"Just a Sip?" Parental Alcohol Supply in Middle Childhood: Frequency of supply, Family Context, and Reasons for Supply.

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Introduction:
Parental supply of alcohol to minors, commonly in the form of a "sip", is associated with earlier alcohol initiation, heavier alcohol consumption, and increased risk of alcohol-related harm in adolescence. Although guidelines recommend delaying alcohol exposure in childhood, early parental supply remains common in Australia. Understanding the family context in which sipping occurs, and reasons for supply, is important for identifying prevention targets.

Method:
Data were from a longitudinal cohort of Australian children and families (n = 1,082). Parent-reported measures assessed alcohol sipping in middle childhood (mean age = 8.2 years), including frequency of sipping, context, family sociodemographic characteristics, and reasons for alcohol provision.

Key Findings:
Approximately 20% of children had ever sipped alcohol provided by a parent, with 11% reporting sipping in the past 6 months. Most children sipped infrequently (less than once a month), with a similar proportion of girls and boys reporting sipping. Alcohol was most often provided during family meals or celebrations. Family sociodemographic characteristics, (i.e., parental education, socioeconomic disadvantage, marital status) were similar between children who had and had not sipped alcohol. However, regular alcohol consumption (≥3 days/week) was more common among families where children had sipped alcohol.

Parental reasons for allowing sipping reflected beliefs that supervised exposure may be protective, including reducing curiosity about alcohol, strengthening resistance to peer influence, and promoting responsible drinking in later life.

Discussion and Conclusions:
Findings indicate that parental supply of alcohol in childhood is relatively common in Australia. Sipping is more likely in families where parents report regular alcohol use and is shaped by beliefs that supervised exposure in family contexts may reduce later alcohol-related risk.

Implications for Policy and Practice:
Findings support the need for clearer, evidence-informed guidance on alcohol provision in childhood and prevention strategies addressing early family drinking norms and beliefs about supervised exposure.

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