



research in action

The Influence of Family and Friends on American Indian Youth's Intent to Use Substances

The majority of American Indians (AI) lives outside of tribal lands and in urban environments. Consequently, it can be difficult for some urban AI adolescents to maintain important connections to their tribal community where traditional beliefs, values and social norms are taught by elders and other family members. This is significant because in AI culture, grandparents and extended family play a major role in passing on the culture, and teaching values and ethics to youth. The teachings of cultural values to youth from elders have been found to help protect youth from engaging in dangerous or risky behaviors. This community-centered approach to raising children is a cultural strength and fosters a sense of interconnectedness and identification between youth, family, and tribal community.

The difficulties presented by physical distance may make it harder for extended family members to communicate and provide guidance to urban AI youth about the negative effects of substance abuse. In comparison with other ethnic minority peers, AI youth use alcohol and other drugs at earlier ages and have higher rates of substance abuse and dependence. AI youth behaviors are shaped by distinctive familial, peer and cultural influences. Understanding how these influences impact AI youths' intent to use substances is essential for protecting AI youth from alcohol and other drugs. However, existing research exploring these influences on AI youth living in urban areas is very limited.

The purpose of the study carried out by a research team at the Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center at Arizona State University was to determine the importance of AI parents and grandparents and friends in influencing urban AI youths' intent to use alcohol, cigarettes and marijuana. It also examined what these youth thought would be acceptable behavior.

Methodology

The study used survey data collected from 155 7th and 8th grade urban AI students, enrolled in five middle schools in a large southwestern city. Students' average age was 12.4 years, of whom 49% were male and 51% were female. Their grades on average were Bs and Cs and the majority received free lunch in school, indicating low socio economic status.

Measures

Students were asked about their intent to use alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana if given the chance. Responses ranged from "yes, I would definitely use" to "no, I would definitely not use." Students were also asked how their parents, grandparents, and best friends would react if they used substances. Responses varied from "very positively" to "very negatively" to "no reaction."

Results

Overall, AI youth reported they were not planning to use substances. AI youth were less inclined to use marijuana when their friends had a negative reaction to its use. Similarly, when parents reacted very negatively, youth were less inclined to use cigarettes. Strong negative reactions by grandparents predicted less alcohol use by youth.

Discussion

This study is an important step towards understanding familial influence and peer interactions that can protect urban AI youth from using substances. This study is one of the few which includes grandparents yet they have an important role in shaping the lives of AI youth and play a significant part in protecting adolescents' from using alcohol. This may be because elders have an important role in childrearing and sharing their values and influence. Also, since elders carry much respect in AI culture, their grandchildren might feel it would be disrespectful to them if they used substances. Parents are more likely to influence youths' intent not to smoke, which may be related to parents' exposure to antismoking messages. Only friends' values were significant in predicting marijuana use.

Conclusion

Parents, grandparents and friends can play an active role in communicating anti-drug messages and discouraging AI youths' intent to use substances. More research is needed to determine the content and context of anti-drug messages that urban AI youth receive from their peers, parents and grandparents as well as how these messages are expressed. It would be important to understand the processes involved in the delivery of anti-drug messages for different substances, at what age messages should be given and if there are different ways urban AI youth receive these messages. This is critical information for substance use prevention programs to best develop and deliver messages about substance use. Moreover, given the important role of extended families in AI communities, it would be useful to understand the influence of other extended family members who may also influence youth. Additionally, it is essential to further research how others who have positive interaction with AI youth, such as teachers and community leaders, may help reinforce anti-drug attitudes and behaviors.



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