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ORI SCIENTISTS

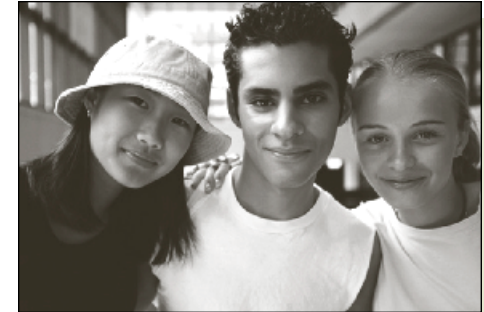
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Model Connects Family Ties and Youth Behavior

Scientists at Oregon Research Institute are zeroing in on some of the causes of antisocial behavior, drug and alcohol use, and poor school performance during adolescence. ORI researchers have recently completed a series of studies testing a model that explains why kids sometimes drift away from their family members, strike up friendships with other troubled kids, and then begin a downward spiral of failing grades, drug and alcohol abuse, and violent or criminal behavior.

drinking, using drugs, skipping school. In contrast, kids who have good relationships with their family



members tend not to have as many behavior problems.

Multi-Problem Behavior Model

Many family members know all too well the sequence of events the model of social influences on multi-problem behavior describes: frequent family arguments, communication breakdown, hard feelings among family members, alienation between adults and kids. As a result, parents quit monitoring their kids, who then develop friendships with other youths who are involved in problem behavior. Soon the destructive behaviors begin as the kids start to experiment with problem behaviors with their friends—fighting, vandalizing property, stealing, smoking,

In two previous studies by ORI scientists, the model was shown to be effective for explaining the connection between poor family relations and antisocial behavior by Caucasian kids. Until recently, however, ORI researchers didn't know whether the model also worked well for American Indian and Hispanic youths. ORI scientists wanted to know whether differences in the family life and social and cultural customs of these two ethnic groups would produce differences in the way that youth problem behaviors develop. To answer these questions, the researchers collected information from the kids

themselves about the quality of their family life, the kinds of friends they had, the behavior of those friends, and their own behaviors.

Participants and Measures

In the study, ORI scientists collected information from more than 12,000 seventh-grade students attending schools in 16 rural communities in Oregon. The average age of the students was a little over 12 years. The students completed a questionnaire that asked them to identify their ethnic background and indicate the frequency of conflicts within their families, the kinds of relationships they had with their family members, and the level of parental monitoring they received.

The survey also asked students to indicate to what extent their closest friends engaged in various problem behaviors, the extent to which they themselves used drugs and alcohol and engaged in antisocial behaviors, and their performance in school. All responses were given anonymously and the information was kept confidential.

In the complete set of questionnaires, 546 were answered by Hispanic students, 404 were from American Indian students, and the remainder of the 12,000 were primarily from Caucasian students. To create ethnic samples

of comparable size, a sample of 500 questionnaires was randomly selected from the Caucasian group. The responses in the set of 1,450 questionnaires from roughly equal numbers of American Indian, Caucasian, and Hispanic students were then statistically compared to determine whether kids who said they had poor family relationships and poor parental monitoring also said that their close friends engaged in problem behaviors and that they themselves used drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes; engaged in fighting; vandalized or stole property; lied to their parents; skipped school; and received low grades on their schoolwork.

The students' survey responses were then further compared to determine whether the connections between family relationships and youth behavior were equally strong for students in each of the three ethnic groups. Finally, the responses from males and females in each of the three groups were compared to determine whether the model applied to girls as well as it did for boys.

Results

After studying the relationships among the various factors, ORI scientists determined that, for all three ethnic groups, kids who reported troubled family relationships were more likely to

have friends engaged in problem behaviors and were themselves more likely to use drugs and alcohol, display delinquent behaviors, and perform poorly in



school. The results also showed that the girls with behavior problems typically had followed the same pattern the boys followed in all three ethnic groups. They, too, had become alienated from their families, received less parental monitoring, began to associate with other kids with troubling behaviors, and then began behaving badly themselves. In general, the model of family and peer factors influencing youth problem behaviors fit all three ethnic groups and both genders quite well.

Discussion

Social workers, teachers, and

others responsible for building programs to help kids develop good social skills and perform well in school need to know how, when, and where to intervene in the life of young people. Although this study did not examine the relationships among these factors over time, if, as the model suggests, frequent family conflict can lead to increased problem behaviors in kids, then it is important that all family members learn how to do things as a family that build a sense of closeness.

The work done thus far by ORI scientists may help social service providers deliver better help to troubled families in various ethnic groups. Further research is needed to explore how these family and peer factors influence the development of problem behaviors across a wider age span. If good relationships between kids and their parents can begin early and endure, perhaps we will see a generation of happier, more well adjusted youngsters.

Reference

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Social Influences on Child Substance Use and Attitude

Principal Investigator: Judy Andrews, Ph.D.
Funded by: National Institute of Drug Abuse
This project identifies influences that predict substance use from early childhood through early adolescence.

Social Influences on Adolescent Alcohol Use Development

Principal Investigator: Susan Duncan, Ph.D.
Funded by: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism
Researchers in this project are examining the development of alcohol use during preadolescence and adolescence among White and African-American individuals and families within a neighborhood design.

Young Adult Substance Abuse: Predictors and Consequences

Principal Investigator: Hyman Hops, Ph.D.
Funded by: National Institute of Mental Health
This longitudinal project studies family and peer influences of drug use and abuse from adolescence to young adulthood.

Young Adult Adjustment: Predictors and Consequences

Principal Investigator: Hyman Hops, Ph.D.
Funded by: National Institute of Mental Health
This project continues a longitudinal study of social adjustment, focusing on the peer and family influences on intimate and parenting behavior.

Mobilizing Parents and Peers to Prevent Tobacco Use

Principal Investigator: Anthony Biglan, Ph.D.
Funded by: National Cancer Institute
This study tests the influence of parents and peers in preventing youth tobacco use by evaluating two prevention strategies in 40 Oregon middle schools.

Tobacco Control Activities and Adolescent Tobacco Use

Principal Investigator: Anthony Biglan, Ph.D.
Funded by: National Cancer Institute
Investigators in this project are studying the effects of tobacco control practices and individual risk factors on the prevalence of tobacco use among high school and middle school students.

Low-Cost Prevention of Conduct Disorders

Principal Investigator: Anthony Biglan, Ph.D.
Funded by: National Institute on Drug Abuse
This project evaluates a comprehensive, inexpensive program to reduce early childhood conduct problems, one of the major predictors of later drug abuse.