

Reducing Teen Use of Alcohol and Drugs Through Parent Involvement: A Parent Network Study

Background: In 2002, a group of parents in the NICE Community School District approached the Aspen Ridge Family Resource Institute (FRI), a family resource center for the school district, for assistance in helping them become more involved in the school life of their middle school children. These parents had been involved in the elementary school and they and their children had benefited from this involvement.

Family Resource Institute asked Great Lakes Center for Youth Development (GLCYD) for assistance in starting a Parent Network, a model that promotes parent involvement and has been successful in other school districts. GLCYD, through involvement with Nova Southeastern University, designed a Parent Network study to learn more about how parents influence teens about substance use. The school administration and FRI staff agreed, and a joint project was developed.

Study Overview

The Problem: The high level of substance use by teens in the area was a common concern of the school district, parents, and GLCYD. In local surveys of youth across Marquette and Alger Counties, teens reported that 47% of youth had used alcohol in the last 30 days and 35% of youth had been drunk in the last two weeks (Search Institute, 2000). Additionally, reports of marijuana use and tobacco were considered high by the parents. The parents and the school were both interested in how parents could help prevent substance use by teens.

The use of alcohol and drugs by youth can lead to negative outcomes such as school problems, delinquent behavior, becoming a victim of crime, early sexual involvement, and involvement in accidents (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2000).

Parenting styles have been shown by researchers to impact substance use. Studies have found that a lack of parental monitoring and involvement can lead to substance use (Baumrind, 1991). Children whose parents are more authoritarian or permissive were found to be more likely to use substances (Cohen & Rice, 1997).

The purpose of the study was to learn more about the parenting practices of Parent Network members, teen perceptions of parenting practices and use of substances by teenage children of Parent Network members.

GLCYD and the Parent Network committee recruited 49 families to participate in the study. Two surveys were developed, one for parents and one for teens. The survey was first administered at the start of the second semester (Time One) and then again at the end of the 2003 school year (Time Two). Just 22 families with a total of 28 teenage children completed both adult and teen surveys at both Survey Time One and Time Two as listed in the table below.

<u>Parent Network Survey Participants</u>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 22 families participated with all females completing the adult surveys ▪ 28 teenagers from the 22 families completed the surveys ▪ 16 boys and 12 girls participated from the following grades: 			
<u>Middle School:</u>		<u>High School:</u>	
6th graders	5	9th graders	1
7th graders	6	10th graders	1
8th graders	12	11th graders	1
		12th graders	2

Parent surveys were mailed to the parents and completed at home while students completed their surveys at their school.

A Review of the Literature

Parents can help prevent or delay the use of alcohol and drugs by teens.

Research has shown that parents can play this key role by monitoring their children's activities, staying involved in their lives and establishing good communications with their children. The literature also encourages parents to be positive role models, get to know their children's friends and their families, and establish expectations and family rules about substance use. These behaviors reflect a style of parenting known in the literature as "authoritative parenting," the style most associated with prevention of substance use (Barnes & Farrell, 1992; Chilcoat, Breslau, & Anthony, 1996; Cohen & Rice, 1995).

Youth whose parents were not involved in their lives used substances more than youth with involved parents. Involved parents set rules, showed love and affection, and monitored activities. Parents with neglectful and passive parenting styles were typically less involved, less organized, and allowed self-regulation by adolescents (Cohen & Rice, 1997).

Monitoring students after-school activities is an important prevention strategy.

Youth who were not monitored after school are found to be more involved in crime, substance use, and sexual activity than those who were monitored (Flannery, Williams, & Vazsonyi, 1999). After-school programs and structured recreational

activities with responsible adults were found to help prevent youth involvement in at-risk behaviors (Chilcoat, Breslau, & Anthony, 1996).

Parents need to know how important it is to monitor youth's activities. Parental monitoring can be a strategy to decrease and delay alcohol and drug use by youth (Barnes & Farrell, 1992; Curran & Chassin, 1996; Chilcoat, Breslau & Anthony, 1996; Li, Stanton, & Feigelman, 2000). Some reasons why parents might not monitor their children's activities were because of work responsibilities, belief that their children won't be involved in alcohol or drug activities, lack of knowledge about the importance of parental monitoring, and personal problems (Cohen & Rice, 1995; Benson, 1997; Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992).

The drinking behavior of parents can impact children's behavior. Children of parents who drank were found to be more likely to use alcohol than youth whose parents abstained (Felton, et al., 1996). The message parents may be giving children through their use of alcohol or drugs was that use was acceptable and normal behavior (Beman, 1995).

Peers can influence youth use of substances. One study stated that the strongest influence on young people's use of substances was friends that use substances (Marcos, Bahr, & Johnson, 1986). If adolescents participated in peer groups that encouraged drinking, a reliable and strong prediction could be made that these adolescents were more likely to participate in substance use (Blanton et al., 1997).

Why Alcohol and Drug Use by Youth is a Concern

The use of alcohol and drugs by youth can lead to negative outcomes. Youth who use alcohol and drugs were at risk for school problems, might be victims of crime, were more likely to demonstrate delinquent behavior, might become sexually involved at a younger age, and were more likely to be involved in accidents. Also, teens that used alcohol were four times more likely to become dependent on alcohol than were teens that didn't start using alcohol until they were adults (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2000).

The many causes identified in the literature – parenting style, peer influence, parent use behavior, lack of monitoring, availability of substances – all played roles in local substance use and abuse.

The 2000 Youth Asset Survey provided this local evidence concerning young people:

- Parent involvement was low (28%)
- Family communication was weak (23%)
- Family boundaries were lacking in many homes (44%)

- Few adults were positive role models (only 26% of youth report having positive adult role models in their lives)
- Almost half of the youth's friends don't model responsible behavior (53%)
- Many youth were out with little to do several nights per week (69%)

It seemed clear that the conditions existed to support the problem of substance use among teens.

Why Start a Parent Network?

The job of parenting teens isn't easy. Both teens and parents are often busy and away from home much of the day, but parents can help each other by working together. Parent Networks may help in the following ways:

- Organizes parents to support each other in their roles as effective parents and communicators with their children
- Links parents together to encourage safe and alcohol/drug-free environments for our youth
- Creates common codes of conduct and standards for our children
- Shares parenting strategies
- Learns about important youth issues
- Helps decrease risky behaviors

Parent Networks help link parents together to use the following positive parenting practices:

- Encourage and sponsor wholesome activities for youth
- Communicate with other parents about youth activities
- Set agreed-upon curfews for young people
- Emphasize the importance of school
- Agree to be positive role models

To help parents accomplish their active parenting roles, a Parent Network directory is printed that is used to help parents contact each other about youth activities.

Forming the NICE Parent Network

Eight mothers of middle school students and the coordinator of the Family Resource Institute served as the planning committee for forming the NICE Parent Network. Selecting the name Parent to Parent Network, the committee worked to establish the Network by first focusing on middle school parent involvement. The committee established a set of guidelines for Network members that promote parental monitoring and close relationships between parents and their teenage children.

The parents recruited over 100 families to join the Network. Then, they developed a Parent Network directory that was printed and distributed to Network members. The directory included the Parent Network guidelines, parenting tips, and phone numbers of all of the members so they can easily contact each other as they monitor their children's activities.

Study Findings

Both parents and students were asked at survey Time One and Time Two to answer questions about parent involvement and parent monitoring behaviors. While there was little change between survey Time One and Time Two in parenting behaviors, authoritative parenting practices were clearly being used by the parents in the Parent to Parent Network. In addition, there was very low use of substances by the teenage children from these families at either Survey Time One or Time Two.

Teen Use of Substances

One of the primary goals in creating a Parent Network is to decrease or delay substance use among teens. As a part of the study, the 28 teens from the 22 participating families reported at both survey Time One and Time Two their use of alcohol, tobacco and drugs over their lifetime.

While seven youth reported having used alcohol and/or tobacco before and/or during the intervention, **21 youth remained substance-free through both survey periods**. Five youth had used alcohol—three reporting once in lifetime use and two reporting use three-to-five times. Only one of these youth used alcohol for the first time during the study. Six teens reported tobacco use with two first-time users during the study. Four of the six teens had only used tobacco once. None of the teens reported any use of marijuana. They also reported no use of alcohol or tobacco use in the last 30 days.

A 2002 local survey of youth reported that 35% of teens said they had used alcohol and 25% had smoked cigarettes once or more in the last 30 days (Search Institute, 2002). Also, 27% of teens had used marijuana once or more in

the last 12 months. While about one-fourth of the 28 teens in the study had used substances, most were not frequent users. Their use appeared to be somewhat less than the general population of teens at both survey Time One and Time Two.

Parenting Practices & Survey Results

The following parenting practices results were explored in the Parent Survey. It is important to remember that the small number of participants in the survey does not allow us to generalize the results to a larger population. It reflects the responses of the particular sample involved in this survey project.

1. ***To what extent did parents monitor activities of their teens through the following parenting behaviors?***
 - A. **Set and follow a curfew** – Most of the parents reported that they always set and follow curfews for their middle school aged children. For high schoolers, more than half of the parents said they always set curfews, but almost half said they sometimes set curfews. The teens agreed with most reporting that their parents very often or often set and followed curfew times.
 - B. **Monitor teen's activities** – All parents in the Network reported that they monitor their teen's activities. Almost all of the parents of middle school teens always monitored their activities. Over half of the parents of high schoolers said they always monitored their activities.
 - C. **Call other parents to check on teen's activity plans** – About three-fourths of the parents of middle school teens said they always or often call other parents to check on their teens' activity plans. The rest of the parents said they sometimes check. For high school, most of the parents often or sometimes checked with only two parents always checking with other parents about their teens' activities. The teens reported a slightly lower rate with just less than half of the students saying their parents very often or often called the parents of their friends to check on their activities. Eight of the students said their parents never or not very often call other parents.
 - D. **Ensure youth activities are alcohol and drug-free** – Almost all of the parents reported that their children's activities were alcohol and drug-free. However, when asked how many times they had checked to see that the activities were alcohol and drug-free, only about half of the parents frequently checked and about a third of the parents almost never checked.
 - E. **Have clear rules and consequences for youth behavior** – Almost all of the parents reported that they set clear rules and consequences for their

children's behavior. Over half of the parents said they carry out the consequences when rules are broken. Of the teens surveyed, over half strongly agreed and another quarter agreed that their families have clear rules about behavior. Most of the teens agreed that they usually got punished when they broke the rules. For both parents and teens, there was stronger agreement that rules existed and somewhat weaker agreement that the punishment for breaking the rules was carried out.

2. *To what extent did parents have good rapport and open communications with their teens?*

A. *Talk with them about their safety, substance use, and behavior* –

Over half of the parents reported they had talked with their teenage children 10 or more times in the last year about safety, substance use, and/or their behavior. Most of the parents reported they always or often talked with their kids about their friends, school, and career interests. Almost all of both middle and high school parents talked often or always to their teens about not using alcohol and drugs.

About half of the teens reported their parents only sometimes or not very often talk to them about alcohol and drugs.

B. *Teens and parents have good conversations* – Most of the teens agreed or strongly agreed that they have good conversations with their parents.

3. *How involved were parents in the lives of their children?*

A. *Volunteer/chaperone at school/community events* – Almost half of the parents had volunteered to chaperone or help at school events five or more times during the last year.

B. *Parents interested/involved in teens' schoolwork* – Most of the students (22 of 28) reported that their parents ask them often or very often about how they are doing with their homework. About half of the students reported their parents help them often or very often with their schoolwork. Just over half of the students reported their parents attend school events often or very often.

4. *Are parents concerned about youth issues?*

A. *Teen use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs* – Almost all of the parents (20 of 22) were quite or very concerned about alcohol, tobacco, and drug use by teens in the community. Only two parents thought their children might have used alcohol in the last 30 days.

- B. Teen involvement in sexual activity** – Almost all of the parents (19 of 22) were quite or very concerned about teen involvement in sexual activity in the community.
- C. Adults modeling positive, responsible behavior** – Almost all of the parents (21 of 22) thought that most or almost all adults were positive role models for youth. Also, almost all of the parents stated they were positive role models before they joined the Network.

Summary of the Findings

There are two main findings to review from the study. First, the teenage children of Parent Network members who participated in the study seem to use substances somewhat less than the general population. Second, most of the parents who participated in the study (almost all of whom were Parent Network members) tended to demonstrate parenting behaviors consistent with an authoritative parenting style. The research shows that this style helps prevent and/or delay youth substance use.

These positive parenting behaviors include:

1. Positive and frequent communication between parents and teens about youth activities, school, use of alcohol and drugs, parent expectations, and friends
2. Involvement in young people's lives: showing interest and helping with school work, attending youth's events and getting to know the friends of your children and their families
3. Monitoring youth activities and checking with other parents about safety and chaperoning
4. Setting rules and consequences for behavior including curfews and use of alcohol and drugs
5. Serving as a positive role model about substance use. (Because no criteria was provided in the survey for what a positive role model might be, this behavior is not clearly understood for the study group.)

Feedback on the NICE Parent to Parent Network

At Time One, parent participants were asked how satisfied they were with the Parent Network. About one-fourth of parents who answered the question were satisfied or very satisfied and more than half of the parents were unsure. At Time Two, over four months later, two-thirds of the parents reported they were satisfied or very satisfied with the Parent Network. About one-third of parents remained unsure. No parents reported a lack of satisfaction.

Several parents provided individual comments about the Network. A few parents reported they did not need the Parent Network at this time. One parent noted that as her children got older, the Network would be more beneficial. Several parents encouraged the organizers and stated that the Network was off to a great start. Another parent hoped more people would become involved. If get-togethers are planned, one parent suggested more convenient times for working parents. A suggestion was made to publish a youth activity calendar and continue providing parenting tips in newsletters and on a website. More communication by mail or phone was also suggested. Efforts needed to be made to encourage many different parents to be a part of the Network.

Parents were asked what the best ways were for the Parent Network to reach them. About one half of the parents reported the best way was through the mail. Almost one third did not indicate a method. Just three parents listed the school newsletter.

Limitations of the Parent Network Assessment

The study group was very small and was self-selected by those parents who were willing and able to take the time to complete the surveys. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized to the rest of the Parent Network or to other Parent Networks. It is also not known what, if any, impact the Parent Network had on the participating parents because parents seemed to come into the Network with a high level of monitoring and support behaviors. To find out if parents without these prevention behaviors in place would adopt them as a result of joining the Network, additional studies will need to be carried out.

It is also not known if uninvolved parents and parents who tend to use more authoritarian or permissive parenting styles would even join a Parent Network. It may be that the Parent Network concept works best with parents who are already very committed, interested, and involved with their teenage children. It is believed that the Network concept does help reinforce the positive parenting behaviors identified in this report. Additional studies of longer duration could help ascertain the influence the Parent Network has on already engaged, supportive parents.

Parent Network Lessons

1. Many parents do not want to attend meetings or events in order to be involved and engaged parents. This may be because many parents are so busy already with work, home, and community responsibilities.
2. Parents tend to respond positively to receiving short, easy-to-read materials to assist them in their parenting roles.
3. While some parents are wary about including their names and phone numbers in a directory, many were still interested in being included.

4. Some parents who were very involved in elementary school when their children were students there felt isolated and uninformed as their children attended middle and high school. Some parents would welcome more ways to be involved and more information to stay informed.
5. There are parents who are willing to put in the work to develop Parent Networks. They just must be identified and then supported as the work of developing a Parent Network is carried out. Involving the parents in the many stages builds ownership. The work must be organized so they can be productive and keep the project moving along.
6. Parents need to recruit other parents. Help is also needed from schoolteachers and administrators throughout the year to reach harder-to-reach families.
7. Parent Networks and the parenting concepts they encourage must be continually promoted.