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Alcohol-related cognitions in children (aged 2–10) and how they are shaped by parental alcohol use: A systematic review

Carmen Voogt, Miriam Beusink, Marloes Kleinjan, Roy Otten, Rutger Engels, Koen Smit, Emmanuel Kuntsche

Aim: This systematic review aims to summarize the evidence of the impact of parental alcohol use on the acquisition of children’s alcohol-related cognitions (alcohol-related knowledge, alcohol-related norms, alcohol expectancies) in the developmental period from age two to ten.

Methods: A computer-assisted systematic literature search was performed in PubMed, PsychINFO, ERIC, and EMBASE. Overall, 20 out of the 3406 unique articles identified in the first screening were included.

Results: The results revealed that children acquire knowledge about alcohol already at age two and from age four on, they understand its use in adult culture. By the age of four, children have certain alcohol expectancies. The evidence of the impact of parental alcohol use on the acquisition of children's alcohol-related cognitions is inconsistent so far with studies showing positive and no effects. Unfortunately, the existing evidence is limited because most studies a) were conducted exclusively in the United States and more than two decades ago, b) used cross-sectional study designs, and c) used non-representative samples recruited using convenience sampling strategies.

Conclusions: Research on children’s alcohol-related cognitions is underdeveloped. To elucidate the conclusions about alcohol involvement in early life, studies with longitudinal study designs need to be conducted among representative samples of children and early adolescents by using age-appropriate measurement tools in a broader cultural context.

1. Introduction

Ample evidence has been presented on the distal and proximal factors that determine the full spectrum of alcohol use – from alcohol initiation to drinking – in adolescence and beyond (Ham and Hope, 2003; Kuntsche et al., 2004). However, an increasing number of longitudinal studies have demonstrated that proximal cognitive factors related to alcohol use are rooted in childhood (Schulenberg and Maggs, 2008). In childhood, parents are the principal socialization agents stimulating children's development (Steinberg, 2002). Consequently, they are the primary source of their children’s alcohol-related knowledge (Zucker et al., 2008, 1995). The Cognitive Model of Intergenerational Transference (Campbell and Oei, 2010) assumes that parents’ verbal affirmations of the perceived benefits of alcohol and children’s observation of the effects of parental alcohol use are responsible for the intergenerational transference of alcohol-related cognitions, that is, what children a) know about alcohol (i.e., alcohol-related knowledge); b) know about alcohol use in adult culture (i.e., alcohol-related norms), and c) believe happens to others or themselves when drinking alcohol (i.e., alcohol expectancies).

A literature review conducted by Lang and Stritzke (1993) on children’s alcohol-related cognitions showed that children are not ‘innocent’ with respect to alcohol. Already at age three, children have alcohol-related knowledge, as they can recognize and identify alcoholic

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**ABSTRACT**

**Background:** This systematic review aims to summarize the evidence of the impact of parental alcohol use on the acquisition of children’s alcohol-related cognitions (alcohol-related knowledge, alcohol-related norms, alcohol expectancies) in the developmental period from age two to ten.

**Methods:** A computer-assisted systematic literature search was performed in PubMed, PsychINFO, ERIC, and EMBASE. Overall, 20 out of the 3406 unique articles identified in the first screening were included.

**Results:** The results revealed that children acquire knowledge about alcohol already at age two and from age four on, they understand its use in adult culture. By the age of four, children have certain alcohol expectancies. The evidence of the impact of parental alcohol use on the acquisition of children’s alcohol-related cognitions is inconsistent so far with studies showing positive and no effects. Unfortunately, the existing evidence is limited because most studies a) were conducted exclusively in the United States and more than two decades ago, b) used cross-sectional study designs, and c) used non-representative samples recruited using convenience sampling strategies.

**Conclusions:** Research on children’s alcohol-related cognitions is underdeveloped. To elucidate the conclusions about alcohol involvement in early life, studies with longitudinal study designs need to be conducted among representative samples of children and early adolescents by using age-appropriate measurement tools in a broader cultural context.
beverages. From age five on, children seem to be aware of age-related alcohol norms (e.g., only adults consume alcohol), hold sex-specific alcohol norms (e.g., males like alcohol-related activities more than do females), and know socially acceptable amounts of alcohol use (e.g., small versus large alcohol dose). Finally, as early as six years of age, children have certain alcohol expectancies that seem to shift from primarily negative to primarily positive by the age of ten. Based on observed situational determinants, children seem to acquire knowledge of alcohol itself and the role of alcohol in the social environment (i.e., norms) based on which they eventually develop alcohol expectancies (Zucker et al., 2008, 1995). In this respect, it is essential to evaluate what is already known regarding the developmental sequence from knowledge and norms to expectancies.

Unfortunately, since the review by Lang and Stritzke (1993) conducted more than two decades ago did not follow guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Liberati et al., 2009; Moher et al., 2009), a comprehensive state-of-the-art knowledge of research on children’s alcohol-related cognitions is currently lacking. Besides, the impact of parental alcohol use on the acquisition of children’s alcohol-related cognitions was not considered in the previous review (Lang and Stritzke, 1993). It is crucial to understand this impact, as alcohol-related knowledge and alcohol-related norms are supposed to influence alcohol expectancies (e.g., ‘I expect that alcohol makes me sociable’) and the transition to drinking motives (e.g., ‘I drank (for the first time) to enjoy a party’). According to the Motivational Model of alcohol use (Cox and Klinger, 1990, 1988), the latter is thought to constitute the final pathway to alcohol initiation (Kuntsche and Müller, 2012) and subsequent drinking patterns (e.g., binge drinking) (Andrews et al., 2011; Donovan et al., 2004; Windle et al., 2008). Risky drinking among young people is particularly alarming, as childhood is a critical period of cortical development, and it is important for establishing lifelong adult characteristics, which drinking could disrupt (Crews et al., 2007). Therefore, this systematic review aimed to summarize the evidence of the impact of parental alcohol use on the acquisition of children’s alcohol-related cognitions (alcohol-related knowledge, alcohol-related norms, alcohol expectancies) in the developmental period from age two to ten. This particular age range was chosen to explore the development and increase of alcohol-related cognitions before adolescence. Scholars have suggested that the socialization into early alcohol use occurs before age ten (Zucker et al., 2008). This review builds on and extends the review of Lang and Stritzke (1993) by including studies published from 1976 to 2016 that focused on the acquisition of children’s alcohol-related cognitions and on the impact of parental alcohol use on this acquisition. Our review also adheres to PRISMA guidelines (Liberati et al., 2009; Moher et al., 2009), thus reporting the findings in a comprehensive and transparent manner.

2. Material and methods

A computer-assisted systematic literature search was performed in collaboration with an information expert in searches for systematic reviews and meta-analyses in PubMed, PsychINFO, ERIC, and EMBASE in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines (Liberati et al., 2009; Moher et al., 2009). The review was registered in the Prospero database of systematic reviews (registration number CRD42016051080). Inclusion criteria were: a) full-text original articles published in the last forty years (from 1976 to 2016) and written in English; b) studies including children in the developmental period from age two to ten; and c) studies assessing children's alcohol-related knowledge, alcohol-related norms, and/or alcohol expectancies as outcomes only and/or in combination with parental alcohol use. The reviewed studies that comprised samples of children who were younger as well as older than the age of ten were included in the review. Of these studies, we only reviewed the results for the children within the age range between two and ten years (see Table 2 for specific information). Both explicit alcohol expectancies that rely on non-automatic cognitive motivational processes as well as implicit alcohol expectancies that rely on automatic underlying motivational processes were included (Thush and Wiers, 2007). Exclusion criteria were: a) full-text original articles published before 1976 and written in language other than English and b) commentaries, editorials, notes, and study protocols. In addition, the reference sections of identified articles were cross-checked in order to find relevant articles meeting the above-mentioned inclusion criteria. If full-text articles were not available, we contacted their authors to obtain them.

2.1. Data selection process

Fig. 1 shows the PRISMA study flow diagram (Liberati et al., 2009; Moher et al., 2009). The keywords used to identify relevant articles were; e.g.; ‘knowledge’ or ‘schema’ or ‘awareness’; ‘norm’* or ‘appropriate’*; ‘expectancy’* or ‘perceived benefits’; ‘child’* or ‘younger’ or ‘preschool’*; ‘parent’* or ‘father’* or ‘mother’*; in combination with ‘alcohol’ or ‘drinking’. We identified 3388 articles from the four search engines. Overall; 18 articles emerged from the screenings of the reference sections in the identified studies; resulting in 3406 unique articles (Fig. 1). Two authors (CV and MB) screened all articles independently based on their title and abstract to ascertain that they met the inclusion criteria. Articles that were published before 1976 (n = 14); commentaries (n = 10); editorials (n = 5); notes (n = 2); study protocols (n = 11); and those that did not focus on children’s alcohol-related cognitions (n = 3320) were excluded. For the 44 remaining articles; the full text was obtained to check the compliance with the inclusion criteria. Once again; the same two authors (CV and MB) performed this task independently. Any disagreement between the two authors was resolved by consensus or; if the disagreement persisted; by consulting a third researcher (EK). Articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded (n = 24). In total; 20 articles were retained for further analysis.

2.2. Data extraction process and critical appraisal

Using a predefined scheme based on the PRISMA checklist (Moher et al., 2009), the following data were extracted from the 20 selected studies: a) study characteristics (i.e., author(s) and year of publication); b) methods (i.e., sample characteristics, sampling strategy, study design, and outcomes); c) results (i.e., main results), and d) conclusions. The risk of bias of the selected studies was evaluated using the Newcastle Ottawa Scale (NOS) (Wells et al., 2000), a widely used tool for assessing the quality of observational studies (Stang, 2010) that has been adapted for cross-sectional studies (Herzog et al., 2013).

3. Results

Table 1 provides an overview of the characteristics of the 20 selected studies in this systematic review. Of the 20 studies, 16 focused on children’s alcohol-related knowledge (Austin and Nach-Ferguson, 1995; Casswell et al., 1988; Dalton et al., 2005; Flett et al., 1987; Fossey, 1993a, 1993b; Gaines et al., 1988; Greenberg et al., 1985; Hahn et al., 2000; Jahoda et al., 1980; Kuntsche et al., 2016; Mennella and Garcia, 2000; Noll et al., 1990; Tennant, 1979; Valentine et al., 2014; Zucker et al., 1995), five focused on children’s alcohol-related norms (Jahoda et al., 1980; Kuntsche et al., 2016; Noll et al., 1990; Spiegler, 1983; Zucker et al., 1995), four focused on children’s explicit alcohol expectancies (Austin and Nach-Ferguson, 1995; Flett et al., 1987; Kuntsche, 2017; Mares et al., 2015), and one focused on both explicit and implicit alcohol expectancies (Pieters et al., 2010). Eleven focused on the impact of parental alcohol use on the acquisition of children’s alcohol-related cognitions (Casswell et al., 1988; Dalton et al., 2005; Gaines et al., 1988; Greenberg et al., 1985; Hahn et al., 2000; Jahoda et al., 1980; Mares et al., 2015; Mennella and Garcia, 2000; Noll et al., 2000).
Children (aged 3.0-6.0) could distinguish between alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. In addition, children could identify the content of alcoholic beverages and knew its use in adult culture. Sex and age differences in alcohol-related knowledge were found:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study (year)</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Conclusions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kuntsche et al. (2017)</td>
<td>198 children aged 4.0-6.0 (of which 19.2 aged 4.0, 43.4% aged 5.0, and 37.4% aged 6.0) recruited using a random sampling strategy; mean age (SD) of participants: 47.0% boys; cross-sectional study; Switzerland.</td>
<td>Children's explicit AE (4 factors: arousal-positive, arousal-negative, sedation-positive, sedation-negative) and demographic characteristics (sex, age). The outcomes were measured by the Berkeley Puppet Interview in which 2 identical dog hand puppets made opposing statements about different opinions (e.g., 'I think when adults drink alcohol, they become happy' versus 'I think when adults drink alcohol, they do not become happy'). Children were asked 'And how about you, what do you think?'. The puppet with which the child agrees then repeats the child's answer, thereby appraising the child's answer. Trained interviewers administered responses individually.</td>
<td>Children had higher positive rather than negative explicit AE. No age differences for explicit AE factors emerged, yet sex differences indicated that girls had more positive explicit AE compared to boys.</td>
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<td>Kuntsche et al. (2016)</td>
<td>301 children aged 3.0-6.0 recruited using a random sampling strategy; 5.4 (SD = 0.80) years old; 50.5% boys; cross-sectional study; Switzerland.</td>
<td>Children's alcohol-related knowledge, alcohol-related norms, and demographic characteristics (sex, age). The outcomes were measured using the eBART that presents 11 everyday life scenarios on a touch-screen computer. Children were asked a) to indicate what the displayed male and female adults and children drank by touching 1 of the 12 displayed beverages (4 alcoholic; 8 non-alcoholic), b) whether the beverages contain alcohol, and c) whether they know the names of the beverages.</td>
<td>Concerning alcohol-related knowledge, children identified 68.1% of the beverages as alcohol-containing and 83.2% as non-alcohol containing. They knew 46.6% and 73.1% of the alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages by name. No sex differences were found in alcohol-related knowledge, yet the knowledge increased with age. Concerning alcohol-related norms, children assigned alcoholic beverages more often to males (42.2%) compared to females (28.7%) or children (12.7%) and adults were more often assigned alcoholic beverages at a party (39.4%) rather than when playing outdoors (34.7%). Sex and age differences in alcohol-related norms revealed that a) girls and older children assigned alcoholic beverages to children less often compared to boys and younger children and b) older children assigned alcoholic beverages to males more often compared to younger children. Children (aged 3.0-6.0) could distinguish between alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. In addition, children could identify the content of alcoholic beverages and knew in use in adult culture. Sex and age differences in alcohol-related knowledge and alcohol-related norms were found.</td>
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<td>Mares et al. (2015)</td>
<td>240 children aged 6.0-9.0 (of which 23.7% aged 6.0, 23.7% aged 7.0, 25.9% aged 8.0, and 26.7% aged 9.0) recruited using a random sampling strategy; 8.0 (SD = 1.13) years old; 47.9% boys; cross-sectional study; the Netherlands.</td>
<td>Children's explicit AE (positive and negative) and demographic characteristics (sex, age). Parents reported on alcohol use. Children's outcomes were measured using the Berkeley Puppet Interview in which 2 identical dog hand puppets made opposing statements. Children were asked 'And how about you, what do you think?'. The puppet with which the child agrees then repeats the child's answer, thereby appraising the child's answer. Trained interviewers administered responses.</td>
<td>Children had equally strong positive and negative explicit AE. No sex differences emerged in the strength of positive and negative explicit AE. Older children had less positive and more negative explicit AE compared to younger children. In addition, more paternal alcohol use was related to less negative explicit AE among girls. Moreover, more maternal alcohol use was related to less positive explicit AE while more paternal alcohol use was related to more positive explicit AE among older children. Children had limited knowledge of specific types/brands of beverages: a few recognized specific beverages from television programs, yet the majority correctly identified only alcohol that their parents or relatives drank, in some cases recognizing gendered product preferences and the consumption of different beverages (cocktails and shots) on holiday. In addition, children were aware that alcohol is an adult product, yet they were not aware Children (aged 6.0-9.0) had equally strong positive and negative explicit AE. No sex differences emerged in the strength of positive and negative explicit AE; however, age differences showed that older children had less positive and more negative explicit AE compared to younger children. In addition, parental alcohol use was related to children's positive and negative explicit AE.</td>
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<td>Valentine et al. (2014)</td>
<td>Ten families consisting of 18 children aged 5.0–12.0 (of which 55.6% young and 44.4% old) recruited using a random sampling strategy; case study; United Kingdom.</td>
<td>Product recognition and awareness of health risks and social harms associated with drinking and society rules). The outcomes were measured using a child-centered research process. For product recognition, children were asked to identify types of beverages (alcoholic and non-alcoholic) by smell and from a series of advertisements for common brands. To assess the awareness of health risks and social harms associated Children (aged 5.0–12.0) could identify alcoholic beverages and the short-term health risks and social harms associated with drinking and society rules. Alcohol-related knowledge is gained through proximal processes, that is, their daily interactions with parents/older siblings in the family context and their media exposure rather than health campaigns or school interventions targeted at them.</td>
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<th>Study (year)</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
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<td>Pieters et al. (2010)</td>
<td>99 children aged 9.0–12.0 (of which 23.0% non-white, 57.4% boys, cross-sectional study, the Netherlands)</td>
<td>Children’s explicit AE (positive and negative), implicit AE, and perceived parental alcohol use. Children’s explicit AE (modified version of the AE Scale for Children) and their perceived parental alcohol use, with drinking and society rules, puppets and a doll representing adults and children as drinking-drunk. The responses were audio-recorded and transcribed.</td>
<td>Concerning explicit AE, children had positive and negative explicit AE. Concerning implicit AE, children did not differ in the degree to which they associated alcohol more strongly with angry faces than with happy faces. Children’s cognitive representations of alcohol were not related to children’s explicit and implicit AE. Perceived parental alcohol use was not related to children’s explicit and implicit AE. Additional, perceived parental alcohol use was not related to children’s alcohol use and children’s movie exposure.</td>
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<td>Dalton et al. (2005)</td>
<td>120 children aged 2.0–6.0 (of which 30.0% minority, 56.0% boys, cross-sectional study, United States)</td>
<td>Children’s alcohol purchases were related to parental alcohol use and children’s movie exposure. Children (aged 2.0–6.0) purchased alcohol and could identify the type of alcohol. Children’s alcohol purchases were related to parental alcohol use and children’s movie exposure. On average, 17 (SD = 4.8) of the 73 grocery products were purchased. Of the 120 children, 56% identified alcohol by type (beer, wine, or booze) and 52% recognized drinking and driving. Children’s alcohol purchases were related to parental alcohol use a) when their parents reported drinking alcohol at least monthly compared to those who reported drinking alcohol less than monthly; b) as the number of times per month that the children’s parents reported drinking alcohol increased, and c) if children watched PG-13- or R-rated movies compared with those who watched only G-rated movies infrequently. Of the 120 children, 50% identified alcohol related to parental alcohol use. No sex and ethnic differences in this alcohol-related knowledge were found. In addition, children’s alcohol-related knowledge was not related to parental alcohol use.</td>
<td>No alcohol-related knowledge, which is based on sensory experiences and experiences at home and the emotional context in which their parents perform alcohol use, respectively. Children in the scope group were concerned with the slope of the increase in alcohol use and experiences at home and the emotional context in which their parents perform alcohol use.</td>
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<td>Hahn et al. (2000)</td>
<td>126 children aged 5.0–6.0 recruited using a random household sampling strategy (10.2 ± 0.45 years old; 44.0% boys, 32.4% fathers, cross-sectional study, United States)</td>
<td>Children’s alcohol-related knowledge and demographic characteristics. Children’s outcomes were measured using an age-appropriate ACASI. Children’s alcohol-related knowledge was measured by the CDAI, a pictorial inventory consisting of 18 pictures (6 neutral; 6 odor; 6 alcohol) administered responses individually. Parents reported on alcoholic use and demographic characteristics (income, marital status).</td>
<td>Children’s alcohol-related knowledge (odor preferences and identification) was not related to parental alcohol use, parental alcohol-related knowledge was not related to parental alcohol use, and experiences at home and the emotional context in which their parents perform alcohol use. Children’s alcohol-related knowledge was not related to parental alcohol use, parental alcohol-related knowledge was not related to parental alcohol use, and experiences at home and the emotional context in which their parents perform alcohol use. Concerning odor preferences, children preferred bubble gum (86.0%), followed by mineral oil (66.0%), beer (52.7%), and pyridine (11.3%), respectively. Children in the scope group were concerned with the slope of the increase in alcohol use and experiences at home and the emotional context in which their parents perform alcohol use.</td>
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<td>Austin and Nach-Ferguson (1995)</td>
<td>213 children aged 7.0–12.0* recruited using a convenience sampling strategy; mean age (SD) is unknown; 47.0% boys and 276 parents; 24.0% fathers; cross-sectional study; United States.</td>
<td>Children’s alcohol-related knowledge (general knowledge; factual information about alcohol and how frequently it is used, brand-specific knowledge: knowing brand names of various types of alcohol, including what type of alcohol a particular brand represents and what symbols are associated with particular brands, and total knowledge: sum of general knowledge and brand-specific knowledge, explicit AE (negative), and demographic characteristics (sex, age)). Outcomes were measured using self-administered paper-and-pencil surveys in a classroom guided by adults if needed.</td>
<td>Children’s alcohol-related knowledge was considerable, as they obtained a mean score of a) 6.3 (1–7) for general knowledge, b) 5.9 (1–13) for brand-specific knowledge, and c) 12.2 for total knowledge (1–19). Sex and age differences emerged in general knowledge and total knowledge but not in brand-specific knowledge: girls and older children (aged 10.0–12.0) had more knowledge compared to boys and younger children (aged 7.0–9.0), respectively. In addition, most children (60%) had negative explicit AE, as they disagreed that ‘friends will think I am not cool if I do not drink beer or wine with them.’</td>
<td>Children (aged 7.0–12.0) had alcohol-related knowledge and negative explicit AE. There were sex and age differences in total knowledge and general knowledge but not in brand-specific knowledge: girls and older children (aged 10.0–12.0) had more knowledge compared to boys and younger children (aged 7.0–9.0).</td>
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<td>Zucker et al. (1995)</td>
<td>223 children (of which 62% were COAs and 38% were NCOAs) aged 2.9–6.5 recruited using a convenience sampling strategy; 4.5 (SD = unknown) years old; 100% boys and 223 parents; cross-sectional study; United States.</td>
<td>Children’s alcohol-related knowledge, alcohol-related norms, and demographic characteristics (age). Fathers reported on alcohol use. Children’s outcomes were measured using a modified version of the ART in which 10 everyday life drawings are shown on a table. In every drawing, each character is drinking an unidentified beverage. Children were asked to indicate what the male and female adults and children drank by pointing 1 of the 10 beverages (5 alcoholic; 5 non-alcoholic) and b) whether they know the names of the beverages. The paternal outcome was measured using paper-and-pencil surveys.</td>
<td>Concerning alcohol-related knowledge, of the 223 children, 88% identified ≥ 1 alcoholic beverage: this knowledge increased with age. CAOs were more likely compared to NCOAs to identify a) ≥ 1 alcoholic beverage, b) specific alcoholic beverages (beer), and c) a larger number of alcoholic beverages. Concerning alcohol-related norms, a) males were more often assigned alcoholic beverages compared to females and b) adults were more often assigned alcoholic beverages compared to children, and this knowledge increased with age. CAOs assigned more alcoholic beverages to adults than did NCOAs. Age and paternal alcohol use was related to children’s provision of alcoholic beverages to males while maternal alcohol use was related to children’s assignment of alcoholic beverages to females. In the 1st trial, 47.4% correct identifications of the odors were made versus 78.2% in the 2nd trial. In the 1st trial, children identified beer and whiskey on the 5th and 6th place. In the 2nd trial, children identified whiskey and beer on the 1st and 2nd place. Of the 238 children, 37.8% (beer) and 78% (whisky) did not recognize the odor in the 1st trial compared to 29% (beer) and 26% (whisky) in the 2nd trial. When combining the 2 trials, 94.5% identified beer and/or whiskey and 77.7% identified experience alcohol.</td>
<td>Children (aged 2.9–6.5) could distinguish between alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. This alcohol-related knowledge increased with age. In addition, children know its use in adult culture as a) males were more often assigned alcoholic beverages compared to females and b) adults were more often assigned alcoholic beverages compared to children, and this knowledge increased with age. Moreover, CAOs had more alcohol-related knowledge and alcohol-related norms than did NCOAs.</td>
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| Fossey (1993a) | 238 children (aged 5.5–6.5; aged 7.5–8.5; and aged 9.5–10.5) aged 5.5–10.5 recruited using a convenience sampling strategy; mean age is unknown; % of boys is unknown; cross-sectional study; United Kingdom. | Children’s alcohol-related knowledge and demographic characteristics (age). The outcomes were measured using a modified version of Recognition of Smells Task in which children attempt to identify alcoholic beverages by smell (1st ‘free identification’ trial) and by pointing to pictures of the substances that were not correctly identified in the 1st trial (2nd ‘assisted identification’ trial). In the 1st trial, 9 jars with different odors (2 alcoholic: beer, whiskey; 7 non-alcoholic: mint, dettol, ...) were made versus 78.2% in the 2nd trial. In the 1st trial, children identified beer and whiskey on the 5th and 6th place. In the 2nd trial, children identified whiskey and beer on the 1st and 2nd place. Of the 238 children, 37.8% (beer) and 78% (whisky) did not recognize the odor in the 1st trial compared to 29% (beer) and 26% (whisky) in the 2nd trial. When combining the 2 trials, 94.5% identified beer and/or whiskey and 77.7% identified experience alcohol. | In the 1st trial, 47.4% correct identifications of the odors were made versus 78.2% in the 2nd trial. In the 1st trial, children identified beer and whiskey on the 5th and 6th place. In the 2nd trial, children identified whiskey and beer on the 1st and 2nd place. Of the 238 children, 37.8% (beer) and 78% (whisky) did not recognize the odor in the 1st trial compared to 29% (beer) and 26% (whisky) in the 2nd trial. When combining the 2 trials, 94.5% identified beer and/or whiskey and 77.7% identified experience alcohol. | Children (aged 5.5–10.5) could recognize and identify alcoholic beverages based on smell. This alcohol-related knowledge started at age 5.5–6.5 and increased with age. | (continued on next page)
Children (aged 5.5-10.5) could tell factual (‘alcohol make you drunk’) and negative information (‘alcohol is bad for you’) about alcohol. This alcohol-related knowledge started at age 5.5–6.5 and increased with age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study (year)</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Conclusions</th>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Children aged 5.5–6.5</strong>&lt;br&gt;Total of 95 children (49.6% boys; cross-sectional study; United Kingdom)</td>
<td>Noll et al. (1990) 57 children (of which 51.0% aged 2.6–4.0 and 49.0% aged 4.1–5.8) aged 2.5–6.0 recruited using a random sampling strategy; mean age is unknown; 49.6% boys; cross-sectional study; United States.</td>
<td>Children’s alcohol-related knowledge and demographic characteristics (age). The outcomes were measured using a modified version of the Judgement of Photographs Task comprising 20 photographs (adults engaged in an alcohol/tobacco-related activity or a non-alcohol/tobacco-related activity). Children were asked a) what they could tell about the beverages (1 = factual information: ‘alcohol make you drunk’; 2 = positive information: ‘alcohol taste nice’; 3 = negative information: ‘alcohol is bad for you’) and b) to put each photograph into 1 of the 4 boxes (1 = like very much; 2 = like a little; 3 = do not like a little; 4 = do not like at all).</td>
<td>Concerning alcohol-related knowledge, older children were better at identifying substances by smell compared to younger children in the 1st trial. Of the older children, 57% identified beer, wine, or whiskey compared to 21% of the younger children. When combining the 2 trials, 89%/69% of the older/younger children identified ≥1 alcoholic beverage. Children were better at identifying the universally used and the non-controlled adult-use substances compared to the controlled adult-use substances in both trials. Concerning alcohol-related norms, children reported that a) universal-use substances are used by adults and children (62%) and b) non-controlled adult-use substances (69%) and controlled adult-use substances (86%) are used by adults only. Age differences in alcohol-related norms are unknown. Moreover, parental alcohol use was related to children’s ability to identify ≥1 alcoholic beverages. Those who were most successful at identifying ≥1 alcoholic beverage came from families in which both parents reported alcohol use. No sex differences in alcohol-related knowledge and alcohol-related norms emerged.</td>
<td>Children (aged 2.6–6.0) could identify alcoholic beverages based on smell: this alcohol-related knowledge started at age 3.0–4.0 and increased with age. In addition, children also know alcohol use in adult culture, as they reported liking substances that are used mainly by children and adults and generally reported disliking substances the use of which is legally limited to adults only. No sex differences emerged in alcohol-related knowledge and alcohol-related norms.</td>
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<td><strong>Children aged 5.5–6.5</strong>&lt;br&gt;Total of 26 children aged 5.5–6.5; 34% aged 5.5–7.5; 33% aged 7.5–8.5; and 33% aged 9.5–10.5 aged 5.5–10.5 recruited using a random sampling strategy; mean age is unknown; 49.6% boys; cross-sectional study; United Kingdom</td>
<td>Castwell et al. (1998) 743 children aged 8.0–9.0 recruited using a random sample strategy; mean age is unknown; 52.8% boys; and 740 mothers; cross-sectional study; New Zealand.</td>
<td>Children’s alcohol-related knowledge. Mothers reported on their own and partner’s alcohol use and alcohol-related problems in their children’s social environment. Children’s and maternal outcomes were measured using structured interviews administered by trained examiners.</td>
<td>Both alcoholic beverages, of which 26.5% identified alcoholic beverages without the aid of visual cues. In both trials, children’s identification of beer and/or whiskey increased with age.</td>
<td>Children (aged 8.0–9.0) could describe the effects of alcohol and know the concept drunkenness. Television was the major source of alcohol-related knowledge.</td>
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</table>
Children (5- and 8-year olds) had knowledge about adults’ drinking motives, the amount of a small or large amount of wine and whiskey, and the places where adults drink, but they were not aware of the legal age for public consumption. Sex and age differences in alcohol-related knowledge indicated that girls and 8-year-olds know more about adults’ drinking motives compared to 5-year-olds and boys, respectively.

Parental alcohol use was related to children’s alcohol-related knowledge: girls and 8-year-olds knew more about adults’ drinking motives compared to 5-year-olds and boys, respectively. Most children were not aware of the legal age for public consumption and no more than 20% could guess the legal purchase age between 21 and 22 years. The 8-year-olds knew more about society’s rules and constraints compared to 5-year-olds, respectively. More children agreed on the amount of a small or large amount of wine and whiskey, 5-year-olds drank more beer from whiskey. The most number of days a year children had seen either parent drinking were 107.7 (SD = unknown) and 96.4 (SD = unknown), respectively.

Table 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study (year)</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Main results</th>
<th>Conclusions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Flett et al. (1987)</td>
<td>74 children aged 5-9 recruited using a random sample strategy; 48.8% boys; and their parents; cross-sectional study; United States.</td>
<td>Children’s alcohol-related knowledge and explicit AE. The outcomes were measured using a structured interview administered by trained interviewers.</td>
<td>The reported associations showed that children’s knowledge of adult’s drinking motives was higher among older children and compared children with heavy drinking parents compared children with parents who never drank or moderate drinking parents.</td>
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<td>Greenberg et al. (1985)</td>
<td>57 children (of which 50.9% aged 2.5–6.0, 49.1% aged 4.0–6.0; 55% in grade 1, 45% in grade 2) recruited using a random sample strategy; 52.8% boys; cross-sectional study; New-Zealand.</td>
<td>Alcohol and non-alcoholic beverages were compared to non-alcoholic beverages. Children were asked about what they knew about alcoholic beverages.</td>
<td>Children’s knowledge of alcoholic beverages was lower among younger children. Of the young children, 65% knew nothing about alcohol.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenberg et al. (1987)</td>
<td>80 children in kindergarten (5-year olds), grade 3 (8-year olds), and grade 6 (11-year olds); 25% in grade 1, 25% in grade 2, and 50% in grade 3; parents recruited using a random sample strategy; 85% of boys; and their parents; cross-sectional study; United States.</td>
<td>Children’s alcohol-related knowledge and explicit AE. The outcomes were measured using a structured interview administered by trained interviewers.</td>
<td>Children’s knowledge of alcoholic beverages was higher among older children and compared children with heavy drinking parents compared children with parents who never drank or moderate drinking parents.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Of the children, 6% knew nothing about alcohol, 28% knew alcohol was a drug, 28% knew that they have to be 21 years old to drink beer, wine, or whiskey, and 23% knew that they have to be 21 years old to drink beer, wine, or whiskey.</td>
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Children (5- and 8-year olds) had knowledge about adults’ drinking motives, the amount of a small or large amount of wine and whiskey, and the places where adults drink, but they were not aware of the legal age for public consumption. Sex and age differences in alcohol-related knowledge indicated that girls and 8-year-olds know more about adults’ drinking motives compared to 5-year-olds and boys, respectively. Parental alcohol use was related to children’s alcohol-related knowledge: girls and 8-year-olds knew more about adults’ drinking motives compared to 5-year-olds and boys, respectively. Most children were not aware of the legal age for public consumption and no more than 20% could guess the legal purchase age between 21 and 22 years. The 8-year-olds knew more about society’s rules and constraints compared to 5-year-olds, respectively. More children agreed on the amount of a small or large amount of wine and whiskey, 5-year-olds drank more beer from whiskey. The most number of days a year children had seen either parent drinking were 107.7 (SD = unknown) and 96.4 (SD = unknown), respectively.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study (year)</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Conclusions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Spiegler (1983)</td>
<td>60 children (of which 20.0% aged 5.5–6.5; 20.0% aged 6.5–7.5; 20.0% aged 7.5–8.5; 20.0% aged 8.5–9.5; and 20.0% aged 9.5–10.5) aged 5.5–10.5 recruited using a convenience sampling strategy; mean age is unknown; 50.0% boys; cross-sectional study; United States.</td>
<td>Children’s alcohol-related norms and demographic characteristics (sex, age). The outcomes were measured using a pictorial interview consisting of 24 photographs (4 with a alcohol: drinking beer, drinking whiskey, going to a bar, being drunk; 19 with eating food or drinking non-alcoholic beverages, and 1 with smoking) showing activities that people can do. Children were shown a box with 4 compartments (‘like very much’, ‘like a little’, ‘dislike a little’, ‘dislike very much’) and a picture of a same-sex child/male/female in front of the box. Children were asked to put the photograph in the box that asked how do they think a boy/girl/male/female like them/their father/their mother or like the boy/male/female in the picture feels about doing these activities.</td>
<td>Children (aged 5.5–10.5) acquired alcohol-related norms as early as age 6. No sex differences were observed, yet age differences in alcohol-related norms were noted.</td>
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<td>Jahoda et al. (1980)</td>
<td>113 children (of which 32.7% aged 4.0–5.6; 35.4% aged 5.7–6.6; and 31.9% aged 6.7–7.6) aged 4.0–7.6 recruited using a convenience sample strategy; mean age is unknown; 52.2% boys; and 113 parents; cross-sectional study; United States.</td>
<td>Children’s alcohol-related knowledge, alcohol-related norms, and demographic characteristics (sex, age). Parents reported on alcohol use and demographic characteristics. Children’s outcomes were measured using a pictorial interview consisting of 12 color photographs of bottles (6 alcoholic; 6 non-alcoholic), and 4 drawings (boy, girl, male, female engaged in the act of drinking). The bottle photographs were shown on a table. Children were asked to a) choose 3 bottle photographs, which contained the beverages the person depicted in the drawing ‘would like the most’, b) name each bottle photograph that was shown in a random order, and c) explain the difference between the alcohol and non-alcohol grouping of the bottle photographs. The responses were administered individually by student assistants. Parental outcomes were measured using self-administered surveys. Concerning alcohol-related knowledge, about half of the 4.0-5.6 year olds correctly named an ‘alcohol’ label to the bottle photographs and about half of them correctly explained the differences between the alcohol and no-alcohol grouping of the bottle photographs. Concerning alcohol-related norms, more than 1/3 of the 4.0-5.6 year olds reported that adults prefer alcoholic beverages and children prefer non-alcoholic beverages. No sex differences in alcohol-related knowledge and alcohol-related norms emerged, yet age differences showed that 6.7-7.6 year olds had more knowledge about alcohol and its norms compared to the younger children. In addition, parental alcohol use was not related to children’s alcohol-related knowledge and alcohol-related norms.</td>
<td>Children (aged 4.0–7.0) acquired alcohol-related knowledge and alcohol-related norms. No sex differences emerged, yet age differences were found. No relation was found between parental alcohol use and children’s alcohol-related knowledge and alcohol-related norms.</td>
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Table 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study (year)</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Conclusions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tennant (1979)</td>
<td>46 children aged 5.0–6.0 recruited using a convenience sample strategy</td>
<td>Children’s alcohol-related knowledge and cognitions were assessed using a variety of methods, including interviews, questionnaires, and observation.</td>
<td>The results showed that children had a high level of alcohol-related knowledge and cognitions. The findings suggested that children were aware of the health implications of alcohol use and were able to identify the appropriate beverage tasks.</td>
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</table>

Note: Appropriate Beverage Task (ABT): children’s response to a scenario involving grocery shopping (Dalton et al., 2005). AE: alcohol expectancies; CAOs: children of alcoholics; NCAOs: children of non-alcoholics; CDAI: Child Drug Awareness Inventory; eABT: electronic Appropriate Beverage Task; IAT: Implicit Association Test; SD: standard deviation. *Results were only reported for the total age group (aged 7–12) and not separately for children in the required age range (2–10). |

3.1. Children’s alcohol-related cognitions

3.1.1. Alcohol-related knowledge

The 16 studies that focused on children’s alcohol-related knowledge indicated that children as young as age two start to acquire knowledge of alcohol. Of these 16 studies, a) eleven revealed that children aged 2.0–10.0 can distinguish between alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages based on smell (Fossey, 1993a; Greenberg et al., 1988; Mennella and Garcia, 2000; Noll et al., 1990; Valentine et al., 2014), photographs (Austin and Nach-Ferguson, 1995; Hahn et al., 2000; Jahoda et al., 1980; Kuntsche et al., 2016; Zucker et al., 1995), or a role-playing scenario involving grocery shopping (Dalton et al., 2005). b) One study revealed that from age five and half on, children can tell factual ‘(alcohol makes you drunk’) and negative ‘(alcohol is bad for you’) information about alcohol (Fossey, 1993b). c) Three studies revealed that from age five on, children can describe the effects of alcohol (e.g., getting drunk, having accidents) (Casswell et al., 1988; Flett et al., 1987; Tennant, 1979), and d) one study revealed that from age five on, children know adults’ drinking motives, drinking places, and the quantity of a small or large amount of wine and whiskey (Gaines et al., 1988). Of the seven studies that examined sex differences in alcohol-related knowledge, two revealed that girls had more knowledge compared to boys (Austin and Nach-Ferguson, 1995; Gaines et al., 1988), yet five studies revealed no sex differences (Hahn et al., 2000; Jahoda et al., 1980; Kuntsche et al., 2016; Noll et al., 1990; Tennant, 1979). All nine studies that examined age differences in alcohol-related knowledge revealed that the knowledge of alcohol increased with age (Austin and Nach-Ferguson, 1995; Fossey, 1993a, 1993b; Gaines et al., 1988; Greenberg et al., 1985; Jahoda et al., 1980; Kuntsche et al., 2016; Noll et al., 1990; Zucker et al., 1995).
Table 2
Results of the critical appraisal of the 20 selected studies.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Author's</th>
<th>Selection: total 5 stars</th>
<th>Comparability: total 2 stars</th>
<th>Outcome: total 3 stars</th>
<th>Total stars</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Representativeness of the sample</td>
<td>Sample size</td>
<td>Non-respondents</td>
<td>Ascertainment of the exposure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kuntsche (2017)</td>
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<td>Kuntsche et al. (2016)</td>
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<td>Mares et al. (2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valentine et al. (2014)*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pieters et al. (2010)</td>
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<td>Dalton et al. (2005)</td>
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<td>Hahn et al. (2000)</td>
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<td>Mennella and Garcia (2000)</td>
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<td>Austin and Nach-Ferguson (1995)</td>
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<td>Zucker et al. (1995)</td>
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<td>Fossey (1993a)</td>
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<td>Noll et al. (1990)</td>
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<td>Caswell et al. (1988)</td>
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<td>Gaines et al. (1988)</td>
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<td>Greenberg et al. (1985)</td>
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<td>Tennant (1979)</td>
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Note: *
1) This study used a case study design, while the other 19 studies used cross-sectional study designs. NA: Not applicable.
2) Somewhat representative of the average in the target population (all participants or random sampling), 3) Truly representative of the average in the target population (non-random sampling), 4) Selected group of users, 5) No description of the sampling strategy.
6) Not justifiable, 7) Justified and satisfactory, 8) The study controls for the most important factor (select one), 9) The study controls for any additional factor, 10) Independent blind assessment, 11) Record linkage, 12) Self-report, 13) No description, 14) The statistical test used to analyze the data is clearly described and appropriate, and the measurement of the association is presented, including confidence intervals and the probability level (p-value), 15) The statistical test is not appropriate, not described or incomplete.
3.1.2. Alcohol-related norms

The five studies that focused on children’s alcohol-related norms indicated that children as young as age four have knowledge of alcohol use in adult culture. For instance, children (aged 2.9–10.0) assigned alcoholic beverages more often to males (Kuntsche et al., 2016; Zucker et al., 1995) and perceived males as liking alcohol-related activities more often (Spiegler, 1983) compared to females and children. Children (aged 2.6–7.0) also reported that alcoholic beverages, such as beer, wine, or whiskey, are consumed by adults only (Noll et al., 1990) and that adults prefer alcoholic beverages while children prefer non-alcoholic beverages (Jahoda et al., 1980). Besides having knowledge of these sex-specific and age-related alcohol norms, children (aged 3.0–6.0 years) can indicate that adults drink in specific situations. For example, adults were more often assigned alcoholic beverages at a party rather than when playing outdoors (Kuntsche et al., 2016). Of the four studies that examined sex differences in alcohol-related norms, only one study revealed that girls had more knowledge of alcohol-related norms compared to boys, as they less often assigned alcoholic beverages to children (Kuntsche et al., 2016). The other three studies did not find any sex differences in children’s alcohol-related norms (Jahoda et al., 1980; Noll et al., 1990; Spiegler, 1983). All four studies that examined age differences in alcohol-related norms revealed that knowledge of alcohol use in adult culture increased with age (Jahoda et al., 1980; Kuntsche et al., 2016; Spiegler, 1983; Zucker et al., 1995).

3.1.3. Alcohol expectancies

Of the five studies that focused on children’s alcohol expectancies, two revealed that children, from age six on, have positive explicit alcohol expectancies (e.g., ‘I think adults become friendly when they drink alcohol’) (Mares et al., 2015; Pieters et al., 2010). Four studies revealed that children, from age six on, have negative explicit alcohol expectancies (e.g., ‘I think adults become mean when they drink alcohol’) (Austin and Nach-Ferguson, 1995; Flett et al., 1987; Mares et al., 2015; Pieters et al., 2010). One study revealed that children, from age four on, have higher positive rather than negative explicit alcohol expectancies (Kuntsche, 2017). Lastly, one study indicated that children, from age nine on, have negative implicit alcohol expectancies, as they associated alcohol more strongly with angry faces rather than happy faces (Pieters et al., 2010). The two studies that examined sex and age differences in explicit alcohol expectancies showed opposite effects. A recent Dutch study showed that boys and girls had equally strong positive and negative explicit alcohol expectancies, yet older children had less positive and more negative explicit alcohol expectancies compared to younger children (Mares et al., 2015). In contrast, a recent Swiss study showed that girls have more positive explicit alcohol expectancies compared to boys, yet no age differences emerged.
for explicit alcohol expectancies (Kuntsche, 2017).

3.2. The impact of parental alcohol use on the acquisition of children’s alcohol-related cognitions

Of the eleven studies that focused on the impact of parental alcohol use on the acquisition of children’s alcohol-related cognitions, nine focused on alcohol-related knowledge (Casswell et al., 1988; Dalton et al., 2005; Gaines et al., 1988; Greenberg et al., 1985; Hahn et al., 2000; Jahoda et al., 1980; Mennella and Garcia, 2000; Noll et al., 1990; Zucker et al., 1995), three focused on alcohol-related norms (Jahoda et al., 1980; Noll et al., 1990; Zucker et al., 1995), and two focused on alcohol expectancies (Mares et al., 2015; Pieters et al., 2010). The results revealed that the impact of parental alcohol use on the acquisition of children’s alcohol-related cognitions is ambiguous. In some studies, parental alcohol use was positively related to children’s alcohol-related knowledge (Casswell et al., 1988; Gaines et al., 1988; Greenberg et al., 1985; Mares et al., 1993b; Noll et al., 1990; Zucker et al., 1995), alcohol-related norms (Dalton et al., 2005; Zucker et al., 1995), and explicit alcohol expectancies (Mares et al., 2015), yet other studies indicated no effect of parental alcohol use on children’s alcohol-related cognitions (Greenberg et al., 1985; Hahn et al., 2000; Jahoda et al., 1980; Pieters et al., 2010).

4. Discussion

This systematic review aimed to summarize the evidence from the past forty years (1976–2016) on children’s alcohol-related cognitions (alcohol-related knowledge, alcohol-related norms, alcohol expectancies) and the impact of parental alcohol use on the acquisition of these cognitions in the developmental period from age two to ten. This review showed that children already at age two start to acquire knowledge about alcohol, as they are able to distinguish alcoholic from non-alcoholic beverages; to distinguish factual and negative alcohol information; to describe alcohol effects; and to name drinking motives, places, and amounts of alcohol use (Austin and Nach-Ferguson, 1995; Casswell et al., 1988; Dalton et al., 2005; Flett et al., 1987; Fossey, 1993a, 1993b; Gaines et al., 1988; Greenberg et al., 1985; Hahn et al., 2000; Jahoda et al., 1980; Kuntsche et al., 2016; Mennella and Garcia, 2000; Noll et al., 1990; Tennant, 1979; Valentine et al., 2014; Zucker et al., 1995). From age four on, children start to understand that alcohol is usually restricted to adults and consumed in specific situations (Jahoda et al., 1980; Kuntsche et al., 2016; Noll et al., 1990; Spiegl, 1983; Zucker et al., 1995). By the age of four, children have certain, predominantly negative, explicit and implicit alcohol expectancies (Austin and Nach-Ferguson, 1995; Flett et al., 1987; Kuntsche, 2017; Mares et al., 2015; Pieters et al., 2010). The results of this review of children’s alcohol-related cognitions are quite consistent with findings of the literature review of Lang and Stritzke (1993) conducted twenty-four years ago, thereby underscoring the need to conduct more studies in this area of research. The alcohol-related cognitions of children increase with age due to improved cognitive and language abilities (Berk, 2013; Dalton et al., 2005; Flavell, 1999; Ross et al., 2005). Although girls are biologically and social-culturally more mature and more advanced in their language development (Berk, 2013; Gaines et al., 1988), the evidence of sex differences in children’s alcohol-related cognitions was inconsistent. One explanation may be that the alcohol-related cognitions depend more strongly on parental drinking habits and specific environmental factors rather than children’s sex.

The evidence of the impact of parental alcohol use on the acquisition of children’s alcohol-related cognitions has also been inconsistent so far, with some studies reporting a positive effect (Casswell et al., 1988; Dalton et al., 2005; Gaines et al., 1988; Greenberg et al., 1985; Mares et al., 2015; Mennella and Garcia, 2000; Noll et al., 1990; Zucker et al., 1995) and other studies finding no effects (Greenberg et al., 1985; Hahn et al., 2000; Jahoda et al., 1980; Pieters et al., 2010). The existing studies examined only parental alcohol use and not its visibility, that is, children’s exposure to it. According to the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977; Maisto et al., 1999), the degree to which the behavior of others is observable determines the acquisition of new knowledge. For example, some parents might drink frequently, that is, with colleagues after work or later in the evening when their children are in bed but not when their children are present. Other parents consume alcohol less frequently, but in presence of their children, in family-specific situations, such as when having meals, when playing a game, or when watching television. Therefore, children’s exposure to alcohol misuse (Zucker et al., 2008) and observed situational determinants and personal consequences, such as mood change among drinkers, are more likely to affect children’s alcohol-related cognitions rather than parental alcohol use per se. Possible differences in children’s exposure to parental alcohol use across studies may explain why study findings diverge, as the existing studies measured the effects of parental alcohol use and not children’s exposure to it on the acquisition of their alcohol-related cognitions.

The evidence of the impact of parental alcohol use on the acquisition of children’s alcohol-related cognitions should be interpreted with caution due to methodological flaws of the selected studies in this systematic review. First, evidence is limited (i.e., only 20 studies were conducted in the past forty years), outdated (i.e., only 6 out of 20 studies were conducted after the year 2000), and comes almost exclusively from the United States (i.e., 11 out of 20 studies). Therefore, the degree to which the reported findings still apply today and the degree to which they apply to a broader cultural context remains unclear. The methodological challenges encountered when studying this population with limited reading and/or writing skills and undeveloped language skills that can be easily influenced by the researcher or by the ways in which questions are phrased might explain this undeveloped area of research on children’s alcohol-related cognitions (Dalton et al., 2005). Besides, age-appropriate measurement tools for children tend to be costly and time and labor-intensive (Kuntsche and Zucker, 2016). Nonetheless, these methodological challenges do not justify the lack of knowledge of the development of children’s alcohol-related cognitions. Another explanation for the undeveloped area of research on children’s alcohol-related cognitions is the low prevalence of alcohol use among children (Zucker et al., 2009). Since most children start to drink alcohol during adolescence (Monsbouwer et al., 2007; Van Dorsseelaer et al., 2010), alcohol prevention and policies are mainly focusing on this age period. Scholars have argued, for instance, that postponing the age of alcohol initiation is crucial to prevent risky drinking and alcohol-related problems in adolescence and later in life (DeWit et al., 2000; Gruber et al., 1996; Hingson et al., 2000; Pitkänen et al., 2005). Although alcohol prevention should start early (Zucker, 2008), not much is known about what ‘early’ actually means. This is because the vast majority of studies on alcohol have been conducted among drinkers. Second, all evidence was obtained from cross-sectional study designs, which largely restricts conclusions about the causal impact of parental alcohol use on the acquisition of children’s alcohol-related cognitions. Third, most evidence was collected from non-representative samples recruited through convenience sampling strategies that enhance the risk of selection bias, which is a systematic error in the deliberate selection of study participants (Kunz et al., 2007). Selection bias impairs the external validity, that is, the extent to which study findings can be generalized to other situations and populations. Safeguarding the external validity by using representative samples recruited through random sampling strategies is important particularly in the undeveloped area of research on children’s alcohol-related cognitions to ascertain that study findings can be applied to a broader cultural context. Finally, no studies were identified that focused on the possible role of genetics in the acquisition of alcohol-related cognitions within the family context. Family, twin, and adoption studies have convincingly demonstrated that genes play an important role in the development of alcohol misuse and dependence, with heritability estimates in the range
of 50% to 60% for both males and females (McGue, 1999). Although genetic factors have been found to be important mostly for the increase in drinking once initiated (Agrawal et al., 2012; Dick, 2011; Kuntsche et al., 2004), they may indirectly influence the observational learning process by providing more opportunities for the child to learn alcohol-related cognitions when he or she has a parent who is more genetically prone towards alcohol use. Thus, even though genes may be less relevant for the child’s alcohol cognitions, as opposed to the child’s progression to more advanced drinking habits once initiated later in life (Kuntsche et al., 2004), future research efforts could explore the role of genetics in the acquisition of alcohol-related cognitions.

In sum, the research on children’s alcohol-related cognitions is quite undeveloped. Moreover, empirical evidence of the role of exposure to (or visibility of) parental alcohol use in the acquisition of children’s alcohol-related cognitions is missing in contemporary literature. To further contribute to the development of theories that would explain young people’s alcohol initiation and precursors of risky drinking that contribute to the increased mortality in late adolescence and young adulthood (Rehm et al., 2001), future studies should explore the role of exposure to parental alcohol use in the acquisition of children’s alcohol-related knowledge and alcohol-related norms as basis for alcohol expectations, as well as the transition from drinking motives to alcohol initiation and subsequent use. Additionally, the role of siblings and extended family members in this regard deserves attention, as parental influences are not necessarily synonymous with family influences. If families consist of more than parents and one child, the exposure to alcohol should ideally be measured within the broader family context. For this purpose, future longitudinal studies should use age-appropriate measurement tools and representative samples of children and early adolescents. The widespread availability of computer technology and the Internet provides opportunities to develop electronic and cost-effective measurement tools for children (e.g., touch-screen tablets) and early adolescents (e.g., online surveys) that would be easy to implement. This would also allow us to determine whether lower alcohol exposure by parents, but also by siblings and other extended family members, is an important factor that could be incorporated into prevention programs for children and young adolescents and their parents to significantly contribute to primary prevention.

Conflict of interest

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Contributors

CV was responsible for the literature search, the data selection and extraction process, the critical appraisal, and writing the manuscript. Ek and MB also contributed to the literature search and the data selection process, respectively. MK, RO, RE, KS, and Ek reviewed drafts and revisions of the manuscript and contributed to writing. All authors contributed to and have approved the final manuscript.

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