

Children's Knowledge/Opinions May Predict Youth Alcohol/Tobacco Use

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A new study sheds light into the way that communities may be able to more closely monitor developing use of alcohol and cigarette among youth. The study tracked children's opinions of smokers and drinkers, and their knowledge of how many of their peers and friends use alcohol and cigarettes, to see if they could predict adolescent use of alcohol and cigarettes.

How did they do it?

The study, based on longitudinal data collected during a seven-year period, tracked four grade cohorts. Data were collected annually beginning in the 2nd through 5th grades. Researchers used a combination of in-school assessments, telephone and mailed questionnaires and structured interviews, depending on the age and availability of the student.

They measured children's opinions of smokers and drinkers, by asking if they thought that kids who smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol are "exciting", "cool", "neat" or "popular." This builds on previous research, which indicated that by the 2nd grade, boys and girls have formed reliable social opinions of individuals who smoke cigarettes and those who drink alcohol. To assess children's beliefs of how much their peers and friends use alcohol or cigarettes, they asked questions such as, "How many kids at school or in your neighborhood smoke cigarettes/drink alcohol?" and, "Do you have friends who drink/smoke?"

Then they asked children about their intentions and willingness to smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol. For example, the question, "Do you think you would (smoke/drink alcohol) when you are an adult?" This question assessed their planned intentions to do so. While the question, "Suppose you were with one of

your friends and one of them offered you (cigarettes/alcohol), how willing would you be to do so?" measured their willingness.

The study indicates that although intentions and willingness seem similar, they are quite different when predicting behavior. Both move a young person closer to actually using a substance, but intention is considered a "reasoned and planned path to behavior" while willingness is "reactive, rather than planned." Children's opinions of smokers and drinkers and their perceptions of peer use, may effect intentions and willingness to use differently, but, both can be used to predict later substance use.

What did they find?

- Children with favorable attitudes toward smokers and drinkers, and who believe that many of their peers and friends smoke cigarettes and/or drink alcohol are more likely to report higher intentions and willingness to smoke and/or drink.
- As willingness and intentions to smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol increase, the chances that the children will report actual use of that substance in adolescence also increases.
- Although willingness and intentions were highly related and led to actual use of alcohol and cigarettes, results showed that they are different. Intent to use is a much stronger predictor than one's willingness to use a particular substance if offered.
- As children aged, their opinions of smokers and drinkers became more favorable, and they reported more use of alcohol and cigarettes among their peers and friends.

Source: Andrews, A., Barckley, M., Hampson, S., Gerrard, M., & Gibbons, F. (2008). *The effect of early cognitions on cigarette and alcohol use during adolescence.* *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 22(1), 96-106.

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- ☐ **Direct underage alcohol use prevention efforts toward younger children. Teach children the dangers of alcohol and that drinking alcohol is not "cool."** This study found that it appears as though children and adolescents view smoking cigarettes as being a more risky behavior than drinking alcohol. Increased education on how alcohol affects the young brain, and more information on how early drinking can lead to alcoholism could change these perceptions. Also, while many communities are making great strides in reducing social norms related to alcohol, more efforts need to target changing social images related to those who drink alcohol. Teach children about the social problems that alcoholics face. Information must of course, be tailored to developmental age and be culturally considerate.
- ☐ **Start early!** Many prevention programs today, continue to target older students in the 7th and 8th grade. However, research consistently tells us that we need to change our old habits and target prevention efforts toward younger children. Since children form measurable and reliable perceptions about substance users and substance use rates as early as the 2nd grade, and since favorable perceptions increase with age and are predictive of substance use in adolescence, prevention education for younger children could be the key to preventing early onset in the first place.
- ☐ **Consider engaging in a focus group with younger children in your community.** Do you know what second and third graders in your community know about alcohol, tobacco and other drugs? Can young children recognize alcohol and cigarettes? What do they think about people who use them? This kind of information from younger children can be a critical resource for understanding what is happening in your community and may help inform future prevention programming.

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