Adolescent Marihuana Use: Role of Parents and Peers

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Abstract. In order to examine the relative influence of parents and peers on marihuana use among adolescents, independent data have been obtained from adolescents, their parents, and their best school friends in a sample of secondary school students in New York State. The data indicate that drug use by peers exerts a greater influence than drug use by parents. Friends are more similar in their use of marihuana than in any other activity or attitude. Parental use of psychotropic drugs has only a small influence, mostly related to maternal use. Peer and parental influences are synergistic; the highest rates of marihuana usage are observed among adolescents whose parents and friends are drug users.

A social interpretation of adolescent drug use has been proposed, according to which drug use on the part of the young is assumed to develop in response to parental consumption of psychoactive drugs (1). According to this view, adolescent use of illegal drugs is a juvenile manifestation of adult behavior. This hypothesis has received apparent support from surveys that suggest a relationship between use of illegal drugs by young people and use of legal psychoactive drugs by their parents (2). Adolescents who use marihuana, LSD, and other hard drugs are more likely to report that their parents use tranquilizers, amphetamines, or barbiturates. These conclusions have so far been based exclusively on the youths' perceptions of their parents' drug use, not on usage reported directly by the parents. I find, on the basis of parents' self-reports, that the relationship between parental and adolescent drug use in matched parent-adolescent dyads is reduced, although it is still positive. Peer influence on adolescent drug use is stronger than parental influence. Peer and parental influences are synergistic, however, and marihuana use occurs most frequently in triads in which both friend and parents are drug users.

This report is based on a survey in which independent data were obtained from adolescents, their parents, and their best school friends. The basic adolescent sample (N = 8206) is a multiphase random sample representative of public secondary school students in New York State, drawn from 18 schools throughout the state. The sample selection was based on a two-stage sampling procedure involving the selection of (i) a stratified sample of high schools and (ii) a sample of students clustered by homerooms and stratified to represent the different grades within a high school. In fall 1971, structured, self-administered questionnaires were given in a classroom situation to a random sample of homerooms in 13 schools and to the entire student body in five schools. Therefore, in these five schools, it was possible to collect data from the student's best school friend so as to obtain a relational sample of matched student-friend dyads. Within each of the 18 schools, all homerooms were surveyed simultaneously. The student sample was weighted to reflect the variable probabilities of selection of schools and homerooms and the absentee factor in each school. Two to three weeks after a school was surveyed, a questionnaire was mailed to one parent of each student, alternately mothers and fathers. A maximum of three follow-up contacts were involved. Usable questionnaires were returned by 5574 parents or 61 percent of the initial group contacted. Since the behavior investigated is illegal, the respondents did not sign the questionnaires; identification of records was accomplished through the use of self-generated identification numbers (3). Using these codes, we were able to match 49 percent of all the students to their parents and 38 percent of the students in the five schools to their best school friends.

In these five schools 1112 students, or 23 percent of those surveyed, could be matched to parents as well as to best school friends and were incorporated into triads. The resulting number of dyads and triads is below that obtained when matching is done on the basis of names (4). However, since these relational samples are used to analyze processes related to adolescent drug use, the loss of cases is less serious than it would be if the data were used to estimate incidence or prevalence rates of drug use in the New York State population. The findings presented in this report are based on the total sample of adolescents from the 18 schools, except when the self-reported behavior of friends is introduced, in which case the analyses are restricted to the 5-school sample.

Adolescents were asked about their use of a variety of illegal drugs and about their perceptions of their parents' use of psychoactive drugs. Parents were also asked about their own use of tranquilizers, barbiturates, or sedatives and stimulants (including diet pills and pep pills). I combined the answers for each class of drug to obtain a summary variable, parental use of any psychoactive drug.

Rather than examine a broad range of adolescent drug use, I focus in this report on marihuana, the illegal drug used most frequently by adolescents in our sample and in the population at large. In our sample of New York State high school students, 29 percent reported having used marihuana, the proportion increasing from the freshman (16 percent) to the senior class (41 percent). It should, however, be kept in mind that marihuana use overlaps with the use of other drugs. Marihuana users include a great variety of youths, ranging from "experimenters" who have tried the drug once or twice and have not tried other drugs (23 percent) to extensive users who have used marihuana many times (33 percent have used it 40 times or more) and have also used other drugs. The
The most striking finding is the crucial role which peers play in the use of drugs by other adolescents. Involvement with other drug-using adolescents is the most important correlate of adolescent marijuana use. Adolescents' marijuana use is strongly related not only to friends' perceived marijuana use but to the friends' self-reported use. Only 7 percent of adolescents who perceive none of their friends to use marijuana use marijuana themselves, in contrast to 92 percent of those who perceive all their friends to be users (7). When adolescent marijuana use is correlated with the self-reported marijuana use patterns of best school friends (see Fig. 1), the proportion of users ranges from 15 percent when the best friend has never used marijuana to 79 percent when the friend has used it 60 times or more (8). Not only use per se, but extent of use, is highly related to friends' drug behavior. Thus, the proportion of adolescents who report having used marijuana 60 or more times increases from 2 percent among those whose friends have never used marijuana to 48 percent among those whose friends have themselves used the drug 60 times or more. The influence of best friends is extremely strong, but it is not the only influence. In addition to the 15 percent who are users when their best friend is not, 21 percent are nonusers despite the fact that the friend has used marijuana. Further analyses of deviant cases such as these may provide important insights into the circumstances under which adolescents do not respond to peer pressures.

Other data from the study document the extent to which experience with marijuana and with other drugs is a focus of interaction with peers and is closely related to the extent of involvement with peers. Indeed, we find that use of marijuana and of other illegal drugs is what friends have most in common. With the exception of certain demographic characteristics (such as age, sex, and race), no other activity or attitude (such as school attitudes and performance, deviant behaviors of various kinds, political attitudes, drug-related attitudes, and attitudes toward parents) is similarity between friends as great as on illegal drug use (see Table 1).

The greater influence of friends than parents on adolescent marijuana use is illustrated further in the sample of matched triads when adolescent's marijuana use, best-school-friend's marijuana use, and parent's overall use of psychoactive drugs are examined simultaneously. While parents and best friends both have an independent effect on adolescents' marijuana use, the effect of peers is far larger than the effect of parents (Fig. 2). This is best
seen in those triads in which the adolescent is exposed to conflicting role models because parent's and friend's behaviors diverge, one using drugs and the other not. When faced with conflict, adolescents are much more responsive to peers than to parents. Thus 56 percent of adolescents use marihuana when their best friends use marihuana although their parents have never used any psychoactive drugs. But only 17 percent of adolescents use marihuana when their parents have used psychoactive drugs but their best friends have not used marihuana. Parental influence can, however, synergize with and potentiate peer influence. The highest rates of adolescent marihuana use (67 percent) occur when both parent and peer reinforce each other's influence on the adolescent.

Parental drug behavior appears to be related to the child's use of illegal drugs only when such use already exists in the peer group. A necessary condition for the appearance of adolescent illegal behavior may be the use of illegal drugs by friends, parental use of psychoactive drugs being neither necessary nor sufficient for such adolescent behavior to develop. But given a situation in which peers use drugs, parental behavior becomes important in modulating peer influence. Children of non-drug using parents are somewhat less likely to use drugs, whereas children of drug using parents are more likely to use drugs.

These findings fit a "cultural deviance" model of behavior and in particular the theory of differential association developed by Sutherland and Cressey (9) to explain delinquent behavior. According to the theory, the crucial factor in the learning of delinquent roles by adolescents is the availability of delinquent role models in the adolescent peer group. The family can potentially lead the child toward delinquency, either because it engages in delinquent behavior which the child imitates, or because it creates a hostile climate from which the child seeks escape. But the child will not engage in delinquent acts unless such acts are present in the peer culture around him. This theory has been much debated since its formulation in 1939, and has often been held to be incorrect (9, 10). However, the present findings on illegal adolescent drug use appear to fit the the model. Peer behavior is the crucial determining factor in adolescent drug use and parental behavior becomes important once such behavior exists in the peer group.

Stressing the fact that an adolescent who uses drugs associates with other adolescent drug users does not answer the key question: Which comes first, drug use or drug-using friends? Do adolescents seek out drug users after they themselves have become involved with drugs or do they start using drugs because they come to associate with other drug-using friends? By using longitudinal data (across time) one might be able to provide answers to these questions.

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References and Notes


3. In each school, each adolescent was asked to construct a number for himself and, in the five schools, one also for his best friend in school, identical to the number the friend constructed for himself. Each parent was also asked to construct a number identical to the one the adolescent constructed for himself. The eight-digit self-generated numbers were based on the middle letters of the adolescent's first and last names, his date of birth, and the last two digits of his telephone number. Most adolescents (94 percent) and most parents (98 percent) were willing and able to construct self-generated numbers for themselves; 82 percent of adolescents constructed numbers for their friends. Some of the numbers produced were incorrect, incomplete, or, in the case of friends, for someone not in the school sample. However, individuals could often be matched even if some digits (phone numbers or friend's birth date) were missing.

4. See D. Kandel and G. S. Lesser, Youth in Two Worlds (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1972), p. 190. The use of self-generated codes for linking questionnaires represents a compromise and is inferior to the use of names. Not only does it reduce the overall rate of matching, but it potentially introduces a bias in the resulting relational samples, since students who do not give a code number and cannot be matched contain a higher proportion of drug users than those who provide a code. Twenty-five percent of adolescents matched with a parent or best school friend or both have used marihuana, as compared to 35 percent of those not matched to either. However, because the relational sample of five schools is unweighed and two of these schools are large and in areas with high drug use, the overall rates of adolescent drug use are similar in the total representative adolescent sample and in each of the relational subsamples of dyads and triads.

5. Maternal influence is also greater on daughters than sons. To the extent that parental behavior has any influence at all, use of legal substances, such as alcohol, is more important than use of psychoactive drugs. But the overall effect of parental alcohol use on adolescent marihuana use is small (D. Kandel, in preparation).


8. Since in 79 percent of the cases, the adolescent's best friend in school is also the best friend outside school, the data permit inferences about the role of best friends in general.


10. For a recent critique, see G. F. Jensen, Amer. J. Sociol. 78, 562 (1972).

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