



# Science, Kids, and Alcohol

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## Suicidal Behaviors and Alcohol Use Among Adolescents: A Developmental Psychopathology Perspective

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Suicide is the third leading cause of death among teens in America. Each year, one in five American teens seriously considers suicide, approximately one million attempt suicide, and between 1,000 and 2,000 of these attempts are fatal. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 10- to 19-year-olds, and accounts for more deaths than all natural causes combined. More girls than boys attempt suicide. However, five times more boys than girls die as a result, probably because boys are more likely to choose a lethal method such as firearms.

Studies have shown that teen suicide is associated with depression, hopelessness, impulsivity, and alcohol and other drug use. This study explored the contribution of various risk factors, including alcohol use and binge drinking, to suicide attempts. Twelve hundred tenth- and eleventh-graders participated in four waves of data collection over an 18-month period. The study measured motives for drinking, percentage of friends who use alcohol, and binge drinking. Other risk factors measured included depressive symptoms, temperament (e.g., rigidity, persistence, distractibility), delinquency (e.g., destroyed public property, hit a teacher, was suspended), and stressful life events (e.g., failing one or more subjects, having an acne problem, or breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend). These life events may not seem particularly stressful to adults, but are often magnified in importance by adolescents' heightened self-consciousness, acute sensitivity to rejection, and emotional fluctuations.

The main results of the study were that a difficult temperament, drinking to cope, low family supports, and a higher percentage of friends who drink predicted current depression, stressful life events, and binge drinking. These three factors, in turn, predicted suicidal behavior. Of particular importance is that binge drinking was a significant predictor of an actual suicide attempt.

- Suicide is the third leading cause of death among teens in America; each year, one in five American teens seriously considers suicide.
- Teen suicidal behaviors are influenced by a broad range of factors, with alcohol and other substance use among the prominent influences, along with depressive symptoms, psychosocial factors, and stressful events.
- Interventions need to be multifaceted, from early detection and treatment of depression, to improving problem-solving and coping skills, to controlling youths' access to firearms.

This and other studies demonstrate that teen suicidal behaviors are influenced by a broad range of factors, with alcohol and other substance use among the prominent influences, along with depressive symptoms, psychosocial factors, and stressful events. Interventions to address these factors need to be multifaceted, from early detection and treatment of depression, to improving problem-solving and coping skills, to controlling youths' access to firearms.

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