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Seeing alcohol use in movies can be a factor in teen drinking

by **ERIN SHEA**

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"The party you've only dreamed about" is the slogan for recently released movie "Project X" where high schoolers throw an out of control, booze-filled birthday party when their parents are away. Popular movies such as "Project X" and "The Hangover" made drinking seem all the rage.

But a new study claims that these kinds of movies are bad for the viewers they attract.

The report released this week from the American Academy of Pediatrics said teens who watch movies containing scenes with alcohol are more likely to binge drink.

"Human behavior is highly driven by unconscious learning processes, so we might not be aware of being influenced," said Dr. Matthias Morgenstern, who worked on the study. He is head of the department of research and prevention at the Institute for Therapy and Health Research in Kiel, Germany.

Researchers surveyed approximately 16,000 students in six European countries from 10 to 19 years old about their drinking habits and movies they watched. They found that teens were more likely to binge drink -- defined as five or more drinks in one sitting -- after seeing movies with drinking related scenes.

Morgenstern said that movies are only one source of media persuasion, but were chosen for the study because of the strong emotions they evoke. These findings are not just a European phenomenon since most of the box-office hits are the same around the world.

A collaborative study released in February in the online journal "BMJ Open," also found a strong correlation between seeing alcohol in movies and alcohol consumption in U.S. teens. The study estimated that American children ages 10 to 14 had viewed approximately 4.5 hours of on-screen alcohol use and some had seen as much as eight hours. Medill News Service reported on this study in On-screen alcohol use influences teens' habits.

"Media can play a strong role in showing us images of what is fun," said Danier Piedrahita, youth community organizer for the Scholarship and Guidance Association Youth and Family Services in Chicago. He said teens are at a time in their lives when they want to explore different activities and movies can make alcohol use look cool, yet ignore the consequences of binge drinking.

"I think we need prevention to give them a clue about what they're getting into," said Daryl Edwards, vice president of Prevention Partnership in Chicago, a community-based prevention and health promotion agency. He said that when teens have a chance to drink, they binge drink because having alcohol is illegal for them.

"When teens get a chance to drink, they will drink all they can get. Five drinks is more like a minimum," Edwards said. Approximately 90 percent of all alcohol consumed by underage kids is in the form of binge drinking, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Both Edwards and Piedrahita said that education and communication from parents about consequences and dangers of drinking could be a solution. Experts also say that parents should be monitoring screen time for their children, and paying attention to movie ratings.

Showing teens that drinking isn't the only form of entertainment can help, Piedrahita said.

"Open communication from the family standpoint can trump the media," he said.



Erin Shea/MEDILL

Drinking can be portrayed as being the cool thing to do in movies, but the consequences are rarely shown.

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