Does YOUR child drink alcohol? Shock number of 11-year-olds 'had more than a few sips'

PUBLISHED: 00:00, Fri, Mar 4, 2016 | UPDATED: 15:25, Fri, Mar 4, 2016

A STAGGERING one in seven 11-year-olds have drunk more than a "few sips of alcohol", according to new research.

Almost 14 per cent have tried booze, the research showed - with the behaviour of friends having more influence than family.

Children whose friends drank were five times more likely to indulge than those whose friends did not, it was suggested.

Meanwhile, children whose mothers drank heavily were apparently almost twice as likely to drink than those whose mothers abstained.

Professor Yvonne Kelly, of University College London, said: "Drinking in adolescence is considered a 'risky' behaviour, it often co-occurs with other 'risky' behaviours and it is linked to educational failure and to premature mortality, for example via accidental deaths.

"Improving our understanding of the factors that influence drinking is important as it has implications for the development of policies and interventions aimed at reducing 'risky' behaviours."

The study published in the journal BMC Public Health analysed data from 10,498 children aged 11 and is the first to examine drinking in very early adolescence in relation to family, friends and the young person's views about alcohol.

Other factors associated with drinking including starting puberty, being a second or later born child, difficulty sustaining good relationships, inability to control emotions and anti-social behaviours. Boys were more likely to drink than girls.

Positive perceptions of booze, such as believing it makes people feel better about themselves or helps to make friends, increased the risk. Other factors were a lack of parental supervision, and not being happy with family relationships.

Children were less likely to drink if they had heightened perceptions of the harms of drinking, such as that it makes it hard to get along with friends or that it impacts school work.

The participants were from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) of children born between September 2000 and January 2002 with questions including "Have you ever had an alcoholic drink? That is more than a few sips?"

It was impossible to distinguish children who only ever had one alcoholic drink from those who drink more regularly.

The researchers suggest while the vast majority of eleven year olds are yet to explore alcohol, investigating in more detail how some children acquire it could inform effective policy and alcohol harm prevention strategies to reduce the risk.

Professor Kelly added: "Our findings support the need for interventions working at multiple levels, including family and school, to help shape choices around risky behaviors including drinking."

Last year a study in Scotland found children as young as ten were being referring to specialists for underage drinking problems as well as those aged 11, 14 and 15.

Another found more than 6,500 under 18s have been caught driving while drunk by police in the last few years, with more than a quarter under the age of 16.

This included an eleven year old in the Thames Valley area in 2011, while 12-year-olds were caught under the same offence in Scotland and Manchester.