Harmful Behavior: Young Kids Learn From Adults

Sept. 6, 2005 - New study results show that children at a very early age begin to model harmful behaviors from observation of adult behaviors.

When pretending to shop for a "social evening," researchers found preschoolers were nearly four times more likely to choose cigarettes if their parents smoked and five times more likely to choose beer or wine if they watched PG-13 or R-rated movies.

Researchers say that tobacco and alcohol prevention programs may need to be targeted at younger age groups rather than adolescents and teenagers.

Kids Model Bad Behaviors Early

In the study, which appears in the September issue of the *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, researchers used a role-playing scenario to assess the attitudes of 120 preschool children toward cigarettes and alcohol. Until, now, researchers say it's been difficult to study young children's attitudes toward cigarettes and alcohol due to their limited communication skills.

In the role-playing scenario, researchers gave the children, aged 2 to 6, two dolls. The children were asked to pretend to be one of the dolls; a researcher pretended to be the other doll, who was a friend invited over to watch a movie and have something to eat.

When the "friend" commented that there was nothing to eat, the child was invited to shop at a doll grocery store. For the youngest children, this scenario was simplified to asking the children to take a doll shopping.

The results showed that the children purchased an average of 17 of the 73 items available at the doll grocery store. About 28% bought cigarettes and 62% bought alcohol.

Kids' Awareness of Cigarettes and Alcohol

Researchers found the likelihood of the child including cigarettes or alcohol in this social evening was closely related to behaviors they saw at home or at the movies. For example:

- Children were nearly four times as likely to buy cigarettes if their parents smoked.
- Children were three times as likely to choose beer or wine if their parents drank alcohol at least once a month.
- Children were five times as likely to choose beer or wine if they watched PG-13- or R-rated movies.

"Children's play behavior suggests that they are highly attentive to the use and enjoyment of alcohol and tobacco and have well-established expectations about how cigarettes and alcohol fit into social settings," write researcher Madeline A. Dalton, PhD, of Dartmouth College, and colleagues.

"Several children were also highly aware of cigarette brands, as illustrated by the six-year-old boy who was able to identify the brand of cigarettes he was buying as Marlboros but could not identify the brand of his favorite cereal as Lucky Charms."

Researchers say the results suggest that observation of adult behavior, particularly parental behavior, may influence preschool children to view smoking and drinking as appropriate behavior in social situations.

"Although it is not clear whether these expectations predict future use, the data provide compelling evidence that the process of 'initiation,' which typically involves shifts in attitudes and expectations about the behavior, begins as young as three years of age. The results from this study suggest that alcohol and tobacco prevention efforts may need to be targeted toward younger children and their parents," write the researchers.

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