

Stereotypes can fuel teen misbehavior

October 21 2009



Christy Buchanan, professor of psychology at Wake Forest University, found that when parents expect their teenagers to conform to negative stereotypes, they are more likely to do so. Credit: Ken Bennett

Drinking. Drugs. Caving into peer pressure. When parents expect their teenagers to conform to negative stereotypes, those teens are in fact more likely to do so, according to new research by Christy Buchanan, professor of psychology at Wake Forest University.

"Parents who believe they are simply being realistic might actually contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy," says Buchanan, who studies adolescent development and behavior. "Negative expectations on the part of both parents and children predict more negative behaviors later on."

In her study, published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, Buchanan found that adolescents whose mothers expected them to take

more risks and be more rebellious reported higher levels of risk-taking behavior than their peers one year later. The same was true for adolescents' negative expectations.

"Higher expectations for risk-taking and rebelliousness predict higher levels of [problem behavior](#), even controlling for many other predictors of such behavior," Buchanan says.

More than 250 adolescents and their mothers participated in the study. The adolescents were sixth or seventh graders at the beginning of the study; they were resurveyed a year later. The study was co-authored by Johna Hughes at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Parents who expect their kids to suddenly become James Dean when they turn 13, even if they have not been rebellious earlier in life, might be making an important mistake. "Sometimes parents expect more negative behavior from their own adolescents than they should based on the adolescent's history of behavior," Buchanan says.

"By thinking risk-taking or rebelliousness is normal for teenagers and conveying that to their [children](#), parents might add to other messages from society that make teenagers feel abnormal if they are not willing to take risks or break laws. This can mean, for example, that when parents expect teens to drink before they turn 21 or to engage in other risky behaviors, kids are less likely to resist societal pressures to do so."

Because negative risk-taking during adolescence can lead to a variety of problems, parents should not be naïve about the possibility of such behavior, Buchanan says. But expectations that adolescents can not only resist such pressures but also exhibit positive behaviors might help reduce the incidence of negative risk-taking.

Buchanan offers the following suggestions for parents:

- Parents' own behavior is a powerful example. Do not suggest in your words or behavior that the only or best way to have fun is through drinking, sex or drug use.
- Let your teenager know that many adolescents resist drinking, smoking or early sexual activity.
- Draw attention to examples of teenagers who are doing positive things. Convey confidence that your child can do the same, and will not be alone in doing so.
- Communicate and support avenues for having fun without negative risk-taking. Teenagers who get into trouble are often simply seeking ways to relieve stress or have fun. Parents who understand this need can offer ideas and opportunities that are healthy and legal.
- Make your own home a fun and comfortable place for your teenager and his/her friends to socialize. Do not allow negative risk-taking such as drinking to occur in your own home under your supervision.
- Encourage and support involvement in positive extracurricular activities, such as community service, sports, music, theater, faith-based youth groups or other activities.
- Pay attention to your teenager's peer choices. Positive peer pressure exists! Encourage and support affiliation with other teens who are involved in positive activities and not getting into trouble. Get to know other parents, and encourage affiliations with families who share your values.

- Make sure your teenager knows that there will be negative consequences if he or she engages in negative risk-taking, and follow through if such risk-taking occurs. Lack of consequences implicitly communicates that [parents](#) accept such behaviors.

Source: Wake Forest University ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Stereotypes can fuel teen misbehavior (2009, October 21) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-10-stereotypes-fuel-teen-misbehavior.html>

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