

# It takes a village to keep teens substance free

May 1 2012

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During high school the parents of teenagers' friends can have as much effect on the teens' substance use as their own parents, according to prevention researchers.

"Among friendship groups with 'good parents' there's a [synergistic effect](#) -- if your parents are consistent and aware of your whereabouts, and your friends' parents are also consistent and aware of their (children's) whereabouts, then you are less likely to use substances," said Michael J. Cleveland, research assistant professor at the Prevention Research Center and the Methodology Center, Penn State. "But if you belong to a friendship group whose parents are inconsistent, and your parents are consistent, you're still more likely to use alcohol. The differences here are due to your friends' parents, not yours."

Cleveland and his colleagues report parenting behaviors and adolescents' substance-use behaviors to be significantly correlated in the "expected directions" in this month's issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*. Results show higher levels of parental knowledge and disciplinary consistency leading to a lower likelihood of substance use, whereas lower levels lead to a higher likelihood of substance use.

However if adolescents' parents are consistent and generally aware of their children's activities, but the parents of the children's friends are inconsistent and generally unaware of their own children's activities, the [adolescents](#) are more likely to use substances than if their friends' parents were more similar to their own parents.

"The peer context is a very powerful influence," said Cleveland. "We've found in other studies that the peer aspect can overwhelm your upbringing."

While long suspected to be the case, the researchers believe this to be the first study where parenting at the peer level proved to have a concrete and statistically significant impact on child outcomes.

The researchers surveyed 9,417 ninth-grade students during the spring semester, and then again the following spring semester. The students came from 27 different rural school districts in Pennsylvania and Iowa, all participating in the Promoting School-university-community Partnerships to Enhance Resilience (PROSPER) study. In ninth grade, the researchers asked the students to name five of their closest friends. The researchers identified social networks within the schools by matching up the mutually exclusive friendships. Overall, the researchers identified 897 different friendship groups, with an average of 10 to 11 students in each group.

At that time students also answered questions about their perceptions of how much their parents knew about where they were and who they were with. They were also asked about the consistency of their parents' discipline. In the tenth-grade follow-up, students responded to questions about their substance use habits, specifically their use of alcohol, cigarettes and marijuana.

Behaviors of friends' parents influenced substance use even when taking into account the effects of the teens' own parents' behaviors and their friends' substance use, demonstrating the powerful effect of peers on adolescent behavior.

"I think that it empowers parents to know that not only can they have an influence on their own children, but they can also have a positive

influence on their children's friends as well," said Cleveland. "And that by acting together -- the notion of 'it takes a village' -- can actually result in better outcomes for adolescents."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: It takes a village to keep teens substance free (2012, May 1) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-05-village-teens-substance-free.html>

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