



International note

Parental knowledge and adolescents' risk behaviors



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ABSTRACT

In this paper we study whether parental knowledge of adolescents' activities varies according to socio-demographic variables, and we analyze the possible association between parental knowledge patterns and certain risk behaviors among adolescents. A cross-sectional study was performed with representative samples of high-school students in Peru and El Salvador. A questionnaire assessed risk behaviors, as well as possible determinants, including parental knowledge. The questionnaire was answered by 6208 adolescents. We observed that the greater the degree of knowledge, the lower the frequency of risk behaviors among youth. The degree of knowledge was inversely associated with children's age, and we observed that being female was associated with a greater degree of parental knowledge. The study shows that parents' supervision criteria might be influenced by gender stereotypes, which would have a harmful effect on young males, as the lower degree of knowledge puts them at higher odds of risk behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a stage where young people shape their behavior in accordance with their lifestyle. For years the lifestyle of adolescents and the risk behaviors they engage in at this stage (such as substance use or risky sexual behaviors) have been studied because of their potentially harmful health effects (Andrés Villas, Remesal Cobreros, Torrico Linares, & Salazar Torres, 2013; Costa Cabanillas & Lopez Mendez, 2008; Osorio, Lopez-del Burgo, Carlos, Ruiz-Canela, & de Irala, 2012).

Among the approaches to the study of family education, one of the relevant variables is parental knowledge: how much parents know about what their children do in their free time. Several studies have found that parental knowledge is a protective factor for children. Specifically, it has been found that children who are supervised by their parents engage less in

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crime (Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010) and are not as likely to use alcohol (Arria et al., 2008), tobacco (Guo, Reeder, McGee, & Darling, 2011) and drugs (Jiménez-Iglesias, Moreno, Rivera, & García-Moya, 2013).

Parental knowledge and its association with other variables (both predictors and outcomes) have been abundantly analyzed (Barber, Stolz, Olsen, Collins, & Burchinal, 2005) in North America (Arria et al., 2008; Barton & Schwebel, 2007; Magoon & Ingersoll, 2006; O'Donnell et al., 2008) and Europe (Escribano, Anierte, & Orgilés, 2013; Kerr et al., 2010; Martínez Álvarez, Fuertes Martín, Ramos Vergeles, & Hernández Martín, 2003), and to some extent in Asia (Goh et al., 2016; Hasumi, Ahsan, Couper, Aguayo, & Jacobsen, 2012; Wang, Kim, Anderson, Chen, & Yan, 2012) and Africa (Bean, Barber, & Crane, 2006). In Latin America, though there are some studies (Cumsille, Darling, & Martínez, 2010; Gutiérrez, Contreras, Trujillo, Haro, & Ramos-Castillo, 2009; Malta, Mascarenhas, Porto, Barreto, & Neto, 2014), more research is necessary. Our aim is to study this issue in two developing countries in Central America (El Salvador) and South America (Peru).

In particular, the specific objectives of this study are:

1. To examine whether parental knowledge differs depending on the sex of the children, their age and other socio-demographic variables.
2. To confirm whether parental knowledge is associated with adolescents' risk behaviors such as the use of tobacco, alcohol or drugs and early sexual relations.

2. Method

This work is part of an international study (Project YourLife) about what teens think and feel about love and sexuality (Carlos et al., 2016; de Irala, Osorio, Carlos, Ruiz-Canela, & López-del Burgo, 2011; de Irala et al., 2009; Osorio et al., 2012). Methods are detailed in the [Supplementary material](#).

2.1. Sample

This study was carried out with representative samples of young students from El Salvador and Peru. A questionnaire was administered to 13-to-18-year-old students from 30 (El Salvador) and 62 (Peru) randomly selected public and private schools.

2.2. Instrument

The questionnaire included questions about lifestyle, opinions and attitudes about sexuality and affectivity and the socio-demographic characteristics of the adolescents. The questionnaire was administered on paper and read with optical reading devices.

The main question for this article (parental knowledge) was formulated as follows: "Do your parents, or the persons responsible for you, know where you go or what you do in your free time (alone or with a group)?" The question had 5 possible answers (from 1 = never to 5 = always).

Regarding risk behaviors the substance use question was: "Indicate how often the following situations apply to your life." Then adolescents responded to each of the following behaviors: "I smoke cigarettes", "I consume alcoholic beverages" and "I use drugs (marijuana, hashish, etc.)". The responses ranged from 1 = never to 5 = always. The sexual relations question was: "Have you ever had sex?" A note clarified, "Remember that by 'sex' we mean 'complete sexual intercourse'".

2.3. Procedure

Before administering the questionnaire to students, consent was obtained through the schools. Survey administrators traveled to each school to administer the questionnaire during school hours. Students were informed that the questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous. It was stressed that they were not obliged to participate, and that they did not have to respond to any question they did not want to answer.

2.4. Data analyses

Bivariate associations were evaluated using Student's t-tests and ANOVAs. Multivariate analyses were performed with multiple lineal or logistic regressions. Stata statistical software (version 12) was used in all analyses.

3. Results

The study sample included 6053 adolescents (2664 Salvadorans and 3389 Peruvians). [Table 1](#) shows the summary of the main socio-demographic variables.

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