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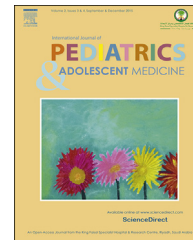


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ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Student, school, parent connectedness, and school risk behaviors of adolescents in Saudi Arabia



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KEYWORDS

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Abstract *Background and Objectives:* School-related risk behaviors, such as school absenteeism, and engaging in violence on school property are scarcely addressed in the Kingdom. The study investigated select school behaviors, including school absenteeism, engaging in fights, and discipline for misconduct at school as well as their association with the school environment, school and home connectedness.

Design and setting: A school-based cross-sectional study.

Materials and methods: A total of 1668 students were selected from high schools in Riyadh on the basis of geographical location (North, South, Middle) and type of school. In each geographical area, the two largest public schools, one private school and one international school were selected. Classrooms with a free period were selected at random, and all of the students in select classrooms were eligible to participate in the study. The study employed a self-administered survey that inquired about school behaviors and student connectedness with their parents and school.

Results: Nearly 54% of students skipped school or cut classes for at least 1 h, and out of those students who skipped school, 37% of students skipped school for 1–3 h and 20% of students skipped school for 3 or more hours during the month prior to the survey. Thirty-eight percent of students engaged in fights on school property at least once during the past or current academic year. In addition, 37% of students were disciplined for engaging in school fights, theft or damaging school property at least once.

Absenteeism increased with grade, while engaging in school fights and discipline for misconduct decreased with grade. A significantly higher proportion of males exhibited these

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behaviors, and students who exhibited these behaviors reported significantly lower levels of school connectedness and parental monitoring. Regression analyses suggested that school-student connectedness reduced the odds for all three risk behaviors examined in this study. Parental monitoring reduced the odds for absenteeism, and school policies reduced student involvement in school fights.

Conclusion: This study highlights the need to develop strategies to enhance the best practices in school settings to promote positive student behavior and school achievement. Schools and parents should be encouraged to work as a team and to recognize the importance of school connectedness in improving positive student behavior and outcomes.

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1. Introduction

The research focus on the Saudi adolescent population has been on diet, exercise, physical inactivity [1] and related health conditions, including nutritional deficiencies [2]. However, recent studies on the mental health of adolescents, such as depression, anxiety and stress, have begun to emerge [3]. Other health-compromising behaviors, such as smoking, have also been frequently studied among youths [4–6], which is a major public health concern in Saudi Arabia. Smoking rates among youths range between 30% and 37% [7–9]. Although school children are recurrent subjects for the study of nutrition, obesity, and smoking, risk behaviors associated with school achievement and factors that might affect those behaviors have not been addressed in the Kingdom. School-based data provide a great opportunity to address other risk behaviors, such as school absenteeism and engaging in violence on school property, which have scarcely been addressed. School climate has also been linked to multiple student behavioral, academic, health, and social-emotional outcomes [10].

The current study aimed to examine school behaviors, including school absenteeism and engaging in physical violence at school as well as their association with student connectedness with the school and their parents. Habitual absenteeism from school can be a serious health concern for mental health professionals, physicians, and educators. The prevalence of unexcused absences from school may be a major childhood behavioral disorder and a key risk factor for violence, injury, substance use, psychiatric disorders, and economic deprivation [11]. To the best of our knowledge, contextual risk factors, such as school violence and victimization, school environment and connectedness, parental involvement, and family variables, have not been examined in the Saudi culture.

School connectedness refers to the belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their education as well as about themselves as individuals, which is an important protective factor. Research has shown that youths who feel connected to their school are less likely to engage in many risk behaviors, including early sexual initiation, alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, and violence and gang involvement. Students who feel connected to their school are also more likely to have better academic achievement, including higher grades and test

scores, have better school attendance, and stay in school longer [12,13]. Efforts to improve child and adolescent health have typically addressed specific health risk behaviors, such as tobacco use or violence. However, a growing body of research suggests that enhancing protective factors help children to avoid multiple behaviors that place them at risk for adverse health and educational outcomes [14]. In addition, a positive school environment has proven to deter children from engaging in school violence, particularly in preventing the initiation and reducing the severity of school violence [15]. However, little is known regarding the relative importance of various characteristics of the school environment or their differential effects on skipping school and engaging in school violence in Arab school youths. These important factors have never been systematically studied in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Parental monitoring is “a set of correlated parenting behaviors involving attention to and tracking of the child’s whereabouts, activities, and adaptations” [16]. Research on parenting practices has revealed parental monitoring to be relevant to the development of childhood antisocial behavior and substance use [17,18]. Parental monitoring is also associated with the positive dimensions of the children’s adjustment in middle childhood, including self-esteem [19], academic achievement [20], and high school completion [21]. A number of risk factors have been identified, including familial environment, however, few studies have examined the effect of parental monitoring on risk behaviors associated with school, in particular, among Saudi adolescents.

Given this background, the main purpose of this study was to investigate select school behaviors, including school absenteeism and engaging in physical violence, and discipline for misconduct at school and their association with the school environment, adolescent school and home connectedness. We hypothesized that a positive school environment and connectedness with the school and home have negative associations with school-related risk behavior.

2. Materials and methods

The study participants were randomly drawn from high schools in Riyadh, the capital and largest city in Saudi Arabia. Schools were selected on the basis of their

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