



From Dr A Majid Katme

A tipples at dinner 'could turn children into binge drinkers'

Parents who believe that following the Continental way of introducing their children to alcohol early as a way of promoting responsible drinking could actually risk them developing alcoholism in later life, a new study has claimed.

By [Nick Britten](#)

Researchers at Yale University said that the younger people have their first drink, the more likely they are to suffer alcohol-related problems in sixth form and at university, and be more prone to drug abuse, liver damage and problematic brain development.

The report belies the belief of many parents who think that giving their children watered-down wine from an early age, or allow them to drink in their mid-teens whilst being supervised, will teach them the dangers of drinking and encourage them to behave more responsibly with alcohol when they grow up.

Meghan Morean, a postdoctoral fellow in the department of psychiatry at Yale University School of Medicine and corresponding author for the study, said: "Beginning to use alcohol at an earlier age was associated with heavier drinking and the experience of more negative consequences during senior year of college.

"Many studies have found relationships between an early AFD (age at first drink) and a range of negative alcohol-related outcomes later in life, including the development of alcohol use disorders, legal problems like drink-driving, and health problems like cirrhosis of the liver.

"There is also evidence that beginning to drink at an early age is associated with more immediate problems, such as compromised brain development and liver damage during adolescence, risky sexual behaviours, poor performance in school, and use of other substances like marijuana and cocaine."

The research involved 1,160 first year college students who had data compiled about their drinking habits from the previous four years. Teenagers had their first drink, on average, aged 14. Those who had started getting drunk at 15 were far more likely to develop problems than those who waited until they were 17, even if they had had their first drink at 15, she said.

However, she said that while having your first drink at a young age is associated with many negative consequences, it is not clear that it directly causes heavy drinking or other negative outcomes.

In 2009, the Chief Medical Officer warned that children under 15 should not drink alcohol and warned that as many as a third of 11-15 year olds on a typical weekend drank.

A year later, the charity Alcohol Concern reported that youngsters drinking was a "significant problem" for the UK and that it accounted for 5% of young people's deaths. In response, the Alcohol Health Alliance UK said that parents should realise they are role models and that "their behaviour in relation to alcohol has more impact than what they tell their children".

Aric Sigman, who advises the NHS on children and drinking, and has written a book about the issue, *Alcohol Nation*, said that parents were too happy to ignore the addictive qualities of alcohol as they would drugs, and said that even small amounts of alcohol at a young age can cause addiction.

He said: "Britain has been living under a misconception about not becoming addictive to what is a highly addictive substance.

"Parents have this idea that you can somehow override the addictive qualities simply because alcohol is something adults enjoy and like to share.

"Those who drink between the ages of 14 and 16 are four times more likely to become alcoholics or experience problems.

"Aside from any moral argument, this is a purely a physiological one. Children are very different physiologically to adults in terms of damage to cells and tissue. We know this in relation to skin cancer, cervical cancer, other addictive substances; alcohol is no different.

"Parental disapproval is brilliant for child sobriety. There is a myth that banning your children will turn them into drinkers later. It won't, and parents should not be conned into discussing their fears."

Jeremy Todd, Chief Executive of the charity Family Lives, said: "A balance has to be made between whether parents feel comfortable about introducing alcohol to their children in safe environment such as the home, or whether they trust that their children will only drink alcohol once they have reached the legal age.

Ultimately parents know their children and will need to make a judgement call about when and if to introduce their child to alcohol. Equipping parents with the tools to ensure they can talk effectively with their children is the best way of preventing children excessively experimenting and can prevent later problems in teenage and adult life."

The findings of the Yale research are due to be published in the journal Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research.