

Parents have more influence than they might realize to prevent substance use

December 10 2015

Adolescence is a time when many children may consider experimenting with alcohol or drugs. New research shows parents can reduce that risk by maintaining a healthy and open relationship with their children.

Thomas Schofield, lead author of the study and an assistant professor of [human development](#) and family studies at Iowa State University, says adolescents are more likely to drink or use drugs if they hang out with deviant friends or if they actively seek out peers to facilitate substance use. Parents who know what's going on with their [children](#) and their friends can minimize the impact of both pathways, according to the study published in the journal *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*.

"Parents don't even have to be 'super parents,'" Schofield said. "As long as they're at the 71st percentile, or getting a C- in parenting, both of these dangerous pathways to drug abuse go away."

Schofield and colleagues Rand Conger and Richard Robins, both at the University of California, Davis, observed interactions between Latino parents and children to gauge the level and effects of parental monitoring. They focused specifically on Latino families to better understand if cultural differences influenced parenting behaviors and outcomes. Latinos are also at greater risk to use drugs and alcohol at an early age, and have a higher probability of use and abuse over time, Schofield said.

For this paper, the research team observed children in fifth grade and

again in seventh grade. Schofield says their data show that for many, this age range is a starting point or baseline for alcohol, tobacco and drug use. It's also a time when parents may be caught off guard by changes in their child's behavior, if they don't have a strong foundation established.

"Parents who haven't been deliberately investing time during middle and late childhood to build the relationship with their child – one that is very open, with lots of communication, respect and understanding – all the scaffolding falls away when their child becomes an adolescent," Schofield said. "The relationship is what the parent made it, and without that scaffolding a lot of parents struggle."

He added, "Preadolescence and early adolescence is not a particularly risky time; it's just the best time to get kids on board with collaborating, communicating with their parents and creating that relationship earlier."

Nearly 675 children were included in the study. Researchers observed mothers and fathers separately as they interacted with their children. They also controlled for child temperament and cultural beliefs. This indicates that more than genetics is at play, and parents can make a difference in influencing their child's behavior, Schofield said.

Parents also influence one another

Deterring drug and alcohol use is just one reason why it is important for parents to be on the same page and share the same beliefs on parenting. Not only do parents affect their child's behavior in this regard, but over time they also change each other's thoughts and actions as a parent. That's the conclusion of a separate study, in which Schofield and colleague Jennifer Weaver, at Boise State University, analyzed data from two-parent families participating in the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study on Early Child Care and Youth Development.

According to their analysis, beliefs about parenting predicted change in actual parenting behavior. They also found that behavior can change beliefs, but this effect was not as strong. The study provides insight that many people may not consider before becoming a parent, but should.

"Young people seek out romantic partners based on shared interests, physical attractiveness and how fun they are, not based on what kind of parent they'll become," Schofield said. "Whoever you end up making your spouse, they're going to influence your parenting behavior. That should be a factor in deciding who you have children with and it is not a factor a lot of people take into consideration."

Schofield says it's only natural that parents emulate each other, because we all adapt and shift to the people around us. But he notes that the ability for one parent to affect the other only exists when they have a good marital relationship, according to a previous study he and colleagues conducted. Knowing this, [parents](#) should use it to their advantage. For example, if there is an issue going on with their child, get support together. The research is published in the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

Provided by Iowa State University

Citation: Parents have more influence than they might realize to prevent substance use (2015, December 10) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-12-parents-substance.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--