Family System Characteristics and Parental Behaviors as Predictors of Adolescent Substance Use

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Overview

Earlier research showed that family factors play a part in adolescent substance use. For example, substantial focus has been on the association between parental and adolescent substance use. Findings if the parents use substances, adolescents are likely use as well. Despite the importance of such findings, the authors proposed that the adolescent viewed the family relationships would also play a role in substance use.

Given earlier research findings that aspects of both parental behaviors and overall family system characteristics are important to aspects of adolescent well-being, the authors propose moving a step further to see if these two aspects of family behavior are both significantly related to adolescent substance use when considered in the same study.

Family System Characteristics and Adolescent Substance Use. A systems point of view sees all the family members’ behaviors are best “…understood in the family context.” Therefore, adolescent substance abuse is viewed as having an association with both family system characteristics and parenting behaviors. Some of these characteristics and behaviors support while others discourage substance abuse. Three family system characteristics are examined in relation to adolescent substance use: bonding, flexibility, and parent-adolescent communication.

Bonding. Family bonding describes the emotional connection among family members as well as how the family as a unit interacts together and with others outside of the family. Two hypotheses can be examined to explain how family bonding relates to adolescent substance use: the overinvolvement hypothesis (one parent being very involved while the other is not), and functional hypothesis (family members join together to detour away from other family conflict by focusing together

IMPLICATIONS FOR COOPERATIVE EXTENSION.

• Parenting Education Programs often include a strong component on parental control. Yet, our findings show that parental support rather than forms of parental control explain variation in adolescent substance. Thus, to prevent substance use fostering connectedness and support between parents and adolescents may hold the greatest promise. Further, since our findings show it is not just parents’ support for adolescents, but also family bonding it may be important to foster a shared sense of connection at the overall family system level in parent education programs.

• Identify local resources to share and refer adolescents or families for substance abuse issues in families, particularly those that recognize the possibility that treatment may need to address parents as well as adolescents.

• Refer families for therapeutic intervention to creating bonding and an emotional environment for support and structuring to prevent substance use.
on an adolescent’s substance use). Thus, families who are overly bonded might heighten substance use by reducing the adolescents’ ability to develop a sense of self apart from the family.

**Flexibility.** Flexibility describes a family’s ability to adapt in their interaction patterns during new settings or changes associated with family development. Families encounter the need to be flexible during the life cycle of having an adolescent in the home who is increasing in abilities and desires life outside the family. Research has shown that adolescents who use substances are more likely to have family systems that are more disengaged and are inflexible.

**Parent-Adolescent Communication.** Three authors, Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967), hypothesized that communication is more than just information given to another, that it also indicates the interpersonal relationship. Open communication in families is shown to diminish difficult adolescent behaviors like substance abuse.

The authors hypothesized that adolescents’ views of family bonding would be positively correlated to adolescent substance abuse, while family flexibly and parent-adolescent communication would be negatively correlated to adolescent substance abuse.

**Parental Behaviors and Adolescent Substance Abuse.** If a parent is involved in substance abuse it creates a greater probability for the adolescent to use substances. Research has shown that many adolescents’ first contact with substances is in their own homes. Parental use is not the only factor that can cause a greater chance of adolescents using substances.

**Parental Support.** An adolescent can feel support from their own family through, praise, encouragement, physical affection, showing approval, love and acceptance. Overall, support from parents lowers the risk of problem behaviors in adolescents.

**Parental Control.** Two forms of parental control were examined. Coercion, or the use of direct and unpredictable force and love withdrawal, or threatening or actually holding back on love and affection toward adolescent tend to be associated with negative well-being in adolescents. In contrast, parental induction, or the use of logical, mature responsibilities on the child allow them to see the consequences of actions and can foster positive outcomes.

The study hypothesized that the adolescent’s awareness of parents’ frequency of substance use as well as problems caused by substance use will increase the risk of adolescent substance use. Finally authors also hypothesized that that parental support and induction would lower the risk of substance abuse, while love withdrawal and coercion would increase the risk of substance use in adolescents.

**Method**

**Sample and Procedure.** The current study took part in a larger project that focused on parent-adolescent relations. The sample came from four different high schools in a southwestern state, recruited from the English classes, 489 adolescents were apart of the sample.

The sample’s age ranged from 13 to 20 with an average age of 16.1. 90% of the sample was Caucasian, 5% were Native American, 4% were African American, and 1% were other races. The average number of children in the sample’s families was 2.77, and the number of children ranged from 1 to 9. 193 of the adolescents reported in the past month they had drank alcohol, including another group of 93 told that once per month they used a substance. Gender was almost even, with 44% males, and 56% females. 57% of the adolescents parental marital status was married, 29% was divorced, 5% widowed, 4% other or not reported, 3% separated, and 2% single.

**Measurement.** The items were assessed through self-reports as well as different Likert-type scales.

**Results and Discussion**

Originally the study had hypothesized that if the adolescents viewed their own family bonding as high that it would increase potential problems for adolescent substance abuse, but the results indicated that the adolescents’ perceptions of family bonding actually reduced the risk of adolescent substance abuse. The adolescents felt encouraged to have autonomy and differentiate from their parents.

High levels of parental support were positively correlated to a decrease in adolescent substance use. The multiple regression model showed no
significant correlation to parental control behaviors and adolescent substance use.

Finally, the adolescent’s awareness of the parent frequency of substance use was positively related to adolescent substance use but if the adolescent did not see it as a problem then it was not a positive predictor of adolescent substance use.