

Benefits and Challenges Facing North Dakota Youth

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Laura De Haan, Assistant Professor of Child Development and Family Science/Human Development Extension Specialist
Diane Gunvalson, Department of Child Development and Family Science

Most of us, when we think of a dangerous place for our children to grow up, imagine an inner-city environment. It is comforting to believe that teenagers growing up in a rural setting are protected from the risks and threats that face other adolescents. Unfortunately, however, research is beginning to discover that living in a rural environment can also be stressful for youth.

Rural environments may present few job opportunities or meaningful activities for adolescents. We are learning that rural youth are engaged in substance abuse and delinquent activity at rates similar to or higher than urban teens, and struggle with high levels of depression. One research project found 53% of a rural sample to be clinically depressed. Some people have even suggested that rural environments, due to rising crime rates, drug use, and gang involvement, may be even more stressful for teens than urban areas!

Researchers have learned that the environment where we grow up has a big impact on adolescent development and adjustment. We would like to share some information about rural adolescents living in North Dakota and some of the challenges that they face.

Relationships with Parents

Relationships with parents change a lot during adolescence. Often daily conflict increases, and relationships change from parental control to parental guidance. Research has shown, however, that teenagers still benefit from a strong support system. Teens who report supportive relationships with parents use alcohol and drugs less often and have higher levels of psychological well-being.

It is also important for parents to provide a clear sense of discipline and monitoring (knowing where their children are and who they are with). Appropriate monitoring has been associated with many positive outcomes, such as lower levels of delinquency.

We found that when adolescents feel their parents are supportive and provide clear, consistent discipline it effected all the outcomes we studied (higher levels of self-esteem and grades, and lower levels of depression, delinquency, and substance use). Hours spent with family were indirectly related to behavioral and well-being outcomes. Although hours with parents were not significantly related to any of the outcomes, they were related to positive feelings about parents. This indicates that hours spent with family was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for positive adjustment.

Youth and Economic Hardship

Poor nutrition, lack of access to medical care, unsafe living conditions, exposure to drugs, and high crime rates are all associated with poverty. In addition, poverty has been associated with higher levels of loneliness and depression in rural adolescents, and higher school dropout rates in national studies of adolescents. Youth in economically disadvantaged families also report greater numbers of stressful things happening in their life. However, there are factors that can protect youth from these negative outcomes. If the family unit remains strong and is supportive and nurturing, the impact of poverty on children is lessened considerably.

In our research, economic hardship was associated with higher depression and less self-esteem. However, poverty was not associated with substance use, delinquency, or grades, indicating that poor adolescents are no more or less likely to engage in risky activities than other adolescents.

Findings of study of fifth and sixth grade youth

A study of about 175 fifth and sixth graders from six rural towns was conducted to learn about very young adolescents in rural North Dakota. Students were asked about different parts of their lives, to find what kinds of problems and risks fifth and sixth graders faced, and to learn which factors helped pre-teens to do well and stay away from harmful situations.

Remember that in this type of study, it is not correct to say that something causes something else, but only that they are related to each other. It takes longitudinal research (research done over time with the same subjects) to discuss cause and effect.

How do fifth and sixth graders spend their time in an average week?

(in hours per week)

Sleeping - 52.9

School - 32.0

TV - 19.1

Family - 16.3

Friends - 12.5

Extracurricular activities - 11.4

Chores - 10.6

Homework - 6.9

Church - 5.7

Prevalence of risk behaviors among rural fifth and sixth graders

It was once believed that rural youth did not use alcohol and drugs with the same frequency as their city peers. Current research indicates that this is not true. In a review of 65 reports on substance use, it was found that alcohol use was virtually the same for both rural and urban youth, and that marijuana use was also very similar. Hard drug use was still more frequent among urban youth except for stimulants and inhalants.

We asked our group of fifth and sixth graders about their use of drugs or alcohol (98% of responses were for alcohol) and delinquent activity:

How often have you used alcohol or drugs in the past three months?

Never - 53%

- 1-3 times - 31%
- 4-6 times - 10%
- 7-9 times - 1%
- 10+ times - 5%

How often have you engaged in delinquent activity in the past three months?

- Never - 56%
- 1-3 times - 33%
- 4-6 times - 8%
- 7-9 times - 3%
- 10+ times - 0%

Factors related to good grades

- low levels of depression
- lower drug use
- higher levels of self-esteem
- 4-H involvement
- being female
- more religious involvement
- on-time or late puberty development

Factors related to delinquency

- higher reported autonomy (feeling separated from others, especially parents)
- more drug/alcohol use
- higher levels of depression
- having a poor relationship with parents
- inappropriate chores at home (such as cooking meals for the entire family, or providing child care on a daily basis)

Factors related to drug/alcohol use

- higher levels of autonomy, which refers to feeling separated from parents
- higher levels of delinquency
- higher levels of depression
- has worse relationship with parents
- spending more time with peers
- inappropriate chores at home (such as cooking meals for the entire family, or providing child care on a daily basis)
- spending more time at
- extracurricular activities
- early pubertal development

Factors relating to loneliness and lower self-esteem

- less identity development (less sure of who they are)
- dissatisfaction with appearance
- lower reported frequency of religious involvement
- poor relationship with parents
- economic hardship

Factors relating to depression

- higher level of autonomy

- poor relationship with parents
- lower level of identity development
- more time spent watching TV
- lower satisfaction with appearance
- economic hardship
- more involvement in drug/alcohol use and delinquency

Findings of study on eighth grade youth

Eighth graders that we studied reported using drugs and alcohol at much higher levels than the national average (55% of participating adolescents had consumed alcohol or other drugs, compared to 23% nationally). About half of the eighth graders reported at least one delinquent act, with 15% reporting six or more activities.

How often have you used alcohol or drugs in the past three months?

Never - 45%
 1-5 times - 31%
 6-10 times - 15%
 11+ times - 9%

How often have you engaged in delinquent activity in the past three months?

Never - 48%
 1-5 times - 37%
 6-10 times - 9%
 11+ times - 6%

How do eighth graders spend their time in an average week?

(in hours per week)
 Hours spent with families - 12.5
 Hour spent with friends - 26.5
 Hours spent watching TV - 22.8
 Hours studying (outside of school) - 11.2
 Hours in religious activities - 7.2

Time with friends was the most common activity: adolescents spend more hours watching TV than they do with their families! Hours spent with friends related to higher substance use and lower grades, as well as lower self-esteem and higher depression. Time spent in religious activities were associated with higher grades and lower levels of delinquency.

Watching TV was associated with negative behavioral outcomes for eighth graders. Although levels of self-esteem and depression were not affected, heavy TV watchers were more likely to use drugs and alcohol, commit delinquent acts, and have poorer grades.

Risks associated with spending more time with friends

While we expect adolescents to gradually spend more time with friends and less time with family, it appears that at this age, spending large amounts of time with friends indicated problems. The more time spent with friends:

- the lower the grades
- the lower their self-esteem
- the more likely they are to use drugs or alcohol
- the more depressed they report feeling

Factors associated with heavy TV viewing

- more likely to use drugs or alcohol
- more likely to commit delinquent acts
- less likely to have good grades

The power of positive parental relationships

Those who felt their parents were supportive, set clear limits and had fair, consistent discipline also:

- had higher self-esteem
- were less depressed
- had higher grades
- used less drugs and alcohol
- were less delinquent

It was found that hours spent with the family were related to better feelings about the parental relationship.

What does all this mean?

It might be helpful to think about this research in two ways. Certain risk factors or challenges identified may increase the chances that an adolescent will engage in some kind of risky behavior.

Also, benefits or protective factors that were identified increased the likelihood that adolescents would feel better about themselves and be less involved in risky behaviors.

Protective Factors -- The Good News

One of the most promising findings is the strong power of a positive relationship between parent and child. Adolescents who felt their parents were there for them, who understood and respected them, and who cared enough to follow through with some limits on their behavior were more likely to avoid drugs and alcohol, get better grades, and feel better about themselves.

What can parents do?

Spend time together. Nothing can substitute for those minutes and hours together.

Listen to your son or daughter. Take time each day, even if it is only a few minutes, to really listen. Try to understand how they are feeling, how they see the world, what is meaningful to them.

Set reasonable limits. It is a tempting world out there. Parents have the responsibility

to set clear boundaries in areas where mistakes have lifetime consequences. They also must pay enough attention to their children's activities to ensure that the limits they set are enforced.

Stay involved in your children's lives. This can be difficult during those adolescent years when teens are struggling for independence, but when you make the effort, and take the time to be there for them, they will know you care.

Be supportive. Find a way each day to encourage and appreciate your children. Make your affirmations as specific as possible.

Know where your child is and who their friends are. As our children become adolescents, their peers play an important role in influencing their behavior, attitudes and choices. We can't control everyone they see, but we can make it a point to get to know their friends and the parents of their friends.

Keep your teen's life in balance. Too much of certain behaviors, like chores, or watching TV, is a risk factor. Chores are important for developing responsibility, but too much, too soon, especially without adult support, seems to lead to stress and problems. Too much time with TV or friends has also been linked to negative outcomes.

If consistent with the beliefs of your family, involve your children in religious activities. Religious involvement leads to less risky behaviors and higher levels of self-esteem for rural adolescents.

Stay in touch with the school and teachers. Work together to make school as important and successful an experience as possible for your child. It is a crucial key to your child's future.

Risk Factors (some questions to think about)

How much time does my child spend hanging out with friends?

Adolescents who spend a lot of unstructured time with their friends are more likely to have lower grades and self-esteem, and higher levels of substance use and depression.

How much time does my child spend watching TV, especially alone?

Watching a lot of television may also be associated with delinquent activity, drug and alcohol use, and lower grades.

If you are currently having economic difficulties. How much have our financial problems affected my relationship with my child?

Poverty, especially when it creates marital strain, often leads to higher levels of loneliness and depression in young teens.

Are the chores that I set for my children appropriate to their age level and skills?

Although studies have shown that many parents do not give their children enough responsibility at home, some parents may err in the other direction. Fifth and sixth graders who were given heavy responsibilities at home (such as cooking the majority of the meals for their family or providing child care for younger siblings every day) were more likely to be delinquent and use drugs or alcohol. This certainly does not mean that children should not be expected to help out in family tasks or chores, just that their duties at home should be appropriate for their age!

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North Dakota State University Agriculture and University Extension
Dept. 7070, Morrill 7, P.O. Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050