

Strong School and Family Ties Protect Teens from Violence, Drugs, Suicide, and Early Sex

Initial results from the largest survey of adolescents ever undertaken in the United States indicate that a feeling of personal connection to family and school plays a crucial role in protecting young people from cigarette, alcohol and marijuana use, as well as violence, suicide, and early sexual activity.

The congressionally mandated, federally funded National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) found that adolescents who reported a “connectedness” to their parents were the least likely to engage in behaviors that endangered their health. These young people felt close to their parents, believed their parents and family members cared about them, and were satisfied with their family relationships. To a lesser extent, teens were less likely to engage in risky behavior if their parents were present at key times during the day and shared activities with them. Also, adolescents whose parents had high expectations for their children’s school performance reported fewer signs of emotional distress.

The study found that many adolescents are living in homes with easy access to cigarettes, marijuana, alcohol and guns, and this was linked to more use of these substances, more violent behavior, and thoughts or attempts of suicide. Further, working 20 or more hours per week— which nearly one in five teenagers does— increased the likelihood a teen would experience emotional distress, smoke, or engage in substance abuse or early sexual activity.

Contrary to common assumptions, Add Health found that parents—not just peers—play a central role for their children throughout adolescence. These findings offer parents guidance on what works in protecting their children from harm, the researchers report. They suggest parents who wish to help their children avoid risky behaviors should spend time with, talk with, be available to, and set high standards for them, and send clear messages about what to do and not do.

Overall, the survey results show that most adolescents are doing well. Most teens, most of the time, make choices that protect them from harm. But the Add Health findings confirm the results of other studies that show a significant proportion of teens put their health at risk in a variety of ways. For example, 3.5 percent of all adolescents reported suicide attempts in the past year; one-quarter identified themselves as being current smokers; one in six (17.5 percent) reported drinking alcohol more than once a month; nearly one-third reported having smoked marijuana; and fully 16 percent of seventh and eighth graders and almost half (48.5 percent) of ninth to 12th graders said they had experienced sexual intercourse.

These findings are drawn from a sample of the responses to the three-stage Add Health survey. In the first phase, roughly 90,000 students from grades seven through 12 at 145 schools around the United States answered brief questionnaires to provide information about their health, friendships self-esteem, and expectations for the future. In the second phase of the study, roughly 20,000 students and their parents were interviewed in the students’ homes. A final phase of the study, not yet reported, repeated the home interviews with the students one year later.

Home environment key

The study found that the mere presence of drugs, alcohol, or tobacco in the home increased the likelihood of adolescents using these substances or of engaging in other risky behaviors. Alcohol was readily available in more than one quarter (27.8 percent) of respondents’ homes and one in three adolescents reported that cigarettes were easily available at home. The researchers concluded that home environment plays a major role in whether a teen uses illicit substances. They concluded that when adolescents do not have access to alcohol and drugs at home, they are less likely to use them.

The importance of school ties

Students’ feelings of connection to school—that is, their perception that teachers treat students fairly, that they feel close to people at school, and that they are a part of school—appear to protect them from every health risk examined. No links were found between student behavior and school characteristics such as size, teacher student ratios, teacher experience, and the school’s grade range.

Discussing sex with teens crucial

Adolescents who reported strong ties to family and school, and who have a high grade point average, were more likely than their peers to delay having sexual intercourse. Adolescents who delayed first intercourse were also more likely to have taken a public pledge to remain virgins until they married and to report that their parents disapprove of them having sex. Compared with those who have been pregnant, sexually experienced girls who have not been pregnant are more likely to have begun intercourse later, to perceive negative consequences of becoming pregnant, and to report being more involved in activities with their parents. The researchers suggest that if parents want their teenagers to postpone intercourse, they should discuss the subject directly.

“Out of synch” students at risk

The researchers report that more than one in five young people has been held back at least one year in school and many school districts are considering tightening their policies on promoting children to the next grade. Yet the survey found that adolescents who physically appear either older or younger than their peers are more likely to engage in risky behavior. Repeating a grade or appearing older than classmates predisposed adolescents to depression, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, violence, substance use, and early sexual activity. Seventh and eighth graders who felt they looked younger than their peers reported experiencing more emotional distress than did their peers.

Religion plays a positive role

Nearly 85 percent of students reported belonging to a religious group. Those who said religion and prayer were important to them were less likely to use unhealthy substances or have premarital sex.

More findings expected

Future analyses of Add Health data will address a host of questions about how families, schools, peers, and communities affect adolescent behavior and health, among them:

How do older siblings influence the health behaviors of their younger brothers and sisters?

Can parents contribute to the health and safety of their children by sending them to a different school or moving to another neighborhood?

Can communities reduce teen alcohol use by making alcohol harder to get in their communities?

Understanding teen violence

Recent shootings at middle and high schools have raised many questions and focused attention on adolescent violence. The Add Health findings show that a significant number of children across the United States—almost one quarter of those surveyed—have easy access to guns at home. The study found that adolescents living in homes where guns are kept are more likely to behave violently and are also more likely to attempt or contemplate suicide.

Teens who reported strong family ties were somewhat less likely to be involved in interpersonal violence than teens that did not report close family ties. Having a parent present at key times during the day—breakfast, after school, dinner, and bedtime—was linked to lower levels of violence among older teens (ninth through 12th graders).

More than 10 percent of males and more than 5 percent of females interviewed reported that they had committed a violent act in the previous year. These violent acts included participating in physical fights, injuring someone, threatening someone with a weapon, using a weapon in a fight, or shooting or stabbing someone. More younger teens (seventh and eighth graders) than older teens reported having been involved in violent activities. Urban teens, teens whose families received welfare, and Native American teens appeared more likely than other teens to have been involved in violence. Also, 12.4 percent of students said that they carried a weapon to school in the previous month. About 12 percent said they had been a victim of violent behavior by peers.

For more information on the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, contact Jo Jones, project director, Carolina Population Center, 123 West Franklin Street, University Square East, Chapel Hill, NC 27516-3997; e-mail: jo_jones@unc.edu; Website: <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/addhealth>.

References

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Words Can Work: Knowing the Issues, Talking With Kids can help parents to start and continue conversations with their teenager.

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