

# Parental Substance Use and Adolescent Adjustment: A Micro-Level Approach

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Research on children of alcoholic parents (COAs) has consistently found that COAs have an elevated risk of experiencing psychological problems, behavioral problems, and substance abuse problems. However, it is important to realize that not all COAs develop problems. In fact, the majority do not. The reasons why some COAs develop problems, whereas others do not, need to be further examined. The underlying processes involved in the relationship between parental alcoholism and offspring adjustment are still not clear.

Prior research has found that characteristics of the family (e.g., parental monitoring, parental discipline, family conflict, family rituals) may mediate and/or moderate the relationship between parental alcoholism and offspring adjustment (Sher, 1991; Windle & Tubman, 1999). However, it should be noted that the majority of investigations that have examined characteristics of COA families have examined the family at a family systems level. Only a handful of studies have taken a micro-level approach when examining COA family dynamics. Therefore, the primary goal of this research was to extend the literature by examining the *immediate* effects of parental substance use on the family. In this study, the degree to which adolescents worried about or avoided their parent when their parent was using alcohol or drugs was assessed. The degree to which the adolescent's parent became angry when drinking or using drugs also was examined. These substance use consequences, in turn, were examined in relation to the adolescent's psychological adjustment.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

All of the participants in this study were involved in the Collaborative Study on the Genetics of Alcoholism (COGA) project (Begleiter et al., 1995; Bucholz et al., 1994). COGA is a national, large-scale, extended family study. Adult COGA participants were recruited as either probands (alcohol affected individuals) or controls (unaffected individuals). Probands were recruited from inpatient and outpatient substance abuse treatment centers and controls were recruited through medical and dental clinics, advertisements, driver license records, and mailings to university students. Family members of both probands and controls also participated in the study. Adolescents in the present study were from the immediate or extended families of the probands or controls. Data for this study were collected from the adolescents and their parents between 1989–1994. The subsample examined in this study included 173 13–17 year-old adolescents (mean age = 15.17, SD = 1.42; 94% Caucasian;

51% boys) and their biological parents.

### Measures

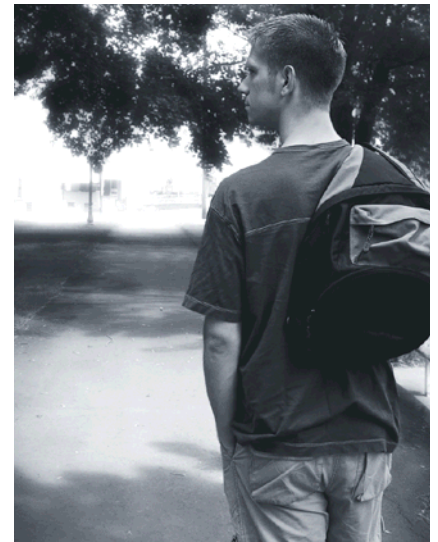
Parental substance use consequences were assessed with the Structured Assessment Record of Alcoholic Homes (SARAH). This measure consists of three scales: Concern/Worry about Parent's Substance Use (alpha coefficients were .88 and .79 for mothers and fathers, respectively), Avoidance of Parent When Drinking or Using Drugs (alpha coefficients were .87 and .79 for mothers and fathers, respectively), and Parental Anger When Drinking or Using Drugs (alpha coefficients were .82 and .72 for mothers and fathers, respectively). The SARAH items and scales are shown in Table 2.1. It should be noted that the SARAH items reflect both alcohol use and drug use. However, most of the parents (89% of the fathers and 69% of the mothers) in the present study were using alcohol, not drugs (only 20% of the fathers and 11% of the mothers reported using drugs).

The Semi-Structured Assessment for the Genetics of Alcoholism for Adolescents (C-SSAGA-A) was used to measure psychopathology in the adolescents. The C-SSAGA-A has been found to be a reliable and valid assessment instrument (Kuperman et al., 2001). The C-SSAGA-A yields both current and lifetime DSM-III-R psychiatric diagnoses. In the present study, lifetime psychiatric diagnoses of major depressive disorder, alcohol dependence, and conduct disorder were examined.

### Results

Frequencies for the SARAH items are shown in Table 2.1 for mothers and fathers. Only adolescents who had an alcohol dependent parent were included. The frequencies were conducted separately for adolescents who had an alcohol dependent mother (37%) and for those who had an alcohol dependent father (55%).

Overall, the adolescents appeared to be more affected by their mother's substance use than by their father's substance use. For example, adolescents were much more likely to report that their mother said or did something to upset them when she was drinking or using drugs than to report that their father upset them when drinking or using drugs. Similarly, more adolescents worried about their mother's substance use than about their father's substance use. Adolescents also were more likely to talk to their mother about her substance use problem than to their father about his substance use problem. These differences may



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reflect the fact that mothers tend to be more involved in adolescents' daily life than fathers. It should also be noted that none of the SARAH items significantly differed by the gender of the adolescent. That is, girls and boys responded similarly to their parent's alcohol and drug use.

### **Parental Substance Use Consequences and Adolescent Psychopathology**

We also have examined whether parental substance use consequences predict adolescent psychological problems. To examine this issue, we conducted logistic regression analyses predicting adolescent alcohol dependence, conduct disorder, and major depressive disorder from the parental substance use consequences scales.

*Maternal Substance Use Consequences and Adolescent Psychological Adjustment.* Results from the logistic regression analyses indicated that adolescents who were more concerned about their mother's substance use were significantly more likely to have received a lifetime diagnosis of alcohol dependence and major depressive disorder than were adolescents who were less concerned about their mother's substance use. In addition, adolescents who avoided their mother more while she was drinking or using drugs

were significantly more likely to be diagnosed with alcohol dependence, major depressive disorder, and conduct disorder than were adolescents who avoided their mother less while she was drinking or using drugs. Consistent with these findings, adolescents whose mothers became angrier when drinking or using drugs were significantly more likely to be diagnosed with all three psychiatric disorders than were adolescents whose mothers were less angry while drinking or using drugs.

It should be noted that a significant interaction was observed for adolescent gender and maternal anger, indicating that maternal anger significantly predicted alcohol dependence for girls, but not for boys. In other words, boys were not as affected by their mother's anger when she was drinking or using drugs as were girls.

*Paternal Substance Use Consequences and Adolescent Psychological Adjustment.* In contrast to the results for mothers, only one significant finding emerged for fathers, suggesting that adolescents who were more concerned about their father's substance use were significantly more likely to be diagnosed with alcohol dependence in comparison to adolescents who were less concerned about their father's substance use. Avoidance of father when drinking or using drugs and paternal anger when drinking or

**Figure 2.1**  
**Percentage of Adolescents Responding "Yes" to SARAH Items**

<b>The Structured Assessment Record of Alcoholic Homes (SARAH Items)</b>	<b>Mothers SARAH Items*</b>		<b>Fathers SARAH Items**</b>	
	<b>Girls n (%)</b>	<b>Boys n (%)</b>	<b>Girls n (%)</b>	<b>Boys n (%)</b>
<b>Concern/Worry About Parent's Substance Use</b>				
"Have you ever worried about your mother's/father's drinking or drug use when you are away from the house, like when you are in school?"	<b>13 (33.3)</b>	<b>9 (30.0)</b>	<b>11 (21.2)</b>	<b>8 (13.1)</b>
"Have you ever gotten upset or nervous when you thought your mother/father was going to start drinking or using drugs?"	<b>15 (42.9)</b>	<b>11 (36.7)</b>	<b>12 (23.1)</b>	<b>17 (27.4)</b>
"Whenever your mother/father has been drinking or using drugs, have you ever gone to them and asked them to stop?"	<b>11 (30.6)</b>	<b>10 (33.3)</b>	<b>16 (30.8)</b>	<b>13 (21.0)</b>
"Have you ever told your mother/father they have been drinking too much or that they should not be using drugs?"	<b>15 (42.9)</b>	<b>13 (41.9)</b>	<b>15 (29.4)</b>	<b>17 (27.4)</b>
"Have you ever tried to be nicer than usual, extra good, hoping that this might stop your mother/father from drinking or using drugs?"	<b>8 (21.6)</b>	<b>7 (23.3)</b>	<b>11 (21.6)</b>	<b>10 (16.1)</b>
<b>Avoidance of Parent When Drinking or Using Drugs</b>				
"When your mother/father was drinking or using drugs, did you ever try to stay out of their way by going to another part of the house?"	<b>15 (42.9)</b>	<b>12 (40.0)</b>	<b>18 (35.3)</b>	<b>15 (24.6)</b>
"Have you ever left the house because of your mother's/father's drinking or drug use?"	<b>11 (29.7)</b>	<b>9 (30.0)</b>	<b>14 (27.5)</b>	<b>12 (19.4)</b>
<b>Parental Anger When Drinking or Using Drugs</b>				
"When your mother/father has had too much to drink, or has taken drugs, have they ever said or done anything that upset you or hurt your feelings?"	<b>14 (40.0)</b>	<b>12 (40.0)</b>	<b>12 (24.0)</b>	<b>14 (22.6)</b>
"Did your mother/father ever argue or fight when one of them had been drinking or using drugs?"	<b>19 (52.8)</b>	<b>16 (51.6)</b>	<b>20 (40.8)</b>	<b>28 (45.2)</b>
"Has your mother/father ever thrown things or broken things when she/he has been drinking or using drugs?"	<b>8 (22.9)</b>	<b>10 (33.3)</b>	<b>13 (26.0)</b>	<b>10 (16.1)</b>

\*Only adolescents who had a mother with alcohol dependence were included.

\*\*Only adolescents who had a father with alcohol dependence were included.

using drugs did not significantly predict any of the adolescent psychiatric diagnoses.

## Discussion

Findings from our research suggest that at the micro-level, adolescents appear to be more affected by their mother's substance use than by their father's substance use. In this study, adolescents were more upset when their mother drank or used drugs than when their father drank or used drugs; they were more worried about their mother's substance use than their father's substance use; and, they were more likely to talk to their mother about her substance use problem than to their father about his substance use problem. Moreover, consequences of mothers' substance use were consistently related to adolescent psychological adjustment, whereas consequences of fathers' substance use were not. That is, those adolescents who worried about their mother's substance use, avoided their mother when she drank or used drugs, or whose mothers became angry when drinking or using drugs were at an elevated risk for experiencing psychological problems. This was not the case when fathers were examined. To summarize, in our research, the immediate effects of a father's substance use seem to have relatively little impact on his adolescent children.

Results from this study may reflect the tenet that mothers play a more central role in child rearing and the day-to-day functioning of the family than do fathers (Kurz, 1997; Mintz, 1998; Taylor, 1997). Subsequently, when mothers are unable to function, the day-to-day life of the family is likely to be disrupted. Substance use by fathers may be less likely to create family disruptions in day-to-day life since they are usually not as centrally involved as mothers. Therefore, adolescents may be more responsive to mother's substance use than father's substance use because of the differential impact mothers and fathers have on the daily functioning of the family.

In addition to the significant main effects that were observed in the present study, a significant interaction also was found between adolescent gender and maternal anger when drinking or using drugs, indicating that maternal anger predicted alcohol dependence for girls, but not for boys. This finding is consistent with gender-role socialization theories that suggest that girls may be more emotionally involved with the family during adolescence in comparison to boys (Gilligan, 1982; Hops, 1995). Therefore, it may be that girls are even more affected by problems within the family than are boys during adolescence, particularly if the problem involves the mother.

Findings from this study have important implications for prevention and intervention programs that target offspring of alcoholic parents. First, these results suggest that it is particularly critical to target children of alcoholic mothers, especially daughters of alcoholic mothers. Results from this study also indicate that programs should aim to teach these vulnerable youth to use more effective coping strategies (e.g., instead of avoidance) when they are upset by their parent's drinking. The findings also suggest that prevention programs should target ways to help girls from alcoholic families to become less emotionally entrenched in their dysfunctional family system.

Importantly, this study has demonstrated the usefulness of adopting a micro-level approach when examining the relationship between parental substance use and adolescent adjustment. Researchers within the field should seriously consider taking a similar approach since the more that we understand the underlying processes involved in alcoholic families, the more that we will be able to help those who are affected. →



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