

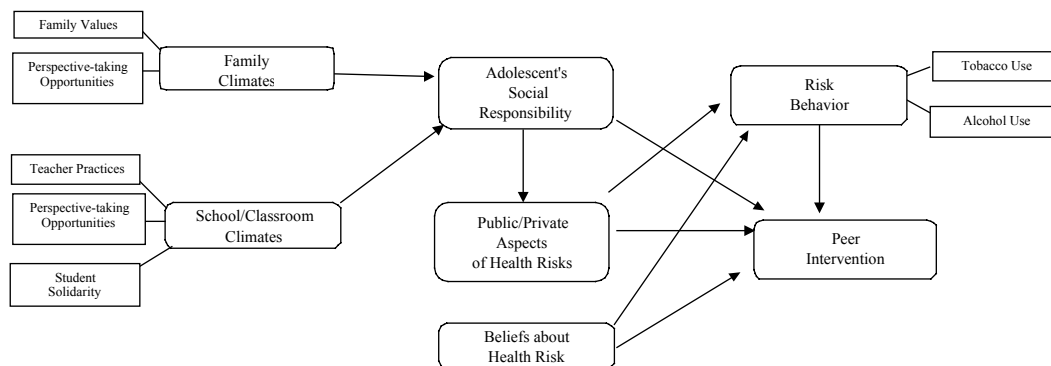
Social Responsibility and Prevention: A study of positive peer pressure

SPECIFIC AIMS

This study concerns the development of social responsibility in adolescence and the application of that ethic to adolescents' prevention efforts with peers. Responsible decision-making is a cornerstone of prevention programs but most attention has been focused on responsibility for one's own behavior. The proposed project conceives of health as a public issue for which there is a shared responsibility. The overall goals are a) to understand the phenomenon of peers monitoring and intervening to dissuade one another from behaviors that compromise health and b) to understand the roles of families and schools in promoting a sense of shared responsibility and of adolescents' appreciation of the public dimensions of risk behavior. Towards these ends we propose a longitudinal, developmental study. We will collect data from focus groups of 5th, 8th, and 10th graders and cross-sectional data from 5th – 12th graders and their teachers during the first year of the study. In addition, we propose a (3-year) panel study of early, middle, and late adolescents, their parents, and teachers as the adolescents make transitions to new school settings.

The power of peer influence has been well documented. Yet, despite evidence of their pro-social influence, research has focused primarily on the negative effects of peer pressure. We expect that young people do act on the adage, 'friends don't let friends..' but have found no empirical tests of this thesis. Prevention and youth development studies consistently show that adolescents are less likely to engage in problem behaviors when they feel connected to others in their families, schools, or institutions in their communities. We posit that the protective function of these social bonds is that young people identify as members of the group and feel responsible for one another.

Figure 1. General Analytic Model



The project will focus on tobacco and alcohol use as gateway drugs. However, our larger goal is to understand those factors that motivate peers to act as allies in prevention, to conceive of health as a public issue for which there is a shared responsibility, and to dissuade peers from a range of risky decisions.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Focus groups

The overall goal of our project is to understand pro-social peer monitoring and intervention as a protective factor. To achieve this goal we will begin our project by conducting focus groups with young people. These groups will enable us to explore questions such as the following: Under what circumstances do young people intervene and when do they feel it's inappropriate? What roles do beliefs about the dangers of a substance or the intimacy of the peer relationship play? Why do some youth intervene and others feel it's none of their business? What strategies do they use to monitor the risks in which members of their crowd engage? How do they intervene without embarrassing themselves or their peers?

In the fall of the school year prior to the first wave of survey data collection, we will conduct focus groups (with students in the 5th, 8th, and 10th grades of the participating schools) with participation representing the student populations of the schools. These groups will help to sharpen our conceptual framework and will inform the measures we will use in the survey.

Survey data collection

The larger survey project consists of two interrelated studies. The first phase of the project will be a cross-sectional survey of 5th through 12th graders from school districts throughout Pennsylvania. Surveys will be group administered in social studies classes. A core set of parallel items will be developed for a survey of the approximately 100 social studies teachers as well as other teachers of these students. In addition, mothers and fathers of participating 5-12th graders who themselves agree to participate will be mailed surveys in the first year.

From this large group, a panel of 5th, 8th, and 10th graders will be recruited for the longitudinal study. During each of the three years of data collection, these adolescents, their teachers, and mothers and fathers will be asked to complete questionnaires. The longitudinal design will enable us to trace changing patterns in adolescents' relationships in their primary environments as these are related to changes in their attitudes and behaviors. For example, it will allow us to determine whether beliefs about health risks as private or public matters affect behavior during adolescence or conversely, whether young people accommodate their beliefs to be consonant with changes in their behavior and in peer group norms. The longitudinal data will also mean that we can examine the effects of school transitions on the feelings of group solidarity and peer intervention norms of different age groups. Because school transitions will occur in Year 2 for both the early (5th – 6th grades) and middle (8th – 9th grades) groups, we will be able to look at the effects of a transition on these outcomes as well as at the unique effects for different age groups and in different contexts.

We have allocated funds in the budget to compensate participants. In addition, funds are allocated for communication with panel families via a project newsletter between waves of data collection. We are optimistic that such efforts will minimize sample attrition. Based on advice from the director of the Pennsylvania School Study Council, we have also allocated funds for a group meeting and luncheon during each year of the project with designated representatives from each participating school district (a superintendent, principal, teacher, and parent). This will facilitate communication between school districts and the research team. It will also provide an informal advisory group and increase the school districts' sense of connection to the study.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and all information will be kept in the strictest confidence, including individual and school identifiers. Students can only participate if they have signed permission from their parents. We will make extensive efforts to explain the purpose of the study to everyone involved and participants can ask questions of the researchers at any time. Participants can also withdraw from the study at any time. We will set up a web site and other mechanisms to enhance communication between participants

and Penn State. We particularly hope to use the web site as a means of communication with participating schools.

SIGNIFICANCE

A major objective of this project is to work together with teachers and administrators to identify those classroom factors that reinforce the development of social responsibility and civic values among young people during the adolescent years. We especially hope to be able to highlight those teaching practices that assist youth in becoming responsible friends willing to intervene positively on behalf of each other and for the common good.

There is compelling evidence that opportunities for bonding at school are a protector for teens against a host of risks. We contend that the dynamic underlying this association is the sense of identification youth develop with the common good of the group. In our earlier work we have found that feelings of student solidarity and a democratic climate in the classroom were positively related to adolescents' social responsibility. In addition, we found that adolescents' civic commitments were higher among youth whose teachers (a) established an ethic of mutual respect for one another's perspectives (b) held the same high expectations of all students, regardless of their background, and (c) actively intervened to stop instances of student intolerance.

We believe that classrooms are settings in which young people can learn a sense of membership in and obligation to a group. In such climates we expect that young people will be more concerned about fellow students and more inclined to dissuade them from engaging in behaviors that might compromise their health. The task is to work with educators to identify the best strategies to make such positive development possible.

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