

Peer influence more likely to encourage smoking, say sociologists

July 22 2014



Arizona State University sociologist David Schaefer co-led a recent study on adolescent friends' influence on starting or stopping smoking. Findings show that peer pressure is stronger in making youth take up the smoking habit than quitting it.

(Medical Xpress)—Adolescents tend to be more powerful in influencing their friends to start smoking than in helping them to quit, according to sociologists.

In a study of adolescent friendship networks and [smoking](#) over time, the

researchers found that friends exert influence on their peers to both start and quit smoking, but the influence to start is stronger.

"What we found is that social influence matters—it leads nonsmoking friends into smoking and nonsmoking friends can turn smoking friends into nonsmokers," said Steven Haas, an associate professor of sociology and demography at Pennsylvania State University. "However, the impact is asymmetrical—the tendency for adolescents to follow their friends into smoking is stronger."

Haas, who co-authored the study with David Schaefer, an associate professor in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change at Arizona State University, said there are a number of reasons why [peer influence](#) to start smoking is stronger than peer influence to quit.

"In order to become a smoker, kids need to know how to smoke, they need to know where to buy cigarettes and how to smoke without being caught, which are all things they can learn from their friends who smoke," said Haas. "But, friends are unlikely to be able to provide the type resources needed to help them quit smoking."

Nonsmoking friends do not have access to [nicotine replacement products](#) or organized cessation programs to help their friends quit, according to the researchers, who report their findings in the June issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*.

"Most often, adolescents will try to either quit cold turkey, or by gradually reducing their smoking and these are the least successful ways to quit," said Haas.

While most current adolescent smoking prevention programs are aimed at building resistance to peer pressure, Haas said school nurses and health professionals may be able to design programs that use peer

pressure to positively influence behavior. For example, they could design programs to help nonsmoking adolescents help their smoking friends.

"We have to have a more nuanced view of influence," said Haas. "In reality, kids aren't all bad or all good and some [friends](#) who may not be a good influence in one area may actually be a positive influence in other areas."

The research may also apply to other aspects of adolescent behavior.

"This may apply well beyond smoking," said Haas. "There may be similar patterns in adolescent drinking, drug use, sex, and delinquency."

Even though [smoking rates](#) have declined, adolescent smoking remains a serious problem that has both health and economic costs. From 2000 to 2004, smoking and second-hand exposure to cigarettes were linked to 400,000 deaths, and smoking results in nearly \$100 billion in lost productivity each year, according to the researchers.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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