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Friends remain the biggest influence when teens smoke

by ERIN SHEA
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For teens, friends often lead the way to risky behaviors.

Friendships with shared interests have the strongest influence on whether teens start smoking or drinking. This influence trumps the influence from a teen's best friend, and those peers whom they admire, if the liking isn't mutual.

That's the finding of a study done by the University of Texas in Houston, and the kind of friendship did not matter as much in influencing teen drinking.

Lead researcher Kayo Fujimoto, a public health expert, said that because of these findings, smoking and drinking intervention programs should not be combined together, and should be tailored for how the behaviors are influenced by kinds of friendship.

"For smoking, parents need to be more concerned about who they hang out with," Fujimoto said. "For drinking, parents need to be concerned about solitary activities that can conceal the drinking behavior and talk more with their children about responsible drinking."

However, friends are not the only influences that lead to teen drinking and smoking. Experts said that advertisements and community attitudes have a big effect on teen behaviors.

The researchers surveyed data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. The data involved more than 90,000 7-12 graders across the U.S. The data, though gathered in the mid-1990s, is still relevant, said Fujimoto.

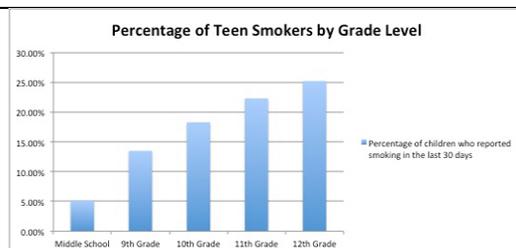
"Nothing in literature, news or my experience makes me think that things have changed significantly," he said. But the new research focused on the context and kinds of friendships that influence teen behavior.

"The tobacco industry is what gets kids to smoke," said Dave Dobbins, chief operating officer for the American Legacy Foundation, the organization that runs the truth smoking prevention campaign. The tobacco industries have been using cultural cues to tailor advertisements towards teens, such as making smoking look like an adult activity and how making the choice to smoke shows individuality, Dobbins said.

"If you want your kids not to smoke, then you shouldn't smoke," Dobbins said. He said that the "just say no" approach can be counterproductive, but campaigns, such as the truth® campaign, based in Washington, D.C., can empower teens to make their own decisions.

"Education is the key," said Danier Piedrahita, a clinician and youth community organizer for SGA Youth & Family Services in Chicago. However, access to alcohol and tobacco can be a factor in a teen's choice to drink and smoke, and community wide prevention is what will make a big difference.

"You need to give more reasons than just saying no."



Graphic created by Erin Shea/MEDILL

Percentage of young smokers shown by grade level. Children were classified as "smokers" if they had smoked a cigarette once in the last 30 days before the survey. Data from the American Legacy Foundation and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2009 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

Percentage of high schoolers who reported smoking and drinking (at least once in the last 30 days)

Percentage of high schoolers who reported smoking:17.2%

Percentage of high schoolers who reported drinking: 41.8%

Data from the CDC's 2009 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

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