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Family Relationships and the Impact on Adolescent Substance Abuse

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Abstract

The following study investigates family relationships and the impacts on adolescent substance abuse. More specifically, the current study addresses the research question of whether family relationships impact adolescent substance abuse. Findings of the investigation reveal that peer relationships represent one the strongest individual predictors of substance abuse. More critically, results show that family relationships, specifically with parents, can significantly impact the nature of peer relationships. This, in turn, means that parents can exert a powerful influence, either positive or negative, on adolescent behaviors of their children especially in relation to substance abuse. Implications of these findings suggest that for a society that increasingly spends more and more time away from the home, reconsideration of values and norms is in order.

Family Relationships and the Impact on Adolescent Substance Abuse

Background

Following the counter-culture revolution of the 1960s, adolescent substance abuse became one of the most pervasive problems in American society. By 1979, in fact, statistics show that 31.8% of teenagers between the ages of 12 and 17 reported using illicit drugs (Vaughn, Howard & Thyer, 2008, p. 171). During the 1980s, a combination of public awareness and anti-drug/alcohol initiatives appeared to prove successful in reducing adolescent substance abuse by nearly one-third. Despite this significant progress, however, by the early 1990s adolescent substance abuse was once again on the rise. Today, it follows; adolescent substance abuse continues to represent an elusive and serious societal problem. In attempting to provide definitive insight on this complex subject, the following discussion presents a qualitative study on adolescent substance abuse. Specifically, the goal of the current study is to determine whether family relationships impact adolescent substance abuse. If a correlation is found, the next question addressed then concerns how family relationships impact adolescent substance abuse.

Preview of the Current Study

The current study consists of the following sections: 1) Introduction, 2) literature review, 3) results/discussion, and 4) conclusion with recommendations. The literature review section provides a critical analysis and summary of research findings related to family relationships and adolescent substance abuse. Next, the discussion section provides a critical analysis of results from the literature review. Lastly, the current study concludes with a statement concerning the implications of the findings and recommendations.

Definition of Key Terms

Attachment Theory. Attachment theory postulates that parents have an important bearing on future relationships of their children (Peluso, Peluso, White & Kern, 2004).

Peer Cluster Theory. Peer cluster theory focuses on the influences of family and peers on the social learning of adolescents (Rew, 2004, p. 245).

Primary Socialization Theory. Socialization forces such as family, school, and peers, influence behavioral outcomes (Oetting, Deffenbacher & Donnermeyer, 2009).

Review of the Literature

The following section of the current study provides a review of literature related to family relationships and adolescent substance abuse. All sources are from peer reviewed articles published in professional journal, full-length books, and credible websites and electronic databases.

Adolescent Substance Abuse Statistics

Statistics on adolescent substance abuse reveal a troubling trend. More precisely, as one team of experts explains, over the past decade the regular use (30-day use) of illicit drugs increased by 7 percent in the total population, yet it increased by 27 percent for children ages of 12 to 17 and 73 percent among 12 and 13 year olds (Slaboda and Bukoski, 2006, p. 76). Stated in more direct terms, more adolescents now use marijuana, methamphetamine, so-called club drugs, and heroine than at any time in United States history. Most problematic is the fact that the trend shows no sign of lessening.

Known Risk Factors for Adolescent Substance Abuse

In attempting to address the growing problem in America with adolescent substance abuse, researchers identify two fundamental types of risk factors related to adolescent substance abuse. These categories of risk factors include both contextual and individual. As one team of experts explains, contextual risk factors include variables such as existing drug laws, availability of drugs, and social norms; individual risk factors include peer relationships, genetic predispositions, and temperament (Burrow-Sanchez, 2006).

The Connection to Family Relationships and Risk Factors – The Emergence of Two Fundamental Questions

The next question, naturally, concerns whether family relationships influence and/or impact the above named specific variables in any way. Interestingly, in investigating this question, a link is discovered between the individual risk factor of peer relationships and family relationships. More exactly, according to researchers parental relationships with children have a significant bearing on peer relationships (Peluso, Peluso, White & Kern, 2004). Given this critical finding, two critical questions concern the following: 1) to what degree peer relationships influence substance abuse, and 2) how parental relationships influence peer relationships.

Peer Relationships and Substance Abuse

In addressing the first question, a growing body of research appears to suggest a strong correlation between adolescent substance abuse and peer relationships. In fact, as one team of experts emphasizes, several influential theories of adolescent substance abuse draw heavily on the notion that peer context and influence are, in fact, the most salient risk factors yet identified with respect to substance-use initiation and escalation (Hankin & Abela, 2006, p. 366).

The first theory, primary socialization theory, emphasizes the role of socialization forces in a child's life. According to primary socialization theory, more exactly, socialization forces such as family, school, and peers, influence behavioral outcomes as a result of interactions between the individual and the context or environment. Primary socialization theory, more exactly, postulates that individual traits and predispositions do not directly relate to drug use and deviance. That is, according to researchers, individual characteristics influence those outcomes only when they affect the interactions between the individual and the primary socialization

sources (Oetting, Deffenbacher & Donnermeyer, 2009). Thus, in sum, studies support the notion that peers can significantly influence adolescent behavior.

The next question, naturally, concerns whether peer influence can translate to substance abuse. Accordingly, the second theory, known as peer cluster theory, specifically addresses the influence of social forces on learning. Central to this empirically supported theory, more exactly, is the notion that peer clusters, consisting of closest friends, exert a significant influence on the development and acceptance of behavioral norms. The implication of peer cluster theory concerns the fact that adolescents are more prone to drug use and substance abuse if the peer cluster approves of this behavior (Rew, 2004, p. 245). The simple conclusion, it follows, concerns the fact that adolescents are more prone to substance abuse if their primary peer groups approved of this behavior.

The Impact of Parental Relationships on Peer Relationships

Given the potentially significant impact of peer relationships on adolescent substance abuse, discussion necessarily turns to the second question – that is, how parental relationships influence peer relationships. In addressing this question directly, the first line of inquiry concerns insights gained from attachment theory. Attachment theory is predicated on the idea that parental relationships significantly impact cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioral development of children. To explain, attachment theory postulates that children have a fundamental need for a secure relationship with primary caregivers who are most often the mother and father. To explain further, the need for a secure relationship arises as a natural survival response. When infants are hungry, for instance, they depend on the action of primary caregivers to meet that need. As needs are met, infants become attached to adults who provide a sensitive response that meets their needs (Bippus & Rollin, 2003). In short, sensitive responses establish critical psychological and

emotional connections that help establish a healthy relationship with the primary caregiver. These same psychological and emotional constructs translate to all relationships, even later in life. Thus, in short, primary caregivers play a crucial role in determining how infants will ultimately relate to peers when they reach the adolescent years. Stated differently, children who develop healthy relationships with their parents will tend to seek out friends and primary peers who are also capable of healthy relationships. This reduces the likelihood substance abuse being considered an acceptable norm.

The Importance of Mothers'. As no surprise to researchers, studies emphasize that mothers often play the most significant role in terms of the development of infant attachments. But even more critically, recent investigations suggest that mothers who exhibit unhealthy parenting behaviors influence children negatively more than fathers. As one team of researchers explains, this is likely due to the simple fact that mothers spend more time with children, especially in the early developmental stages (Ohannessian et al., 2004). In any case, the implication of this finding is that mothers who exhibit weak or unhealthy parenting behaviors can significantly and negatively impact the nature of a child's future relationships. Thus, a mother with poor parenting behaviors will ultimately impact adolescent peer relationships.

Parental Guidance and Peer Relationships. Another way that parental relationships influence peer relationships concerns guidance. To explain, adolescence is a development stage during which children increasingly spends less time with parents and more time with peers. This is a natural part of what is commonly referred to as environmental exploration. As an example of effective parental guidance one team of researchers reports that parents can impact adolescent decision-making and behaviors by simply "making and enforcing rules" (Kalesan, Stine & Alberg, 2006). The critical caveat, however, is that parents must practice what they preach.

Parents who make rules against smoking cigarettes, for example, need to understand that smoking in front of their children undermines parental credibility. On the other hand, parents who consistently provide a proper role model for their children while also enforcing reasonable rules are more likely to serve as effective guides for their children. It follows that proper parental guidance helps adolescents engage in what researchers call “safe exploration of the environment” (Parker & Benson, 2004).

Analysis and Discussion

The goal of the current study has been aimed at determining whether family relationships impact adolescent substance abuse. In addressing this important question, investigation began by establishing the fact that adolescent substance abuse represents a serious and ubiquitous problem in society today. In addressing this problem, the relevant individual risk factor becomes peer relationships. More exactly, the current research has established the fact that peer relationships represent the most salient risk factor with respect to adolescent substance abuse (Hankin & Abela, 2006, p. 366). As primary socialization theory and peer cluster theory explain, this is a result of the predominant influence of peer groups during adolescence. More exactly, primary peer groups establish and reinforce acceptable behavioral norms. Therefore, if primary peer groups approve of substance abuse, an adolescent is more susceptible to this unhealthy behavior.

Given the powerful influence of peer groups, the next question concerns whether family relationships impact peer relationships. Critically, attachment theory supports the notion that primary caregiver relationships significantly impact cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioral development of children. But more importantly, secure relationships with primary caregivers establish psychological constructs that translate to relationships later in life. This leads to the conclusion that family relationships influence adolescent peer relationships. The lesson, it follows, is that the ability to engage in healthy relationships reduces the likelihood of association with peers who approve of substance abuse. This, in turn, reduces the risk of substance abuse.

Having established that family relationships, specifically with parents, can exert either a positive or negative influence on adolescent substance abuse, it becomes important to recognize that mothers play a critical role in the equation. More specifically, the behavior patterns of mothers greatly influence a child's propensity for substance abuse due to the simple fact that

mothers, generally, spend far more time with children than fathers. Lastly, the current study has also established the fact that parents can be effective at preventing their children from engaging in substance abuse by being good role models and guides. That is, by establishing and enforcing rules while practicing what they preach, parents can help guide children towards safe exploration of the social environment.

Conclusions

The current study has addressed the research question concerning the impact of family relationships on adolescent substance abuse. Specifically, the goal of the qualitative investigation has been to determine whether family relationships impact adolescent substance abuse. As shown, family relationships, specifically with parents, represent one of the most critical factors in influencing the likelihood of adolescent substance abuse. That is, parents are highly influential in establishing psychological constructs with their children that effect peer relationships during adolescence which, in turn, represent the most significant individual risk factor for substance abuse. Implications of these findings suggest that more emphasis needs to be placed on quality family values and parenting. For a society that increasingly spends more and more time away from the home, reconsideration of values and norms is in order. More exactly, young children benefit by having significant time with parents to develop family relationships. As most homes now involve two working parents, quality family time has become a limited commodity. Researchers should, therefore, begin focusing on finding ways to change this reality. The scope of needed research, it follows, spans from family behavior to the way society conducts business. That is, while families need support in learning how to cope with the demands of today's fast-paced business world, critical changes in attitudes and practices in the business world also need to be addressed. Possible areas for business research should, therefore, include the promotion of practices such as telecommuting, flex-time, and four-day work schedules similar to those found in many European nations (Albion, 2004).

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