



# Early adolescent substance use in Mexican origin families: Peer selection, peer influence, and parental monitoring<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Because adolescents vary in their susceptibility to peer influence, the current study addresses potential reciprocal effects between associating with deviant peers and use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs (ATOD), as well as the potential buffering role of parental monitoring on these reciprocal effects.

**Method:** 674 children of Mexican origin reported at fifth and seventh grade (10.4 years old at fifth grade) on the degree to which they associated with deviant peers, intended to use alcohol, tobacco or other drugs (ATOD) in the future, and had used controlled substances during the past year. Trained observers rated parental monitoring from video-recorded family interactions at the first assessment.

**Results:** Youth who intended to use ATODs during fifth grade experienced a relative increase in number of deviant peers by seventh grade, and youth with more deviant peers in fifth grade were more likely to use ATODs by seventh grade. Parental monitoring buffered (i.e., moderated) the reciprocal association between involvement with deviant peers and both intent to use ATODs and actual use of ATODs.

**Conclusions:** Parental monitoring can disrupt the reciprocal associations between deviant peers and ATOD use during the transition from childhood to adolescence.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Overview

Early use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs (ATOD) constitutes a major health risk (Anthony et al., 2005; van Leeuwen et al., 2011). Furthermore, although many adolescents experiment with ATODs only to abandon them, ATOD use before mid-adolescence often predicts later substance abuse, delinquency, antisocial behavior, and psychiatric disorders (Ellickson et al., 2003). Therefore, it is important to identify factors that either exacerbate or inhibit ATOD use during early adolescence. In early adolescence (i.e., eighth grade), Latinos report the highest usage rates for most types of drugs compared to Anglo and African American students of the same age (Johnston et al., 2012). For this reason, in the current investigation we focus on factors hypothesized to affect involvement with ATOD among a cohort of over 600 Mexican American youth during

the transition from childhood to early adolescence (fifth to seventh grades). In particular, we examine the potential risk of ATOD use due to deviant peers and the degree to which parental monitoring protects against this risk.

### 1.2. Pathways to ATOD use

We assess two reciprocal pathways implicated in the association between deviant peers and substance use. The *peer socialization pathway* reflects how associating with deviant peers increases the likelihood of ATOD use. The *peer selection pathway* reflects how children who use or intend to use ATOD actively seek out and passively select into peer groups that will facilitate their use (Hirschi, 2002). Scientists find support for both pathways among white American samples (Dishion, 2013). Because adolescents vary in their susceptibility to peer influence (Steinberg and Silverberg, 1986), recent emphasis has turned to identifying mechanisms or processes that buffer youth from the effects of deviant peers on ATOD use and intention to use ATOD (Prinstein and Wang, 2005).

### 1.3. The buffering role of parental monitoring

Although there are many elements of parenting that could moderate both the selection and socialization pathways, in the

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present study we focus on the degree to which parental monitoring reduces these pathways to use during the transition from late childhood to early adolescence. Consistent with ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and family interactional theory (Brook et al., 2006), we expect that parents who monitor child activities prior to adolescence will be in a better position to note changes in behavior that might relate to ATOD use during the transition to adolescence. Those parents should also be better positioned to structure peer relationships in a fashion that reduces the probability of associating with deviant friends after the transition to adolescence. For these reasons, effective monitoring by parents prior to and during adolescence should protect against both selection and socialization pathways.

However, empirical support for a buffering role of parental monitoring on the selection and socialization pathways is decidedly mixed. One longitudinal study showed that higher levels of parental monitoring reduced the socialization pathway (Barnes et al., 2006), whereas others do not find adult supervision to moderate either selection or socialization (e.g., Light et al., 2013). The inconsistency in prior tests of this potential buffering effect of parental monitoring is one of the limitations of the present literature. In the current study, we hypothesize that higher parent monitoring will reduce the magnitude of both the selection and socialization pathways.

Prior work has also called attention to the possibility that parental monitoring might be expressed differently and have different developmental outcomes across ethnic groups (Domenech Rodríguez et al., 2009). Empirical findings show that in terms of main effects monitoring is equally protective – or not protective – across ethnic groups (Kopak et al., 2011; Tragesser et al., 2007; Yabiku et al., 2010) though we found one exception (Voisine et al., 2008). Importantly, this previous cross-cultural work has not tested the potential buffering role of parent monitoring.

#### 1.4. The potential confounding role of adolescent characteristics

Additionally, there has been some concern that parental monitoring is conflated with the child's temperament and willingness to disclose information (Kerr and Stattin, 2000; Stattin and Kerr, 2000). That is, prior research linking parental monitoring to child behaviors like ATOD use has frequently measured the amount of knowledge parents have about their children rather than active parenting behaviors like “attention to and tracking of the child's whereabouts, activities, and adaptations” (Dishion and McMahon, 1998; p. 61). Although some children disclose information to their parents as a result of previous parent efforts to create a good relationship with the children (Soenens et al., 2006), others may disclose information because they are dispositionally inclined to do so (and disinclined to engage in delinquent or rulebreaking behaviors). Stattin and Kerr (2000) describe these children as *conventional*, *highly sociable*, and *low in negative emotionality*. Accordingly, the solicitation and monitoring behaviors from parents may be conflated with the dispositional willingness of some children to disclose information (Stattin and Kerr, 2000). To account for this possibility, we account for these dimensions of temperament in the present study (Eaton et al., 2009).

#### 1.5. Additional covariates

In addition to child temperament, testing these associations among Mexican-origin children allows us to assess the role of acculturation (Fosados et al., 2007) and generational status (Edwards et al., 1995) implicated in other studies of ATOD use in this population. Although these variables are typically included as covariates (Voisine et al., 2008), in the current study we also consider their potential moderating effect on the hypothesized pathways (Smokowski et al., 2008). We also control for parent education

(Wechsler and Nelson, 2008) and child gender (Johnstone et al., 1996). Finally, we account for parent ATOD use (Knight et al., 2013), given the potential effect of parental modeling on adolescent ATOD use.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

The sample comes from the *Proyecto de las Familias de California* (California Families Project) and consists of 674 Mexican-origin families with a typically functioning child attending the 5th grade (Wave 1). Children and their families were drawn at random from rosters of students in the school districts of Sacramento and Woodland, California. First-, second-, and third-generation children of Mexican origin were eligible for the study, and the focal child had to be living with his or her biological mother. Participants were recruited by telephone or, when they did not have a telephone, by a recruiter who went to their home. Of the eligible families, 73% agreed to participate, which is comparable to other community studies that attempt to recruit multiple family members (Capaldi and Patterson, 1987). One hundred and sixteen fathers (21%) refused to participate at the first assessment. There were no families in which the mother agreed to participate in the study but the child refused. 14% of the adolescents did not participate at the 7th grade assessment. Attrition was unrelated to either ATOD use or intent to use ATOD.

The present study used two waves of data, with a two-year interval between waves. Demographic data are presented in Table 1. For example, at Wave 1, the mean age of the children (50% female) was 10.4 years ( $SD = 0.60$ ). Trained research staff visited the families twice within a one-week period and interviewed the participants in their homes (in separate rooms) using laptop computers. All interviewers were bilingual, and most were of Mexican heritage. Interviews were conducted in Spanish or English based on participant preference. Incentives to participate included \$200 for two-parent families ( $n = 548$ ) and \$125 for one-parent families ( $n = 126$  single mother families).

The visits included video and audio recorded structured interaction tasks (i.e., mother-child and when applicable, father-child). The order of father and mother interaction tasks was randomly counter-balanced. To start each task, interviewers provided a brief explanation of the task, gave the task cards to a dyad member, and then left the room while the dyad (parent and target child) discussed issues raised by the task cards. The parent and child took turns reading and discussing the task cards, which included several questions specifically written to elicit discussions of parenting behaviors (e.g., monitoring). Responses to these questions provided information about monitoring and other parenting practices. Each dyad was given 20 min to complete this task. The project observers received several weeks of training on rating family interactions, and rated the interactions using an adapted version of the Iowa Family Interaction Rating Scales (Melby and Conger, 2001). Different observers rated the target child and each parent. Before observing tapes, coders had to independently rate precoded interaction tasks and achieve at least 90% agreement with that standard (25% of the tasks were randomly selected to be rated by a second observer).

### 2.2. Measures

**2.2.1. Intent to use ATODs.** In fifth and seventh grade, the children completed a nine-item scale asking whether they intend to use substances in the next year (Gibbons et al., 2004). Four response options were given ranging from 1 = “definitely will not” to 4 = “definitely will.” These nine items had acceptable reliability (5th grade:  $\alpha = .83$ ; 7th grade:  $\alpha = .83$ ), and were averaged to serve as the sole indicator for a single-indicator latent factor “intent to use ATOD” at each grade, with the residual variance of the scale score fixed to  $[\sigma \times (1 - \alpha)]$  (Hayduk, 1987). Most of the adolescents had no intention of using alcohol (89.6% at 5th grade, 87.7% at 7th grade), cigarettes (92.0% at 5th grade, 95.2% at 7th grade) or street drugs (93.2% at 5th grade, 95.8% at 7th grade).

**2.2.2. Association with deviant peers.** In fifth and seventh grade, the children completed a 23-item scale adapted from Elliott et al. (1985) to report peer deviancy in the past three months. Four response options were given ranging from 1 = “none of them” to 4 = “most of them.” Sample items include “How many of your friends used alcohol to get drunk,” “How many of your friends hung out with a gang,” and “How many of your friends used drugs or sniffed things to get high?” The 23 items had acceptable reliability (5th grade:  $\alpha = .82$ ; 7th grade:  $\alpha = .83$ ) and were averaged to serve as the sole indicator for the latent factor “deviant peers” at each grade.

**2.2.3. ATOD use.** In fifth and seventh grade, the children completed a 9-item scale adapted from Elliott et al. (1985), which asks about the number of times they had used or tried alcohol (“more than just a few sips”), cigarettes (“used or tried”), and street drugs (“used or tried”) in the past three months. Responses ranged from 1 = “never” to 5 = “every day.” At 5th grade, less than 1% of the sample had tried cigarettes, 3.4% had tried beer, and 0% had tried street drugs. The items were averaged within-substance to create three scales: alcohol use ( $M = 1.01$  at 5th grade, 1.02 at 7th grade), cigarette use ( $M = 1.00$  at 5th grade, 1.01 at 7th grade), and street drug

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