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Children drinking before 13th birthday

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By Anne Harding

One-third of seventh-graders experiments with drinking alcohol before their 13th birthday, according to a new study published in Pediatrics.

And these early drinkers are at greater risk for attempting suicide and engaging in violent behaviour than their peers who haven't begun drinking, Dr. Monica H. Swahn of Georgia State University in Atlanta and colleagues found.

It's a mistake to wait until middle or high school to talk to children about drinking, Swahn told Reuters Health. "We've clearly missed an opportunity for those in late elementary school that have already started," she said.

To investigate links between when children started drinking and their risks of suicidal behaviour and either perpetrating or being a victim of peer or dating violence, Swahn and her team analysed data from the 2004 Youth Violence Survey, which included 4 131 public school students in grades 7, 9, 11 and 12. They looked at a subset of 856 seventh-graders who had either started drinking by age 13 or hadn't yet tried alcohol.

Thirty-five percent of the students said they had started drinking before turning 13.

Initial analysis linked early initiation of drinking with increased risk of all six violent behaviours analysed. When the researchers controlled for the effects of several factors that could be related to both violent or suicidal behaviour and early drinking, such as parental monitoring, delinquency, drug use, and whether or not their peers drank, early alcohol use was still associated with being a victim of dating violence, having thoughts of suicide, and attempting suicide.

Early drinkers were nearly twice as likely to consider suicide, and at more than triple the risk of trying to kill themselves, than their non-drinking peers.

"Findings from this study and other reports highlight the importance of delaying and reducing alcohol use among youths," Swahn and her team write in their report.

While increasing the price of alcohol and enforcing restrictions on underage access to alcohol are effective in reducing underage drinking, Swahn thinks "we need a multilevel community approach" that includes parents, teachers, officials and healthcare providers.

The fact that early drinking still increased the risk of some suicidal and violent behaviour even after controlling for several confounding factors raises the possibility that preteen alcohol use actually can predispose a person to such behaviours, but the current study couldn't address that question, Swahn added.

She and her colleagues plan to follow the students over time to see if this in fact may be the case.

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