

## Acculturation Impacts Hispanic Adolescents' Risk of Substance Abuse

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New research published in the *Journal of Immigrant Minority Health* supports the theory that acculturation discrepancies exist and may impact Hispanic adolescents' substance use behaviors. Acculturation refers to a process where individuals from a particular culture adopt the norms, values, attitudes and behaviors of individuals from another culture. Typically acculturation occurs when a person's culture of origin gradually changes to become more similar to that of the host society or dominant culture, but the process can go both ways.

Extensive research exists on the wide-ranging effects of acculturation on the lives of immigrants residing in the United States. This study, supported by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) and conducted by researchers at the University of Southern California, tested an acculturation theory that predicts that differences in acculturation among Hispanic adolescents compared to that of their parents may account for increases in adolescents' risk of substance use. To date, few studies have assessed this issue.

### How did they do it?

A survey was used to collect data as part of a longitudinal study of acculturation patterns and substance use among Hispanic/Latino adolescents in Southern California (Project RED). The survey, available in both English and Spanish, measured Hispanic adolescents' cultural orientation, their perceptions of their parents' cultural orientation, their degree of family cohesion, their substance use behaviors and collected demographic characteristics. Ultimately the sample included 1,772 Hispanic 9th grade students, (predominantly second generation Mexican-American) from seven

Southern California high schools whose student population had at least 70 percent Hispanic students. The students represented a wide range of socioeconomic groups.

### What did they find?

1. *When Hispanic adolescents perceive their own orientation toward American culture to be greater than that of their parents (Adolescent U.S. orientation minus parents' U.S. orientation):* Adolescents were more likely to report cigarette smoking, alcohol and marijuana use in their lifetime and in the past month.
2. *When Hispanic adolescents perceive their parents' orientation toward Hispanic culture to be greater than that of their own (Adolescent Hispanic orientation minus parents' Hispanic orientation):* Adolescents were more likely to report alcohol and marijuana use in their lifetime and in the past month. This factor did not appear to have an affect on whether or not adolescents reported having smoked cigarettes in their lifetime or past month.
3. *When Hispanic adolescents report a dominant orientation toward Hispanic culture, it serves as a protective factor.* These adolescents were less likely to report having smoked cigarettes or used marijuana in their lifetime and in the past month.
4. *The degree of perceived family cohesion as reported by Hispanic adolescents is associated with acculturation gaps among parents and their children.* Adolescents who perceived their own orientation toward American culture to be greater than that of their parents reported lower levels of family cohesion, this was associated with higher levels of reported substance use.

**Source:** Unger, J.B., Ritt-Olson, A., Soto, D.W., Baezconde-Garbanati, L. (2009). Parent-child acculturation discrepancies as a risk factor for substance use among Hispanic adolescents in Southern California. *Journal of Immigrant Minority Health*, 11, 149-157.

### What Coalitions Can Do

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- o **Facilitate opportunities for Hispanic adolescents and their families to come together**— While close family ties are important for all young people, a lack or loss of family cohesion could have greater affects on the behavior outcomes of Hispanic youth compared to youth born in the United States. Often referred to in Spanish as *familismo*, strong identification with and attachment to family members is considered one of the most important cultural values among Hispanic/Latino people. Coalitions should facilitate activities that allow youth to express feelings of their cultural heritage and social milieu. One way your coalition can do this is by planning appropriate celebrations of cultural holidays without having alcohol present.
- o **Consider providing bicultural competence training to Hispanic parents and their children**— This type of training teaches young people living in two distinct cultures the skills necessary to successfully navigate both cultures simultaneously. It promotes social competence and a positive identity as it helps them to understand the motivations, perspectives and feelings of individuals from cultures different than their own. Coalitions should plan activities that promote intergenerational cohesion.
- o **Remain aware of this issue and the potential impacts that acculturation has on Hispanic families living in the United States**— Research continues to expand, however many unanswered questions remain. That is why cultural competence, which requires not only knowledge, but also sensitivity to and interest in different cultures, is important. Try to create opportunities for safe forums where families can gather and discuss these types of issues.
- o **Work with an expert**— Successfully implementing culturally competent programs can be complex and may require the help of an expert. For example the act of properly translating the survey used in the study from English to Spanish required the help of bilingual experts from Mexico, El Salvador and Argentina to ensure that it reflected the language used by Mexican-Americans and other Hispanic/Latinos living in Southern California.

For more information on the ARSMA-II (Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican-Americans), please visit <http://seneca.uab.es/antropologia/jlm/ars/escala1.pdf>

For more information on the FACES II scale used to measure family cohesion, please visit: <http://www.facesiv.com/>

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