (Probe: What are the risks and rewards?)
8. How do these decisions differ depending on where you are? Who you are with? (Probe: What are the risks and rewards at _____(certain place)?)
9. Can you tell me about times or places where it is okay for a parent to drink alcohol?
10. Can you tell me about times or places where it is not okay for a parent to drink alcohol?

Parents Make Drinking Decisions Based on Context

Drinking Outside of the Home

Risks

- Drunken Driving

Benefits

- More adults to monitor children
- Children occupy themselves
- “Fit in” socially

Drinking Inside the Home

Risks

- Drinking alone as bad example for children
- Unable to take care of children

Benefits

- Relaxation

Figure 1.
Summary of themes examining parental drinking decisions by drinking context

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of parents

	Overall n (%)
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	30 (50)
Female	30 (50)
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	
White, non-Hispanic	23 (38)
African American	8 (13)
Asian or Pacific Islander	14 (23)
American Indian or Alaska	1 (2)
Native	
Latino	11 (18)
Other	3 (5)
<i>Marital Status*</i>	
Married	35 (58)
Divorced	8 (13)
Separated	1 (2)
Never Married	6 (10)
A Member of an Unmarried	10 (17)
Couple	
<i>Annual Household Income</i>	
Less than \$10,000	6 (10)
\$10,000 to less than \$15,000	1 (2)
\$15,000 to less than \$20,000	1 (2)
\$20,000 to less than \$25,000	3 (5)
\$25,000 to less than \$35,000	8 (13)
\$35,000 to less than \$50,000	8 (13)
\$50,000 to less than \$75,000	5 (8)
\$75,000 to less than \$100,000	12 (20)
\$100,000 or more	16 (27)
<i>Education Level*</i>	
Grade 12 or GED	8 (13)
Some technical school	1 (2)
Technical school	3 (5)
Some college	16 (27)
College graduate	24 (40)
Post grad. or professional degree	8 (13)
<i>Employment Status</i>	
Full-time (32hrs+)	27 (45)
Part-time	6 (10)
Self-employed	6 (10)

	Overall n (%)
Out of work for less than 1 yr.	5 (8)
Homemaker	8 (13)
Student	5 (8)
Unable to work	3 (5)