



Original article

Not Just Academics: Paths of Longitudinal Effects From Parent Involvement to Substance Abuse in Emerging Adulthood


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Article history: Received August 4, 2015; Accepted November 17, 2015

Keywords: Parent involvement; Substance abuse; Mechanisms of substance abuse prevention

 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: By the 12th grade, half of American adolescents have abused an illicit drug at least once (Johnston et al., 2015). Although many substance misuse prevention programs exist, we propose an alternative mechanism for reducing substance use. There is evidence that parent involvement is related to reductions in children's behavior problems which then predict later substance abuse. We examine the Child-Parent Center (CPC) program, an early childhood intervention, as a strategy to impact substance abuse.

Methods: We conducted a path analysis from CPC to parent involvement through early adolescent problem behaviors and competencies to young adult substance abuse. Participants (N = 1,203; 51.5% female; 93.8% African-American) were assessed from age 3 to 26 years.

Results: CPC participation initiates a pathway to increased parent involvement and expectations, which positively impact adolescents' competencies and problem behaviors, lowering rates of substance abuse.

Conclusions: Through early childhood education, increasing early parental involvement and expectations can alter life-course outcomes by providing children with a foundation for positive behaviors and encouraging adaptive functioning in adolescence.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND
 CONTRIBUTION

This study examined the Child-Parent Center program as an alternative substance abuse prevention mechanism. Through Child-Parent Center, parent involvement improved competencies and problem behaviors, influencing substance abuse. These results support early childhood education programs as a possible strategy to mitigate adolescent substance abuse.

By the 12th grade, approximately half of American adolescents have used an illicit drug at least once [1]. Owing to the detrimental impacts of substance abuse, there has been a plethora of research aimed at identifying the risk factors and causes of substance abuse, which has led to the development of multiple prevention programs with the aim of delaying and reducing substance abuse [2–5]. This study examines an early childhood intervention program as a potential approach to reduce substance abuse in emerging adulthood.

Prevention strategies for substance abuse

The National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (<http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/>) identifies 33 evidence-based childhood substance abuse prevention programs, ranging from school-based social competency programs, curriculum-based programs, community-level interventions, and home-visiting programs. Although evidence based, these programs are limited in scope and target the delayed onset or prevention of substance abuse through a single strategy (e.g., home visitation, school curriculum). A more economically effective approach would be to fund an ecologically oriented program that includes reducing substance abuse as one among other positive changes.

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The Child-Parent Center (CPC) program is a comprehensive early childhood education (ECE) intervention program with a parent involvement focus, targeted for economically disadvantaged families. Research has documented the long-term positive outcomes for CPC participants across a variety of developmental domains [6–9]. Although the CPC program has demonstrated increased parent involvement and has associated these increases with student achievement [10–12], the mechanisms leading from program involvement to substance abuse are unclear. There is evidence that parent involvement is related to children's behavior problems in adolescence [13] and that these problems then predict substance abuse in emerging adulthood [14]. Little research, however, has investigated the pathways within ECE programs from parent involvement and expectations to young adult substance abuse. Furthermore, the effects of parental factors on competencies, such as frustration tolerance, and problem behaviors, have gone relatively unstudied. An ECE program that demonstrates a long-term positive impact *beyond* academics, and including young adult health, would be a financially efficient prevention strategy; evidence indicates that the benefits of ECE programs on education and crime alone can return \$7 for every \$1 invested [9].

Competencies and problem behaviors and substance abuse

Young adult drug abuse poses a myriad of developmental risks through the increased odds of life-course persistent misuse. The likelihood of developing a substance use disorder (SUD) is considerably higher when substance abuse begins in adolescence [15,16]; although the median age of onset of SUD is 19–21 years [17], 90% of people who qualify for a diagnosis began using substances before the age of 18 years. These problem behaviors are situated in a complex-interacting ecological context including parent, school, and personality traits that has been recognized clinically as a premorbid feature of SUD [18–22]. Frustration tolerance in particular, which has been conceptualized as a self-regulatory competency [23], has been associated with substance abuse across a range of studies [19]. For example, boys at high risk for SUD have been found to be lower in frustration tolerance than boys who were not at risk [22].

Childhood and adolescent externalizing and antisocial behaviors also consistently link with later substance abuse [24,25]. Aggressiveness in early childhood predicts drug abuse and becomes more predictive with increasing age [26,27]. Furthermore, early adolescent behavior problems predispose children to the development of SUD even when controlling for attentional problems [26]. Bryant et al. [28] examined the association between children's behaviors and later substance abuse and found that school misbehavior was associated with substance abuse at the age of 14 years. In addition, children who evince behavior problems in middle childhood are more likely to have continued conduct problems later in life than children who do not [29]. Conduct problems have also been found to be associated with SUD [5,24]. Given their potential to lead to maladaptive behaviors, behavior problems are important to mitigate.

Parent involvement, competencies, and problem behaviors

Research indicates that early parent involvement has a sustained influence throughout children's development. Although the positive impact of parent involvement and expectations on achievement has been thoroughly examined [30,31], far less

research has examined nonacademic outcomes. Especially of interest is the impact of early school parent involvement on later maladaptive behaviors (e.g., substance abuse) and its underlying mechanisms (e.g., frustration tolerance).

There is some evidence indicating that parent involvement and expectations impact domains of development beyond achievement. For example, Griffin et al. [32] found that parent involvement was associated with less delinquent activity. Moreover, research indicates that low parent involvement is related to a host of later problems (e.g., behavior problems, attendance) [13,26,28], which then predict adolescent substance use [1]. Relatedly, the relationship between substance use and academic achievement has also been well documented [33].

Furthermore, low parent expectations of a child's school progress have been found to be associated with later substance abuse [21,28]. However, the relations between parent involvement and later substance use have not been thoroughly investigated.

The present study

The CPC program is an ongoing center-based early intervention that provides educational- and family-support services to disadvantaged children and their families [34]. CPC programs provide opportunities to encourage parent participation in school events and activities to facilitate a welcoming parent involvement culture. Numerous longitudinal studies have documented the success of these efforts, identifying the positive impact of CPC parent involvement on children's reading achievement and reduced rates of grade retention and special education status [35].

Although the CPC program's impact on parent involvement has previously been examined within the framework of children's long-term academic success [12], its impact on young adults' tendency to abuse substances and predictive mechanisms within this context has not been examined. To extend current literature, in the present study, we examine the pathways leading from CPC involvement to substance abuse. As school parent involvement involves multiple contexts of bidirectional relationships, it is critical that we examine the potential long-term pathways from early parent involvement to young adult well-being. Moreover, it is important to identify the specific mechanisms that underlie these long-term associations so that interventions can be based on elements with proven effectiveness. We hypothesized that greater parent involvement and expectations increased through CPC participation, set in motion a pathway leading from these parenting factors to reduced early adolescent behavior problems, and higher frustration tolerance, resulting in lower rates of substance abuse in emerging adulthood.

Methods

Sample

The study sample is from the Chicago Longitudinal Study, an investigation of the effects of the CPC program [35]. Children who attended CPC in preschool ($n = 777$) and a matched comparison group ($n = 426$) were followed into adulthood (51.5% female). As both the CPC schools and comparison schools were located in inner city Chicago, there was very little variation in demographic characteristics—93.8% of the sample was

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