Parental Influences on Collegiate Drinking

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Collegiate alcohol consumption affects the lives of many young college students. Some of its effects are: poor academic development, disruptive behavior, alcohol abuse and dependence, deaths, injuries, sexual abuse, sexual assault, unsafe sex, health problems, and suicide attempts. In addition, it also carries possible legal ramifications for underage drinking, underage possession, and distribution to minors, DUI for drunk driving, vandalism, property damage, police involvement, and potentially jail or a prison sentence. Alcohol consumption is also caused due to social factors such as peer pressure from friends, membership in a Greek or athletic organization, and the need to fit into what college students perceive as accepted and normal behavior during college. Nevertheless, studies show that parents may decrease alcohol consumption, involvement, dependence, and abuse if they participate and become engaged before and after the transition to college. When parents share the facts, statistics, and practice a positive parenting style, their children are more likely to listen, think twice, and value their parents’ opinion regarding the use of alcohol. Parents need to have an open communication, avoid being judgmental, stay away from lectures; distinguish between stating their opinions and the real facts, and valuing and asking for their children’s input. Parents contribute immensely in the decision making of their children regarding alcohol consumption.
After choosing the right college, the transition from high school to a new, unknown, and, perhaps, far environment is one of the topics that troubles parents. On the one hand, parents see this as a new opportunity for their children to find themselves, get educated, and explore and live the college years. On the other hand, this also represents the chance for young college students to experiment new things, acquire new knowledge, make friends and connections that may last forever, and, sadly, be surrounded by negative and hazardous situations and individuals that may impact their lives drastically, physically, academically, legally, and, sometimes, tragically. Underage drinking is illegal in any state of the U.S. It possesses a huge threat to college students and those that may be affected by its use, abuse, and dependence. According to Robert Turrisi (2010), “Teens who drink are a danger to themselves, to others, and to other drivers. We have seen a single night of underage drinking ruin lives forever” (p. 5). Such statement only illustrates one of the many cases that we have witnessed on the news in TV or newspapers where a tragedy or severe property damage occurs as a result of alcohol. Many teens start consuming alcohol before they enter college. As a matter of fact, the trend not only continues right after graduation but increases (Baer, Kivlahan, & Marlatt, 1995). Teens who do not attend college have lower levels of alcohol consumption; however, those teens that go to college continue the habit and, in most cases, develop it even further. Research shows that “College students show more frequent and heavier drinking rates than do their same-aged, non-students peers, implying that college experience facilitates drinking behavior” (Johnston, O’Malley, & Bachman, 2001; Schulenberg et al., 2001).
Nevertheless, social trends and influences play a vital role in the development of alcohol consumption, disruptive behavior, academic poor performance, and other health related issues such as improper nutrition, tobacco addiction, depression, and others. These social factors are not exclusive to only parents and friends’ influences but, with the enrollment in college, also include peer pressure from a new circle of friends such as athletics, roommates, Greek organizations, clubs, classmates, and anybody that may interact physically or virtually with college students. The majority of people diagnosed with alcoholic disorders are within the age of 18-29 years. This number establishes a relationship between alcohol consumption and college students that fall between that age range (Cooper, 2002; Dawson et al., 2004; Hingson et al., 2005; Johnston et al., 2006; Welchslor et al., 2002). Besides the elements that have been found to contribute and increase alcohol consumption while in college, other factors include gender and ethnicity (Welchslor et al., 2002), expectancies (Jones et al., 2001; Neighbors et al., 2007), attitudes towards drinking (Turrisi, 1999), and environment (Presley et al., 2002). In other words, the college environment embodies all the potential elements that may trigger alcohol consumption, abuse, and dependence, which may result in a negative outcome with various degrees of consequences.

Parents and peers represent a huge role in the many decisions that college students will have to make in life. They impact negatively and positively the attitude and aptitude teens develop while growing up. They stand for the two most frequent and important sources of advice, support, and
modeling that teens refer to. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) reports that problems associated with high-risk of alcohol include 500,000 unintentional injuries, 70,000 sexual assaults among students between the ages of 18-24 in the year of 2006. Although the drinking rate of alcohol consumption increases with attending college, the frequency rate has not been established yet. In addition, there is a report that alcohol consumption contributes to almost one third drop-out rate among first-year student according to the NIAAA. Nevertheless, the issue at stake is the drinking pattern and behavior that affects the majority of college students and mainly those who are first-year. At the same time, “Heavy drinking was characterized as widespread, dangerous, and disruptive” by the Task Force on College Drinking of the NIAAA. Research proves that heavy drinking occurs more frequently and increases when students first arrive to campus (Baer, Kivlahan & Marlatt, 1995). These studies must be taken seriously before parental intervention may have a direct impact on their students’ alcohol behavior; parents need to be aware of the misperceptions and false assumptions regarding alcohol. Otherwise, this may create a problem and increase the difficulty to make a difference in the developing and decrease the chances of continuous use of alcohol.

Parent shape their adolescent’s drinking behavior and pattern through parental support and monitoring. Parental support is seen as parental behaviors that demonstrate acceptance such participating in the child’s life, activities, and engagement into conversations about concerns the child may have. If there is a lack of this support, the child is more likely to show deviant behavior, association...
with bad influences, substance abuse, and antisocial acts (Dishion, Nelson, & Bullock, 2004). In addition to this, through the use of tracking or monitoring, parents are able to see what their child may be doing. This tracking system allows parents to keep alcohol norms and guidelines designed to decrease its consumption and abuse. When there is low or no monitoring, the chances that a child will develop alcohol consumption will increase. It is essential for parents to support and monitor their child’s behavior and activities. By actively engaging and participating in their child’s environment, a decrease in drinking patterns is more likely to decrease.

Parents need to address the alcohol issues with an open mind and with information, facts, and statistics about the consequences of drinking alcohol and abusing it. Before parents can sit at the table and discuss alcohol freely and openly, alcohol misperceived assumptions must be rejected. Some assumptions include: My son or daughter is not interested in drinking; my teen’s friends are good kids who do not drink alcohol; my son or daughter already knows the negative impact and ramifications of consuming alcohol in school; at this point, my son or daughter should know better about this topic, and my son or daughter will not listen to me regardless of what I say. The true facts are that about 75% of teens try alcohol outside of home; 43% of high school seniors have drunk alcohol in the past 30 days; many teens are still uninformed about important alcohol issues; leading national surveys report that teens do listen to their parents about not drinking alcohol, and, although health classes provide some
basic information about alcohol, many important aspects are not covered, and schools programs are not enough to stop teens from drinking (Turrisi, 2010).

Furthermore, parents should apply a positive parenting style in their efforts to monitor and track their children’s behavior to prevent alcohol use. Robert Turrisi defines positive parenting as taking an active role in teaching their teens responsibility, setting clear expectations about behavior such as waiting to be 21 to drink alcohol, explaining the reasons behind their expectations and encourage teens to express and talk about any concerns, and setting up and enforcing consequences before when agreements have not been met. Boosting self-esteem in teens will help them make smart choices, deal with peer pressure, and avoid underage drinking. This may be done by praising achievements, helping set realistic goals, giving choices, offering responsibilities, focusing on teen’s strengths without comparing to others, and taking all the teen’s concerns seriously (Turrisi, 2010). Practicing a positive style parenting will help teens grow into effective individuals while strengthening and protecting them at the same time. Positive style parents use their age, knowledge, and resources to effective use their power and passing some of them to their children. The goal is to build trust and independence by empowering teens to take increasing controls of their lives effectively and timely. Teens do care about their parent’s opinion. They respond well to a positive parenting style. Many studies show that overprotective, permissive, and authoritarian styles lead to negative outcomes (Turrisi, 2010).
As an illustration of the perception of alcohol, a study by Michael D. Shutt, Assistant Dean of Students for the LGBT Resource Center at the University of Georgia, Sara B. Oswalt, Assistant Professor in the Health and Kinesiology Department at the University of Texas in San Antonio, and Diane L. Cooper, Professor of the College Student Personnel Administration in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at the University of Georgia, was conducted. The study population had a pool of 2,024 incoming students who completed all or part of a 17 item survey designed to measure quantity and frequency of alcohol and other drug use. This number represents 46% of the total population of that year (N=4,333). 63% percent of them were women and 37% were male. Demographically speaking, the majority was White (89.1%). 3.6% identified themselves as Black, 3.4% as Asian, Pacific Islander, 1.7% were Latino, and 2.3% were Alaskan or Native American.

There were a total of 1,399 parents of guardians who completed all or part of the survey. This survey was designed to measure parents’ perception of their students’ alcohol and drug use. No demographic information was obtained regarding the parents or guardians. Nevertheless, parents identified their students similarly with the information obtained from students based on race. Students under the age of 18 did not participate in the study. 1,248 (N=94.6%) were 18 years old, 69 (N=5.2%) were 19 years old, and 2 (0.2%) were 20 years old. Parents and students attended orientations sessions where they were separated and given the survey. Such efforts was done to create a more honest response and to avoid interfering with the questions being asked. Surveys were collected during 15 out
of the 16 orientation sessions. The surveys were not matched in order to guarantee anonymity. Two instruments were used in order to get the collection of this data: Student Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Survey and Parent Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Survey. Both surveys contained elements taken directly from the Core Alcohol and Drug Survey and National College Health Assessment (NCHA) with proper permission. Both surveys have been used constantly in national assessment with reliability and validity well tested.

The Student Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Survey consisted of 17 items, including demographics questions. It targeted three areas: the incoming student’s current use of substances (alcohol, marijuana, tobacco, and other), the incoming student’s perception of current university students’ substance use, and the incoming students’ intent to use alcohol during their first year of college. There were six questions regarding current use. Four questions were pertaining to alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and other drugs with possible options such as: did not use, once a year, 6 times a year, once a month, twice a month, once a week, 3 times a week, 5 times a week, and every day. Two questions asked students to reflect on the last time they partied and to provide how many hours they drank and how many drinks they had. These two questions were open ended. Six questions were about the student’s perception of alcohol and other drugs use at the university. One question asked if the use was greater, equal, or less as other universities, and four questions asked about how often they thought the average consumption was with the same options as the survey about students’ own use. The final
question asked them about how many drinks the university students drank last time they partied in average; this was an open ended question. Two more questions asked about the incoming student’s intent to engage into alcohol consumption with choices such as: did not use, once a year, 6 times a year, once a month, twice a month, once a week, 3 times a week, 5 times a week, and every day. One question asked about how many drinks they were planning on drinking during their first year. Finally, the last three questions were demographic in nature: gender, ethnicity, and if they planned to join a fraternity or sorority.

The Parent Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Survey asked about the parents’ perception of alcohol at this university. The survey had 13 items. Four of those questions asked about their students’ current use of alcohol and other drugs. Five questions asked about the perception of alcohol use at this university. One question asked if the use was greater, equal, or less as other universities. Four questions were pertaining to how often they thought the average university student used alcohol, tobacco, and other substances in the past year with choices such as: did not use, once a year, 6 times a year, once a month, twice a month, once a week, 3 times a week, 5 times a week, and every day. One question asked parents about their student’s intended alcohol use during the first year of college. The remainder questions were demographic in nature. They included items such as sex, age, and ethnicity.

The final results concluded that parents significantly underestimate the use of alcohol and other drugs by their students. Parents demonstrated a lower perceived usage rate than incoming students.
when examining the perception of the university’s overall alcohol use. Finally, the study proves that more incoming students (36.9%, N=716) than parents (22.1%, N=280) believe that students at this university have a higher use of alcohol than students at other universities. In addition, more parents (76.2%, N=965) perceived that this university as similar to other institutions as did incoming students (60.5%, N=1188). Furthermore, students were asked how often they planned to drink in the coming year. 34% students said that they did not plan to drink at all and 36% of them planned to drink weekly or more often. 48.3% of parents believed that their students would never drink during the first year. Less than 25% of parents believed that their students would drink on a weekly or more often basis. The study concludes that parental perceptions regarding alcohol consumption during the first year are much different than actual use and intent to use by first year-college students. Parental perceptions applied not only to alcohol but to tobacco, marijuana, and other drugs as well. Because parents are not fully aware of their students’ patterns, they may not recognize the need to talk openly about alcohol and ways to prevent its use and abuse before or after the first-year at college. By providing an accurate view of their students’ use and peers use of alcohol to parents, parents may be able to make a positive impact and help their students make intelligent decisions regarding alcohol and other drugs. By understanding the high level of alcohol use, parents may set expectations and specifications about its consumption. Parents must be educated on their role about alcohol and other drug prevention efforts; they impact and influence their students’ behavior despite not being around them during the college
years. Many studies indicate lower drinking levels when there is parental intervention (Turrisi et al., 2006).

Many colleges and universities provide environmental management strategies that may help students stay away from consuming alcohol. Such activities include but are not limited to: offering and promoting social, recreational, extracurricular, and public services options that do not include alcohol, creating social, academic, and residential environments that supports health-promoting norms, limiting alcohol availability both on and off-campus, restricting marketing and promotion of alcoholic beverages both on and off-campus, developing and enforcing campus policies while enforcing local, state, and federal laws and making sure everyone knows them. College students must be aware of the health, safety, and legal risks that come with substance abuse; how to alcohol and other drug affect brain development and learning; how choices about alcohol and other drug use affect both academic and personal success, and substance use norms on campus (Ross, 2008). Parents may help their student explore how substance abuse may impact their life goals and whether to engage into such activities or reject them and look for other forms of healthy entertainment. Parents must help their students learn ways to manage stress and peer pressure from college peers or help them find the resources and tools needed in order to achieve successfully alcohol prevention or decrease its consumption.

Let’s keep in mind that the consequences of alcohol consumption and abuse may be fatal. College Drinking Prevention provides the following snapshot of some consequences on a yearly basis: 1,
400 students between the ages of 18-24 die each year from alcohol-related unintentional injuries, including motor vehicles crashes; 500,000 students between the ages of 18-24 are unintentionally injured under the influence of alcohol; more than 600,000 students between the ages of 18-24 are assaulted by another student who has been drinking; more than 700,000 students between the ages of 18-24 are victims of alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape; 400,000 students between the ages of 18-24 have unprotected sex and more than 100,000 report having been too intoxicated to recall if they consented to having sex; about 25% of college students report academic consequences because of drinking that include missing class, falling behind, doing poorly overall on exams and papers, and lower grades overall, and more than 150,000 students develop an alcohol-related health issues and between 1.2% and 1.5% indicate that they have tried to commit suicide due to drinking or drug abuse.

Parents must emphasize caring for their children, wanting to understand them, wanting to help them, and respecting their children’s privacy. (Turrisi, 2010). Parents must use strategies to help their students succeed in alcohol prevention. Some strategies include: respecting their children’s concerns while maintaining limits; there is a need for independence, yet rules must be set against alcohol and other drugs, giving calm guidance by offering clear-headed discussion about choices that must be faced, empowering choices by encouraging them to make relatively minor ones, and phase freedom in and challenges by gradually reducing control, so children can have more freedom and responsibility while maintaining limits against underage drinking. College students will respect when parents talk to them
with facts and valid reasons for not drinking. Parents may also remind their students that there are alternatives to lowering the stress, expressing feelings and reducing inhibitions, fitting in, lifting mood, or finding something to do by engaging in the many alcohol-free activities that many college campuses provide. Parents may also monitor social activities and supervise parties, encourage their students to make new friends, help them avoid high-risk group situations, and refrain from banning friendships that parents disapprove; this will only cause their students the need to defend their friend and feel compelled (Turrisi, 2010).

Parents may also help in the efforts to decrease alcohol consumption by supporting strong laws that will punish individuals who provide alcohol for minors, indentify and penalize retailers that sell alcohol illegally, and support sanction to youth who attempt or purchase alcohol while being underage. Parents may also contact school administrators and inquire about the programming available for alcohol prevention, use, and abuse. They should be familiar with the college policies and how they are enforced. Parents may also need to find out information pertaining to their students’ college regarding the social atmosphere, liquor violations, and alcohol-related statistics. Parents need to stay involved by paying attention to their students’ activities and behavior during the first six weeks of college and during the whole year, inquire about the college’s parental notice in case of alcohol or other drug use violation, and making sure their students understand the ramifications associated with alcohol consumption. Parents need to pay attention to possible signs of alcohol use and abuse by monitoring suspicious behavior such
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as: lower grades, difficulty to reach their students, unwillingness to talk about activities performed at the university, and sudden change in mood. Blaming college students for engaging into alcohol consumption is not recommended, finding an appropriate treatment is more vital. Finding out about friends, paying unexpected visits, attending parents’ weekend and other campus activities will further help parents stay involved in the lives of their students. Although their children may be physically away, parental involvement constitutes not only a way to monitor behavior, decrease or prevent alcohol consumption but also represents an extension of the family and its core values.
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