

Science, Kids, and Alcohol

Abstracted for the Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free

Drinking and Domestic Violence

Nationally representative surveys indicate that one in six couples experiences an incident of partner-to-partner violence each year. Thus, domestic violence constitutes a significant public health concern. Researchers have long noted a relationship between heavy alcohol consumption and domestic violence. Some have suggested that problem alcohol use and domestic violence often occur together because the same personality characteristics put people at risk for both behaviors. Others have suggested that heavy alcohol consumption contributes to unhappy and conflict-ridden domestic environments, which in turn lead to violence. However, recent studies suggest that the relationship between problem drinking and domestic violence is causal and direct— that is, alcohol consumption directly contributes to the frequency and severity of domestic violence.

The first study¹ examined the day-to-day occurrence of drinking and partner violence among couples who had experienced at least one episode of male-to-female aggression in the previous year. Data on drinking and aggression were gathered over a 15-month period through the use of diaries kept by both partners and quarterly interviews with each partner. The odds of male-to-female violence increased 8- to 11-fold on drinking days.

The second study² followed 366 newlywed couples over a 1-year period. Assessments at the time of marriage measured factors associated with marital violence. Interviews conducted at the 1-year anniversary revealed strong associations between husbands who drank and episodes of physical violence (although not verbal aggression). In conclusion, the results of the present study strongly support an association between husband drinking and the occurrence of marital aggression, but not between wife drinking and the occurrence of aggression.

In both studies, the results were sustained even when other factors that might cause both drinking and violence were statistically controlled. Thus, both studies suggest a direct, causal relationship between male drinking and male-to-female partner violence. These findings suggest that strategies that reduce the alcohol consumption of male partners (including both prevention and treatment) can directly contribute to reductions in domestic violence

- Approximately one in four children, is exposed to family alcoholism or addiction, or alcohol abuse, some time before the age of 18.³
- Two-thirds of victims who suffered violence by an intimate (a current or former spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend) reported that alcohol had been a factor.⁴
- Among spouse victims, 3 out of 4 incidents were reported to have involved an offender who had been drinking.⁴

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¹ Fals-Stewart, W. The occurrence of partner physical aggression on days of alcohol consumption: A longitudinal diary study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 71(1):41-52, 2003.

² Leonard, K., and Quigley, B. Drinking and marital aggression in newlyweds: An event-based analysis and the occurrence of husband marital aggression. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 60:537-535, 1999.

³ Grant BF. Estimates of US children exposed to alcohol abuse and dependence in the family. *American Journal of Public Health* 90(1): 112-115, 2000.

⁴ U.S. Department of Justice. Bureau of Justice Statistics. National Crime Victimization Survey 2002. http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/cvict_c.htm (accessed online August 28, 2003).