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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Is a gender differential intervention necessary in the prevention of adolescent drug use? ☆

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KEYWORDS

Gender;
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Abstract

Objectives: To examine the significant differences in smoking, drug and alcohol use between adolescent boys and girls, and to raise the possible need to design and implement prevention programmes from a gender perspective.

Method: A qualitative study using eight discussion groups of adolescents aged 14–18 years (n = 56) and 6 semi-structured interviews with experts and professionals in drug prevention in the Community of Madrid. Categorical interpretive analysis was performed.

Results: The adolescents and prevention professional indicated differences between boys and girls in drug and alcohol use. The significances, reasons associated with the consumption and the patterns of consumption were perceived differently by each sex. To lose weight, calm down or an image of rebelliousness was related to girls who smoked, while boys smoked less because they participated in more sports. The perception of certain precocity of drug consumption was associated with the step from school to Higher Education Institutions. They found smoking associated with a good social image among their groups. Adolescents showed the ineffectiveness of the campaigns and prevention messages they received, incoherence of adults between messages and actions, and the attraction of all behaviours that are banned. Professionals observed the need to include a gender perspective in prevention programmes, but did not know how to achieve it, mainly because it has been translated into different activities for each sex until now.

Conclusions: The significant differences associated with smoking, drug and alcohol use observed in the adolescents should lead us to design and implement prevention programmes that incorporate a gender perspective. It is perhaps from this strategy where drug and alcohol use among girls can be reduced.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Género;
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Alcohol

¿Es necesaria una intervención diferencial de género en la prevención universal y selectiva del consumo de drogas en adolescentes?

Resumen

Objetivos: Explorar los significados diferenciales en el consumo de drogas, tabaco y alcohol entre chicos y chicas, y plantear la posible necesidad de diseñar e implementar los programas de prevención desde una perspectiva de género.

Métodos: Estudio cualitativo mediante 8 grupos de discusión con adolescentes de 14–18 años (n = 56) y 6 entrevistas semiestructuradas a expertos y profesionales de prevención de drogas en la Comunidad de Madrid. Análisis interpretativo categórico.

Resultados: Los adolescentes y profesionales de prevención señalaban diferencias entre chicos y chicas en los consumos de tabaco y alcohol. Los significados, motivos asociados al consumo y las pautas de consumo eran percibidos de forma diferente en cada sexo. Adelgazar, calmar los nervios o una imagen de rebeldía era relacionada al fumar de las chicas mientras que el menor consumo de tabaco en los chicos se asociaba con su participación en el deporte. La percepción de cierta precocidad en los consumos de drogas se asociaba al paso del colegio al instituto. Constataban la buena imagen social asociada a fumar entre sus grupos. Los adolescentes manifestaron la ineficacia de las campañas y mensajes de prevención que recibían, la incoherencia de los adultos entre sus mensajes y acciones, y la atracción de todas las conductas que les eran prohibidas. Los profesionales observaban la necesidad de incluir la perspectiva de género en los programas de prevención, pero desconocían cómo concretarlo, ya que principalmente lo traducían en actividades diferentes para cada sexo.

Conclusiones: Los diferentes significados asociados al consumo que otorgan chicos y chicas nos llevan a diseñar y realizar programas preventivos que incorporen la perspectiva de género, pues es quizá desde esta estrategia desde donde se pueda reducir el consumo de tabaco y alcohol entre las chicas.

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Introduction

Over the last years the surveys designed by the Government Office for the Spanish National Drug Strategy given to secondary school students, as well as other studies,^{1–3} have been indicating important differences between boys and girls in the consumption of psychoactive substances. The feminine predominance in the consumption of legal substances (tobacco, alcohol and psychiatric drugs) is especially notable. The last Spanish National Survey on Drug Use by Secondary School Students⁴ shows that there are clear gender differences in the consumption of substances in these ages; boys consume all the illegal drugs in greater proportion than girls, while tobacco and tranquillisers or hypnotics are more consumed by female students. Likewise, the last student survey carried out in Madrid in 2008⁵ indicated that in the last year 35% of the boys and 41.1% of the girls had smoked; 66.9% of boys and 70.5% of girls had consumed alcohol; and 5% of boys and 7.1% of girls had consumed tranquillisers without a prescription. This ratio was also found in the last month's consumption and in the life prevalence. However, these percentages switch when we talk about illegal drugs (hash, cocaine, ecstasy, etc.); the greatest consumptions appear in boys, which once again shows the different patterns of consumption by gender than have been mentioned several times.^{6,7}

Tobacco and alcohol consumption generate in Spain the biggest drug-related problems, in terms of both accident rates and mortality.⁸ The incorporation of young females in

these consumptions will in time lead to an increase in health problems that were of minority interest for them before. What is happening to adolescent girls to make them smoke and drink more than their masculine counterparts? What social representation and meaning do these substances have for these girls? Is it possible for us to think that the preventative strategies based on universal and selective prevention are less effective for girls?

These questions have motivated this research, considering that gender analysis helps to answer them. While in Spain the gender studies on the use and abuse of drugs are few or in the minority, that is not the case in the international context. Since the 1980s gender has been considered an important matter in the treatment of drug abuse⁹ and, to a lesser extent, in prevention programmes.^{10,11}

The objective of this study was to explore and describe the differential perceptions and meanings in drug consumption (specifically of tobacco and alcohol) between boys and girls, and to pose the possible need to design and implement prevention programmes from a gender perspective.

Method

The methodological focus used in this study was qualitative, utilising semi-structured interviews and discussion groups. Depending on the data collection technique used, the study subjects were different. Six interviews were given, recorded in audio and transcribed literally; the subjects were professionals at different entities that participated actively in

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