



The Effects of Parental Problem Drinking on Adolescent Anxiety

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Abstract

This study explored the relationship between parental problem drinking and adolescent anxiety. In addition, the influence that the gender of the adolescent and the gender of the parent had on this relationship was assessed. Over 1,000 adolescents in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware were surveyed on various measures of adolescent adjustment. Results indicated that for boys, maternal problem drinking was related to separation anxiety and panic disorder. More specifically, boys who had mothers with high levels of problem drinking had higher levels of separation anxiety and panic disorder symptomatology. Paternal problem drinking was not related to anxiety for boys. Furthermore, parental problem drinking was not related to anxiety for girls.

Sample

- 1,031 adolescents from the Adolescent Adjustment Project (AAP)
- Adolescents' mean age = 16.15 (SD= 0.751); age range 15-18
- All participants attended a public high school in Delaware, Pennsylvania, or Maryland
- Male Students: 58.1% Caucasians, 21.8% African American, 11.6% Hispanic, 2.7% Asian, 5.7% other
- Female Students: 58.1% Caucasians, 23.1%, 11.7% Hispanic, 2.1% Asian, 5.1% other

Measures

Anxiety

To measure anxiety, adolescents completed the Screen for Child Anxiety Related Disorders (SCARED; Birmaher, Khetarpal, Cully, Brent & McKenzie, 1995). This SCARED includes 41-items that are answered in relation to the past three months. A sample item is "I feel nervous with people I don't know well." The response scale for the SCARED ranges from 0 = *not true or hardly ever true* to 2 = *very true or often true*. The SCARED measures five specific types of anxiety: generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, separation anxiety disorder, social anxiety, and significant school avoidance. Previous studies have indicated that the SCARED is a reliable measure.

Parental Problem Drinking

An edited 9-item version of the *Short Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test* (M-SMAST/F-SMAST; Crews & Sher, 1992) was used to evaluate problem drinking in both mothers and fathers. A sample item is "Has your mother/father ever gotten into trouble at work because of drinking?" These answers were scored and recorded separately for mothers and fathers.

Procedure

During the spring of 2008, adolescents who provided assent and were given parental consent completed self-report surveys in school by trained research staff. In order to examine the relationships between parental problem drinking and adolescent anxiety, correlation and regression analyses were run by gender. The regression analyses controlled for age and socioeconomic status.

Results

Correlation results showed a significant relationship between maternal problem drinking at Time 2 and significant school avoidance in adolescent girls at Time 3. However, the regression model predicting school avoidance from maternal problem drinking was not significant. That is, with age and socioeconomic status controlled for, there were no significant relationships between maternal problem drinking and adolescent anxiety for girls.

For boys, significant relationships between maternal problem drinking and adolescent anxiety were found. More specifically, a positive significant relationship between maternal problem drinking at Time 2 and separation anxiety in adolescent boys at Time 3 was observed. As maternal problem drinking increased, separation anxiety similarly increased for boys. As shown in Table 2, higher levels of maternal drinking were associated with higher levels of separation anxiety for boys at Time 3. In addition, there was a positive significant relationship between maternal problem drinking at Time 2 and panic disorder for boys at Time 3. This finding indicated that higher levels of maternal problem drinking were related to higher levels of panic disorder symptomatology for boys. Of note, paternal problem drinking did not predict any of the anxiety disorders for adolescent boys or girls.

Table 1

Race/Ethnicity Frequencies by Gender		
Race/Ethnicity	Male (%)	Female (%)
Caucasian	58.1	58.1
African American	21.8	23.1
Hispanic	11.6	11.7
Asian	2.7	2.1
Other	5.7	5.1
Mean age 16.15		
SD 0.751		

Table 2

Intercorrelations Between Parental Problem Drinking and Adolescent Anxiety Measures by Gender of the Adolescent

Variable		1	2
1. Paternal problem drinking	Boys	--	.109*
	Girls	--	.161**
2. Maternal problem drinking	Boys	.109*	--
	Girls	.161**	--
3. Generalized Anxiety Disorder	Boys	.029	.105
	Girls	.032	.050
4. Significant School Avoidance	Boys	.006	.114
	Girls	-.010	.113*
5. Separation Anxiety Disorder	Boys	.072	.144*
	Girls	.083	.100
6. Social Anxiety Disorder	Boys	-.009	.058
	Girls	.086	.051
7. Panic Disorder	Boys	.027	.192**
	Girls	.056	.081

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Conclusions

This study examined the relationship between parental problem drinking and adolescent anxiety. This relationship was analyzed specifically by the gender of the parent and by the gender of the adolescent. Results showed no significant relationships between paternal problem drinking and anxiety disorders for adolescent boys or girls. However, significant relationships were found between maternal problem drinking and adolescent anxiety in boys. These findings are consistent with past research indicating that mothers may have greater effects on adolescent behavior than fathers. Typically, adolescents tend to spend more time with their mother, and have a closer attachment to them. Thus, maternal problem drinking may have a more significant impact on adolescent anxiety disorders than paternal problem drinking. Children of alcoholics (COAs) typically experience a wide array of negative familial issues that can have detrimental effects on adolescent adjustment. This research is crucial in furthering prior research by investigating the impact of maternal and paternal problem drinking independently. It is essential to gain a strong understanding of the relationship between parental problem drinking and adolescent adjustment to develop effective treatment and prevention programs for adolescents.

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