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PRESS RELEASE

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Early Childhood Behavior Predicts Adolescent Alcohol and Drug Use

Children's behavior as early as age 3 can predict whether they will use alcohol and illicit drugs in adolescence, according to a study published in the July/August issue of the journal *Child Development*. The study was supported in part with grants from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA).

The study, from researchers at Idaho and Michigan State Universities, and the University of Michigan, tracked 514 children of alcoholics and matched control families over the past decade. From the time the children were 3 to 5 years old, trained interviewers rated the preschoolers' ability to control their impulses and behavior (behavioral control) and flexibly adapt their self-control to environmental demands (resiliency). They continued to evaluate these behaviors every three years thereafter until the participants reached 12 to 14. Once the children were adolescents, the teens themselves provided information on their drinking and drug use.

The results showed that behavioral control and resiliency predicted the onset of alcohol and illicit drug use in adolescence. Children who have lower levels of behavioral control at ages 3 to 5 and those whose levels of behavioral control increased slower over time were more likely to drink at an early age (i.e., age 14), to report having been drunk, to have more alcohol-related problems and to have used drugs other than alcohol. Additionally, adolescents with higher resiliency in early childhood were less likely to start drinking and experience drunkenness at an early age. They were also less likely to show signs of sadness, anxiety, aggressiveness or delinquent behavior.

The researchers also found that while having an alcoholic parent significantly increased the risk of early use of alcohol use and subsequent alcohol problems, it didn't increase the likelihood of illicit drug use.

“These findings are very important because we know that early drinking (at age 14 or earlier) is associated with a greater likelihood for alcohol abuse or dependence in adulthood,” said lead author Maria M. Wong, Ph.D., assistant professor in the department of psychology at Idaho State University. “If early childhood behaviors such as behavioral control and resiliency put individuals at risk for alcohol and drug use, then programs aimed at changing those behaviors at an early age may protect individuals from experimenting with drugs and alcohol later on.”

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Summarized from Child Development, Volume 77, Issue 4, *Behavioral control and resiliency in the onset of alcohol and illicit drug use: A prospective study from preschool to adolescence* by Wong MM (Idaho State University), Nigg JT and Fitzgerald HE (Michigan State University), Zucker RA, Puttler LI, Jester JM, Glass JM, and Adams K (all University of Michigan). Copyright 2006 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.