

Tweens just say 'maybe' to cigarettes and alcohol

March 12 2012

When it comes to prevention of substance use in our tween population, turning our kids on to thought control may just be the answer to getting them to say no.

New research published in the [Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs](#), co-led by professors Roisin O'Connor of Concordia University and Craig Colder of State University of New York at Buffalo, has found that around the tween-age years kids are decidedly ambivalent toward cigarettes and alcohol. It seems that the youngsters have both positive and [negative associations](#) with these [harmful substances](#) and have yet to decide one way or the other. Because they are especially susceptible to social influences, media portrayals of drug use and [peer pressure](#) become strong allies of [substance use](#) around these formative years.

"Initiation and escalation of alcohol and cigarette use occurring during late childhood and adolescence makes this an important developmental period to examine precursors of substance use," says O'Connor, who is an Assistant Professor in Concordia's Department of Psychology. "We conducted this study to have a better understanding of what puts this group at risk for initiating substance use so we can be more proactive with prevention."

The study showed that at the impulsive, automatic level, these kids thought these substances were bad but they were easily able to overcome these biases and think of them as good when asked to place them with positive words. O'Connor explains that "this suggests that this age group

may be somewhat ambivalent about drinking and smoking. We need to be concerned when kids are ambivalent because this is when they may be more easily swayed by [social influences](#)."

According to O'Connor, drinking and smoking among this age group is influenced by both impulsive (acting without thinking), and controlled (weighing the pros against the cons) decisional processes. With this study, both processes were therefore examined to best understand the risk for initiating substance use.

To do this, close to 400 children between the ages of 10 and 12 participated in a computer-based test that involved targeted tasks. The tweens were asked to place pictures of cigarettes and alcohol with negative or positive words. The correct categorization of some trials, for example, involved placing pictures of alcohol with a positive word in one category and placing pictures of [alcohol](#) with negative words in another category.

"From this we saw how well the participants were able to categorize the pictures in the way that was asked. Using a mathematical formula of probabilities we were able to identify how often responses were answered with impulsive and thoughtful processes as they related to drinking and smoking," says O'Connor."

The next step in this study is to look at kids over a longer period of time. The hypothesis from the research is that as tweens begin to use these substances there will be an apparent weakening in their negative biases toward drinking and smoking. The desire will eventually outway the costs. It is also expected that they will continue to easily outweigh the pros relative to the cons related to substance use.

"We would like to track kids before they use substances and follow them out into their first few years of use and see how these processes play

out," says O'Connor. "Ultimately, we would like to help kids with that thoughtful piece. There is such a big focus now on telling kids substances are bad, but from our study we are seeing that they already know they are bad, therefore that is not the problem. The problem is the likelihood of external pressures that are pushing them past their ambivalence so that they use. In a school curriculum format I see helping kids deal with their ambivalence in the moment when faced with the choice to use or not use substances."

More information: NOW Article: Understanding student drinking:
[www.concordia.ca/now/what-we-d ... student-drinking.php](http://www.concordia.ca/now/what-we-d...student-drinking.php)

Provided by Concordia University

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