

Program to deter youth alcohol use also reduces conduct problems, study finds

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A University of Georgia program designed to reduce alcohol use, drug use and risky sexual behavior in African-American youth also reduces the likelihood of engaging in conduct problems by up to 74 percent two years later, according to a new study.

The finding, published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, is the latest in a series of studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of the Strong African-American Families (SAAF, pronounced "safe") Program, which is increasingly being adopted across Georgia and nationwide.

"A lot of programs show benefits in close proximity to the intervention, but many fewer—and none with African-American populations—show benefits one, two or more years after the intervention," said study co-author Gene Brody, director of the UGA Center for Family Research, part of the UGA Institute for Behavioral Research, and Regents Professor in the College of Family and Consumer Sciences. "Previous research has shown benefits of SAAF up to six years later."

Developed by Brody and Professor Velma McBride Murry, SAAF is based on more than 20 years of research that has identified parenting and care-giving practices that allow low-income, African-American families living in rural areas to raise children who are successful despite the challenges that stem from poverty, racism and a lack of social services. The program consists of seven weekly meetings that include concurrent, hour-long, sessions for pre-adolescent youth and their parents followed by a joint session in which the families practice the

skills they've learned.

Rather than lecturing to participants, SAAF facilitators engage them with specially designed videos, activities and games. Parents learn how to actively monitor, communicate and emotionally support their children and adolescents. Youth learn to set goals, manage peer pressure and appreciate their parents and other adults in their lives. In the joint sessions, the parents and youth participate in activities that help strengthen their relationships and instill pride in being African American.

The average age of youth in the program is 11, Brody said, and this pre-adolescent period is a critical point in development when youth start thinking about experimenting with alcohol and other substances and become more susceptible to peer pressure.

First implemented in 2001, the SAAF program is expanding to eight Georgia counties and is being adopted by the city of Denver. Brody and his colleagues have conducted several studies that compare the outcomes of hundreds of program participants with members of a control group. The researchers have found that among program participants:

- Alcohol use was reduced by 28 percent two years following the intervention and 25 percent six years later;
- Sexual behavior and marijuana use decreased;
- Caregiver depression was reduced;
- The likelihood of youth with low self control engaging in conduct problems decreased by 74 percent two years later.

Brody points out that the SAAF program is grounded in intensive research on successful parenting, but also benefits from the input of African Americans living in the communities that the program is designed to serve.

"In every step of the development of SAAF, a focus group of African-American parents and youth was convened," Brody said. "We would develop intervention targets with community members and, after the curriculum was written, would get additional feedback to make sure we were on the right track. It really was a partnership between the rural African-American community and our research center."

Source: University of Georgia

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