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## Alcohol study says girls are outpacing boys

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Girls are moving further and further away from sugar and spice and everything nice.

Last year, researchers and teachers reported an increase in bullying behaviors among kindergarten and preschool girls. This week, a survey released by the American Medical Association says teenage girls are more likely than boys to obtain alcohol illegally.

That girls are laying claim to behaviors once the exclusive domain of boys is not entirely bad, but turning to violence and alcohol probably is not anyone's idea of progress.

"This is a wake-up call," says AMA president Edward Hill, a family physician from Tupelo, Miss.

The survey also shows that girls are more likely than boys to get alcohol from parents, including from parents of friends. Hill speculates that it's harder to turn down a request from a girl. "Parents see it as more innocuous," Hill says.

Psychiatrist/psychologist Duncan Clark, director of the Adolescent Alcohol Research Center at the University of Pittsburgh, says the AMA findings are consistent with a trend that has largely gone unnoticed: Girls and boys are becoming more similar in their alcohol use. He cites a 2004 nationwide survey of eighth- and ninth-graders showing girls were more likely than boys to binge -- that is, drink at least five drinks, usually beer, within a two-hour period.

The AMA commissioned the survey of 701 teens in the wake of research that shows the human brain doesn't stop growing until about age 21 or 22, and that alcohol consumption can alter or retard that growth, including memory and test-taking ability.

"Think SATs," says David Jernigan, research director for the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Georgetown University ([camy.org](http://camy.org)).

Damage to the brain is real for boys and girls, but a girl who drinks is at greater risk, and not just for the obvious reasons of tarnished reputation, sexual misconduct, unwanted pregnancy, or sexually transmitted disease. The way the female body processes alcohol makes girls more susceptible to alcohol poisoning, hepatitis B, and liver and heart disease, and also affects menstrual cycles and fertility, says Hill.

"A reasonable goal for parents is to delay that first drink for as long as possible: 16 is better than 14, 18 is better than 16, and 21 is better still," says Jernigan.

Many parents apparently doubt their influence. At least that's one explanation Clark offers for the finding, which surprises him, that parents are more likely to supply alcohol to girls. "Parents seem to think the only choice is between supervised drinking and unsupervised drinking. That's a fallacy, and it's dangerous," he says, because it leads girls to conclude there's such a thing as "safe" drinking.

The findings also raise a critical question: Why are girls today more interested in alcohol than they used to be? There's no research on this yet, but there is speculation:

**Girls start getting messages about drinking at very young ages.** Colby College gender researcher Lyn Mikel Brown says girls grow up thinking drinking is normal and glamorous because messages about alcohol are all around them from a young age: toys like Bratz dolls and My Scene Barbie, which

feature pool- and bar-side drinking scenes; reality shows where alcohol is prominent; alcohol-product placements in video and films that young girls watch; and alcohol ads that appear on programming popular among preteens, such as "Seventh Heaven" and "Gilmore Girls."

### **Girls are specific targets of marketing.**

Jernigan says that girls under 21, and especially 13 to 15, get a heavier exposure to alcohol marketing than girls of legal age, and see 95 percent more alcohol advertising than the typical 35-year-old. Much of it is in the magazines girls read, especially *Cosmopolitan*, *In Style*, *Vibe*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *Vogue*, he says, but radio ads are also huge. "It flies under parents' radar because we don't listen, watch, or read the same things. Surprise, surprise," says Jernigan. "Studies show that the more alcohol advertising teens are exposed to, the more likely they are to drink."

**Alcopops make girls feel safe.** About six years old, alcopops are a new genre of spirits, much as wine coolers once were. Sweet, fizzy, and brightly colored, they mask the flavor of alcohol and come with names such as Skyy Blue from Skyy Vodka ("It comes in a pretty blue bottle and . . . citrus flavors which really takes away the aftertaste . . . It has less of a bite" is the comment in one chatroom); Smirnoff Ice; and Bacardi Silver. Most parents don't even know about alcopops, Hill says, although many girls prefer them because they think they are safer. "They aren't," says Jernigan. "They have 5 to 7 percent alcohol, same as most beer." Raspberry-flavored Tilt is the newest, announced this week by Anheuser-Busch.

Koren Zailckas blames alcopops for the rise in underage girls' drinking, along with the advertising girls are exposed to. The 25-year-old author of "Smashed, The Story of a Drunken Girlhood" (Viking), she grew up in Bolton, took her first drink at 14 (Southern Comfort, or So-Co, as she calls it in the book) and nearly died before she took her last two years ago.

"I took my first drink because my best friend offered it to me. I took it because I was looking for a way to bond with her," she says. She kept drinking because she was "bored and unhappy. Girls in middle school are so insecure about their appearance and looking for acceptance. You're trying on so many different

roles at that age. Drinker/party girl is just one."

Her advice to parents is not to wait to talk to daughters about alcohol. "Studies show a girl has often had her first drink by eighth grade," Zailckas says. "If a daughter is old enough to go to a coed dance, she's old enough for a conversation about alcohol," even if that's sixth grade.

Brown urges parents to be more aware and involved in girls' media.

"It's not about turning off TV or forbidding magazines," she says. "It's about watching the shows and reading what she reads, having conversations about what makes you uncomfortable, and letting her put the pieces together." For instance:

Mom: "I notice that on this reality show, it's often a guy in a hot tub with a lot of girls in bikinis with drinks. What do you think about that?"

Daughter: "Oh, mom. . ."

Mom: "In a toy store, I saw the same kind of images on the packaging for a Bratz doll. Do you think there's a pattern?"

Daughter: "Mom, you're so wrong about this."

Mom: "Well, I'm noticing it all the time now. I just wondered if you were, too."

Be careful not to put your daughter down, and not to impose your own morality, says Brown. Rather, "Open her brain to see things differently." Brown's book, "Packaging Girlhood, Rescuing our daughters from marketers' dreams" (St. Martins), is due out next spring.

Jernigan and Clark promise that parents do make a difference. "It's a matter of persistence. This is not a conversation you have once or twice or even three times," whether you have a son or a daughter, says Hill. And while there are known to be greater risks for daughters and therefore greater worries for parents, Hill says there is at least one way in which parents of girls can take comfort.

"I'll be criticized for saying this," he says, "but girls are easier to talk to."

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