

Both good/bad movie characters who smoke influence teens to do the same

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Dartmouth researchers have determined that movie characters who smoke, regardless of whether they are "good guys" or "bad guys," influence teens to try smoking. The study, published in the July 2009 issue of the journal *Pediatrics*, is titled "Adolescent Smoking: Who Matters More, Good Guys or Bad Guys?"

"Previous studies have confirmed a link between [smoking](#) in movies and the initiation of smoking by adolescents, and we wanted to dig deeper into the data to see if the type of character who is smoking matters. Is it 'good guys' or 'bad guys' that have more of an influence?" said Susanne Tanski, the lead author on the study, and an assistant professor of pediatrics at Dartmouth Medical School. "It's true that 'bad guys' are more often smokers in the movies, but there really are not that many 'bad guys' compared to 'good guys'. Episode for episode, youth who saw negative character smoking were more likely to start smoking, but since overall there is so much more exposure to 'good guy' smoking, the net effect is similar."

The survey also revealed that low-risk teens, based on sensation-seeking behavior, are more strongly influenced by "bad guy" movie smoking. "This suggests that it's alluring for 'good' kids to emulate the 'bad' characters on the movie screen," said Tanski.

Tanski is part of a team of researchers at Dartmouth College and Dartmouth Medical School (DMS) who have been studying the connections between popular culture and risky behavior in [adolescents](#).

They have published numerous journal articles that document the link between exposure to smoking and drinking [alcohol](#) in movies and teens using [tobacco](#) and alcohol.

In May 2009, two members of this team, James Sargent and Todd Heatherton, published a research letter in the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#) that reported declining trends in both occurrences of smoking in movies and in smoking among U.S. eighth graders between 1996 and 2007. In that letter, the authors state, "[M]ovie smoking represents only one of several factors that contribute to youth smoking trends, including the marketing of tobacco, price of cigarettes, restrictions imposed by the Master Settlement Agreement in 1999, and state prevention programs. ... Nonetheless, the downward trend in movie smoking is consistent with an influence on downward trends in adolescent smoking." Sargent is a professor of pediatrics and the co-director of the Cancer Control Research Program at DMS's Norris Cotton Cancer Center at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, Heatherton is a professor of psychological and brain sciences at Dartmouth College.

Tanski acknowledges that, although there is a downward trend, smoking still occurs in many movies that teens watch, particularly given the popularity of movie channels and video rentals providing access to older films. "Parents should limit movie viewing and specifically restrict access to R-rated movies, which tend to contain more smoking," she said. "When teens do see [movies](#) or TV shows that contain smoking, parents should talk with them in an effort to discourage initiation of smoking."

Source: Dartmouth College

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