

Research Snapshot

Adolescent identity development buffers against peer pressure risk behaviours

What you need to know:

What is this research about?

Social time with friends or peers plays an important role in development and behaviour. Having positive social experiences with peers can protect teens from risky behaviours like drug or alcohol use. Subsequently, negative peer socialization experiences like peer pressure may increase risk-taking behaviour. Some peer groups may control and/or pressure their members to engage in risky behaviours in order to fit in (e.g. substance use, vandalism, skipping school). The researchers explored what personal factors can help youth avoid risky behaviours if these behaviours are expected of them by their peers.

“By helping teens to construct personal identities, which act as another strong frame of reference other than peer group norms for guiding actions and behaviors, teens may be less likely to engage in behaviors that may conflict with their beliefs and values regarding who they are or that potentially interfere with personal life goals.”

During adolescence, youth explore different versions of themselves and eventually commit to a sense of self or identity. Teenagers who have developed a personal, autonomous identity outside of their peer group have been found to be more resistant to peer pressure, particularly if the pressured behaviours conflict with their personal goals.

This study explored whether youths' level of identity exploration and commitment to identity would moderate the relationship between peer pressure and control and risk behaviours. Over 1,000 students completed self-report measures of identity exploration, identity commitment, risky behaviours, and experiences of peer-group pressure and control. Identity commitment was a buffer against substance use and identity exploration was a buffer against deviant behaviours. Increased identity exploration and commitment can lead to increased autonomy and sense of responsibility. These factors promote personal independence and decrease the influence of external pressuring forces when making decisions.

Those who are considered “identity diffused” (e.g., they have yet to identify and commit to values or beliefs that speak to them personally) have been found to bend easier to the wills of a control-oriented peer group and engage in more substance use. The purpose of this study was to explore whether one's level of identity exploration and identity commitment would moderate the relationship between peer pressure, peer control, and risk behaviours.

What did the researchers do?

A total of 1,070 high school students (49% female) were recruited from two high schools in a mid-sized Canadian city. They ranged in age from 14-17 (average 15 years old) and were predominately White (80.1%). Participants completed a self-report questionnaire package that explored their level of identity exploration and commitment, perceived peer group pressure and control, and frequency of substance-use and risky/delinquent behaviours. Analyses examined the moderating effects of identity commitment and exploration and the predictive factors of peer-group control and pressure on risky behaviours.

What did the researchers find?

Results indicated that identity commitment was a buffer against substance use and risky behaviours. Among pressuring peer groups, high identity commitment led to less substance use while high identity exploration led to fewer risky behaviours. Among controlling peer groups, high identity commitment led to less engagement in risky behaviours. High levels of both identity exploration and commitment were associated with the least substance use, while low levels of both identity exploration and commitment were associated with lower deviancy. Increased peer pressure and youths' ages further positively predicted substance use. Boys experienced more peer pressure and had higher deviancy scores than did girls. Girls demonstrated higher degrees of identity exploration than boys.

How can you use this research?

Increasing our understanding of how identity exploration and commitment can impact a teen's likelihood of succumbing to negative peer pressures can lead to more effective and tailored interventions focused on decreasing these risky behaviours. These interventions can be provided within educational and family environments.

Doing so may present beneficial long-term results in deterring youth from establishing delinquent and/or substance-abuse habits. Fostering the exploration of what feels important to a teenager is key to helping them develop their own unique sense of who they are, what they believe in, and how they should act in their world. In doing so, adolescents can grow as autonomous individuals outside of the potentially domineering norms enforced by some peer groups and learn how best to resist negative pressures.

Original Research Article:

For a complete description of the research and findings, please see the full research article:

Dumas, T.M., Ellis, W. E., & Wolfe, D. A. (2012). Identity development as a buffer of adolescent risk behaviours in the context of peer group pressure and control. *Journal of Adolescence*, 35, 917-927.

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About this Summary: This summary was written by Lyndsay Masters, MA Candidate at Western University. For further information about Western's Centre for School Mental Health, visit www.edu.uwo.ca/csmh.