



## Alcohol Problems and Your Child's Sweet Tooth: What's The Deal?

A recent study, published in *Addiction*, highlights the relationship between a family history of alcohol problems and a child's strong desire for candy and sweets. Study authors were interested in reward pathways in the brain as they related to a preference for sweets. More specifically, they hypothesized a relationship between a childhood preference for candy and sweets and later problems with alcohol.

The study focused on a large sample of 300 children (between ages of 5 and 12) approximately half of which endorsed a family history of alcoholism. Researchers gave the children samples of water with varying levels of sugar (from "barely sweet" to "sweeter than a can of soda"). Following this administration, researchers followed up identifying which samples the participants preferred.

### Study Results

Findings identified that those children who preferred the sweetest samples were also most likely to have a family of alcoholism. This supports the hypotheses of the authors - that a preference for candy and sugary foods is linked to a family history of alcohol problems. As typical with correlational research, explanations for this relationship cannot be assumed. However, these findings suggest there are likely genetic factors that result in children becoming more susceptible

to sugar intake. In turn, this also suggests that children who are excessively drawn to sweets could be at increased risk for alcohol problems later in life. As the authors clearly state the article does not indicate that children who love candy *will* develop alcohol problems. It does suggest however, that an extreme preference for sweets indicates a greater risk for later problems with alcohol.

## Research in Action

Not all kids who love sweets will develop problems with addiction! However, if you have a biological family history of alcohol problems, you may want to think about your child's interest in sugary foods and sweets. While preferring sweets in childhood does not cause one to have problems with alcohol, it may indicate underlying neural circuits that indicate susceptibility to drug and alcohol problems. As always, it is advisable to talk to your children about your family history for all medical problems (including addiction). Helping your kids to understand these risk factors can provide some of the strongest prevention to avoid the devastating effects of substance use.