

Asking kids about drugs doesn't prompt drug use, study finds

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A University of Washington study has found that asking preteens about substance use doesn't prompt them to try alcohol, tobacco or drugs. Credit: Lexie Flickinger/Flickr

It is an oft-repeated fear, particularly among parents: that discussing an undesirable behavior, or even an illegal or dangerous one, may encourage kids to try it.

But when it comes to asking pre-teens about alcohol, drug and tobacco use, a University of Washington-led study finds no evidence that children will, as a consequence of being asked about it, use the substance in question.

The study by the UW Social Development Research Group, published in the October issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, focused on school-based surveys of fifth- and sixth-graders to determine whether their behaviors changed over time. The research team found that, among two groups of students—one surveyed in fifth and sixth grade, and a control [group](#) surveyed only in sixth grade—substance use did not increase following [student](#) participation in the surveys.

Schools often [survey](#) students for a variety of purposes; this study, lead author John Briney said, indicates that surveys about substance use can provide useful information without increasing risk.

"We hope that it puts community members at ease about collecting data in the schools for prevention purposes. It's a relatively unobtrusive, inexpensive method to gather data," said Briney, senior data manager for the Social Development Research Group. "Communities can use data to guide prevention efforts and not worry they're harming students."

The research stems from a 2,000-student sample of respondents in the Community Youth Development Study, which was administered in seven states, including Washington. In the UW study sample, two-thirds of the students were surveyed in both fifth and sixth [grades](#), with the remainder surveyed in sixth grade. About 40 percent of respondents were students of color; half were girls.

In both cohorts, students answered written questions about recent (past 30 days) and lifetime use of cigarettes, alcohol, inhalants, and marijuana.

Among sixth-graders who had been first surveyed in the fifth grade, 10.4 percent said they had smoked cigarettes during their lifetime; 20.8 percent had used alcohol; 10.8 percent had used inhalants; and 2.6 percent had smoked marijuana. These usage rates were actually lower than among the control group of sixth-graders—of whom 12.6 percent said they had smoked marijuana and 23.6 percent said they had used alcohol. Rates of lifetime use of inhalants and marijuana in the control sample were higher than rates in the initial sample but not statistically significant.

If the surveys had prompted substance use among the initial group of fifth-graders, then usage rates when they were in sixth grade should have been higher than those of the [control group](#) of sixth-graders, Briney explained.

"The study answered an important question—whether asking about substance use at a young age encourages use. We didn't think it would, and the data show that asking about drug use doesn't increase use," he said.

Conducting such a study in other locations, especially in states where [marijuana](#) has been legalized (this survey was conducted in 2004, prior to legalization in Washington) and among older students would be useful, and could yield slightly different results, Briney said.

Regardless, he added, for schools and communities that want information to guide prevention efforts, this study shows there is value, not harm, in asking such questions.

More information: John S. Briney et al. Testing the Question-

Behavior Effect of Self-Administered Surveys Measuring Youth Drug Use, *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2017). DOI: [10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.06.026](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.06.026)

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