

# Preventing Adolescent Alcohol Misuse

Survey targets preteens and teens

By Joanne Littlefield

**D**rugs, guns, violence, alcohol, sex—these are the distractions young people face today. With all the media attention given to youth problems around the country, it's easy to believe that 'everyone is doing it.'

'Not so' in the case of alcohol consumption, say researchers Jennifer Maggs, University of Arizona and John Schulenberg, University of Michigan. By using data on alcohol use collected from 20,000 middle school and high school students and parents, these researchers have found that not as many youth are drinking alcohol as the public may think.

The Alcohol Misuse Prevention Study (AMPS), funded by the National Institute for Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, began in 1984. Maggs joined the project while at the University of Michigan and continued as co-leader with her move to the University of Arizona College of Agriculture and Life Sciences as an assistant professor of family studies and human development in the School of Family and Consumer Sciences in 1995. A three-year subcontract from the University of Michigan to the University of Arizona (1996 to 1999) has enabled Maggs and her graduate student assistants to conduct analyses and write papers based on the AMPS data. At the point Maggs joined the AMPS, the data had been collected and the research team was focusing on evaluating for whom the AMPS curriculum was most effective, and why.

"One goal of the AMPS was to give young adolescents more accurate data about alcohol use among their peers," Maggs explains. "Adolescents (and adults) invariably overestimate the prevalence of alcohol and other substance use among students. When people learn the more accurate information that the great majority of middle school students do not abuse alcohol, a potential not-so-subtle pressure to experiment with alcohol loses much of its power. Even fewer young adolescents use illegal drugs. This strategy can easily be implemented in prevention programs using local data, if available, or national data, for example, from the annual Monitoring the Future surveys."

Over the length of the project, 20,000 adolescents and parents from many schools and communities in southeastern Michigan were surveyed about real

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and perceived alcohol use and misuse. Researchers wanted to evaluate short and long-term effects of the AMPS curriculum, which emphasized skills to resist direct and indirect influences to drink alcohol. These skills included refusal skills, knowledge about alcohol, and reasons to avoid using or misusing alcohol.

AMPS is a school-based prevention program, relying on regular classroom teachers for implementation. The prevention curriculum is intensive, involving several hours per week for several weeks. One difference between the AMPS and 'just say no' programs is the refusal skills training. Maggs says that maintaining social relationships is one reason students begin to drink. "Students practice ways to resist offers to drink in ways that help them to save face and avoid embarrassment. They also discuss resisting more subtle pressures such as advertising messages and perceived norms that the majority of adolescents use drugs and alcohol."

Students were randomly assigned at the beginning to either the treatment or the control group. Out of the original survey group of 20,000, longitudinal data (over several years) from approximately 7,000 adolescents was collected as the young people were followed from

fifth or sixth grade through high school and young adulthood.

In the surveys alcohol use was measured by the frequency of drinking beer, wine or hard liquor multiplied by the quantity per average drinking occasion in the previous 12 months. To measure alcohol misuse students were asked to indicate whether they had experienced any of nine problems associated with drinking in the past 12 months, including getting very drunk, getting sick after drinking, friends complaining about their drinking, and getting into trouble with parents because of drinking. The students were also asked about reasons they might drink or not drink, such as 'to have a good time,' 'to be part of the group,' 'my friends are against drinking alcohol,' or 'because of the risk of getting hurt or in trouble.' Although it is normal for students' endorsement of reasons not to drink to decrease as they move through high school, students who were randomly assigned to receive the AMPS curriculum changed less than those in the control group, according to Maggs.

"Another important finding from the AMPS is that the timing of interventions is crucial," Maggs states. "The AMPS curriculum was implemented in fifth and sixth grade, but was most effective for those early teens in sixth grade who had already begun to experiment with alcohol. This suggests that while prevention should begin at an early age, it is possible to begin TOO early." She says information and skills presented need to seem relevant to the participants. "Of course, the most appropriate timing will vary for different locations and populations, but program planners should seriously consider issues of timing to maximize impact."

Maggs and Schulenberg are guest editing a special issue of the journal *Applied Developmental Science* that will focus on how prevention programs can alter the course of child and adolescent development in positive ways. They note in particular how the AMPS successfully targeted risk factors such as susceptibility to peer pressure as a way of reducing substance misuse during adolescence. The future for the AMPS is to integrate these findings into drug, alcohol and tobacco 'resistance trainings' offered to young people throughout Arizona. ❖