'Possible Selves' May Raise Risk of Alcohol Use

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Washington — Children who can imagine drinking alcohol in the future may be at greater risk for early alcohol use, findings of a study of 79 children show.

The existence of a possible self who drinks alcohol might be an important predictor that mediates the effect of known precursors of alcohol problems—such as antisocial behavior and parental alcohol

problems—on early alcohol use, Colleen Corte, Ph.D., and Laura Szalacha, Ed.D., hypothesized in a poster presented at a joint meeting sponsored by the Research Society on Alcoholism and the International Society for Biomedical Research on Alcoholism. Dr. Corte and Dr. Szalacha are with the health systems science department at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

A possible self is a person's conception of who he or she will be at a future time. Previous research has shown that possible selves play a strong role in risk behaviors. In turn, risk behaviors have been shown to reinforce and strengthen possible selves

To test this hypothesis, the researchers recruited 79 children from schools and summer youth programs. The children were an average age of 10.7 years.

To assess the ability to conceive of a future self who drank alcohol (possible drinking self), the children were asked to rate how much the phrase "drink too much alcohol" is likely to describe them in the future. Lifetime drinking was assessed using a single question: Have you ever had more than a few sips of alcohol? Those who answered yes were asked about whether their parents knew.

Almost a fifth (19%) reported a drinking possible self; 19% also reported ever drinking, but 4% reported drinking when their parents were not aware of it. Forty percent of those with a drinking possible self reported ever drinking.

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