The Influence of Parental Actions on Adolescent Health Risk Behaviors: Findings From A National Data Set

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BACKGROUND
The health of adolescents and young adults is positively linked to learned health behaviors. Increased risk behaviors such as drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes can have a lasting impact on both short-term and long-term health. Adolescents who report drinking alcohol are more likely to smoke and to carry a weapon. Binge drinking during both adolescence and young adulthood were predictive of likelihood of arrest 8-14 years later. Adolescents who smoke cigarettes are more likely than nonsmokers to use alcohol, marijuana, and experiment with drugs.

METHODS
A secondary analysis of four waves of data (1994 to 2008) from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) was undertaken using a national sample of 16,388 adolescents and parents.

RESULTS
Parental health risk taking behaviors influenced adolescent risk taking across all four waves of data (1994 to 2008)

Alcohol Use:
- Adolescents who drink alcohol were more likely to have a parent who drinks (p=.0001)
- As the frequency of drinking increases in parents, the incidence of drinking increases in adolescents (p=.0001)
- Adolescents who binge drink (5+ drinks a day) were more likely to have a parent who binge drinks across all four waves (p=.000)

Cigarette Smoking:
- Adolescents who regularly smoke were more likely to have a parent who smokes
  - Wave I: 27.8% of adolescents (p=.0001)
  - Wave II: 80.1% of adolescents (p=.000)
  - Wave III: 53.3% of adolescents (p=.000)
  - Wave IV: 59.3% of adolescents (p=.001)
- Adolescents who smoke (51.8%) were more likely to have parents who said they did not (p=.001), suggesting that parents are unaware of their child’s risk behaviors.

CONCLUSIONS
- Parental health behaviors influence the risk taking of adolescents as they age into young adulthood.
- Healthcare professionals, social service providers, and educators must identify and screen for at risk adolescents.
- Educational programs aimed at reducing health risk in adolescents must also include parents to diminish risk factors and enhance protective factors.
- Promoting healthy behaviors around alcohol and cigarette use in parents can influence the health outcomes of their children.

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