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Injury prevention among friends: The benefits of school connectedness



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ABSTRACT

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Unsafe road behaviors, violence and alcohol use, are primary contributors to adolescent injury. Research suggests that adolescents look out for their friends and engage in protective behavior to reduce others' risk-taking and that school connectedness is associated with reduced injury-risks. This study examined the role of school connectedness in willingness to protect and prevent friends from involvement in alcohol use, fights and unlicensed driving. Surveys were completed at two time points, six months apart, by 545 13–14 year olds from seven Australian high schools. Females were significantly more likely than males to report willingness to protect their friends. School connectedness significantly and positively predicted willingness to protect across all three injury-risk behaviors, after accounting for sex and own involvement in injury-risk behaviors. School connectedness may therefore be an important factor to target in school-based prevention programs, both to reduce adolescents' own injury-risk behavior and to increase injury prevention among friends.

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Worldwide, injuries are responsible for 950,000 unintentional deaths of children under the age of 18 years annually (Peden et al., 2008). Within Australia, injury is a leading cause of mortality for young people aged 12–24 years (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2011). A significant proportion of injuries are associated with adolescents' engagement in risk taking behaviors including road-related risks, violence and alcohol use. Adolescents who report the highest number of risk taking behaviors have been shown to be five times more likely to report medically treated injuries and almost eight times more likely to report an injury of any kind (Buckley, Chapman, & Sheehan, 2012).

Car crashes account for a significant proportion of adolescent injuries, and in the U.S., the majority of unintentional injury deaths among young people aged 10–19 years are a result of car crashes (Sleet, Ballesteros, & Borse, 2010). While the majority of these incidents involve young licensed drivers, underage and unlicensed driving has also received some research attention. Research conducted in the U.S. state of Texas examined crashes between 1995 and 2000, and showed that a total of 4170 involved an underage driver, of which 67% involved an injury or fatality (Huber, Carozza, & Gorman, 2006). The drivers involved in these crashes were also found to be more often male and black, than female and white (Huber et al., 2006).

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Adolescent risk taking behaviors often occur in the context of underage alcohol use. Results from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) conducted in the U.S. have shown that 32% of 14 year olds reported drinking alcohol in the month prior to completing the survey (Centers for Disease Control, CDC, 2010). The significant consumption of alcohol places young people at a greater risk of injury, including through violence-related behavior. YRBS results reveal that 32% of Grade 9 to 12 students reported having been involved in a fight in the previous twelve months (CDC, 2010). Of these, 4% had to be treated by a doctor or nurse. Similar to transport risks and injuries, YRBS data has shown that boys are more likely to report getting into fights than girls and are also more likely to have been injured in fights (CDC, 2010).

The research reported in this paper aims to understand the role of school connectedness in adolescents' willingness to protect and prevent their friends from involvement in risk taking behaviors that are likely to lead to serious injury. As such, this research specifically examines connectedness in association with adolescents' later reports of peer protection in injury-risk situations including underage and unlicensed driving, getting drunk, and getting into fights.

Injury prevention among friends

Research has shown that adolescents are willing to intervene to prevent their friends' risk taking behavior. For example, Buckley, Sheehan, and Chapman (2009) investigated adolescents' likelihood of intervening to reduce their friends' risk taking. Over 50% of students indicated that they would intervene to prevent their friends' alcohol use, drug use, drink driving, riding a bicycle after drinking and violence. Further, Rabow, Newcomb, Monto, and Hernandez (1990) found that, within a sample of college students, over half of the students reported intervening into their friends' potential drink driving at least once in the past year; and in a study of adolescents' intervening in friends' drink driving and alcohol, tobacco and drug use, Smart and Stoduto (1997) found that in all cases at least one third of students would intervene to deter their friends' behavior.

A study by Flanagan, Elek-Fisk, and Gally (2004) assessed adolescents' intervention strategies in hypothetical situations involving friends' experimentation with alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. They found that despite differences across age and gender, adolescents demonstrated willingness to intervene to prevent their friends' engagement in risk behaviors. In particular, girls were more proactive than boys in their protection of their friends, and were more likely to talk to their friends about their alcohol, tobacco and other drug use, rather than to ignore the behavior.

Protective benefits of school connectedness

As the importance of adolescent protective behavior in risk and injury prevention is recognized, there is a need to understand the factors that influence adolescents' willingness to protect their friends. Adolescence is a period during which young people are becoming increasingly independent and seeking relationships outside of the home. During this time, contexts like the school become particularly important and can influence adolescent behavior. In particular, school connectedness has been identified as a critical protective factor that is associated with reduced risk taking behavior, including violence, alcohol use and drug use (e.g., Dornbusch, Erickson, Laird, & Wong, 2001; Simons-Morton, Davis Crump, Haynie, & Saylor, 1999).

School connectedness refers to the extent to which students feel included, supported, and engaged within the school and by the school community, and definitions frequently incorporate cognitive (e.g. perceptions of rule fairness), behavioral (e.g. engagement and involvement in school work and activities) and affective (e.g. feelings of belonging) components (e.g., Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003; Maddox & Prinz, 2003; O'Farrell & Morrison, 2003). This study incorporates a comprehensive definition of school connectedness which considers a whole of school approach or ethos, recognizing relationships between students, teachers, and the wider school environment. Students may benefit from perceiving a whole of school ethos of connectedness where there are clear norms, values and boundaries around unsafe behavior and an opportunity to promote commitment and value in relationships (Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, & Shochet, 2013). Further modeling of positive behavior of teachers and fellow students within a supportive environment may reinforce protective and supportive behavior.

The literature relating to school connectedness indicates that it is an important protective factor for a number of adolescent outcomes. A large body of research has demonstrated the protective nature of school connectedness in regards to adolescent risk behavior. For example, using data from the U.S. National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Dornbusch et al. (2001) examined the protective mechanisms of school connectedness in terms of tobacco smoking, alcohol use, marijuana use, delinquency and violence. They found that higher levels of school connectedness were associated with reduced frequency, prevalence and intensity of each risk taking behavior. Additionally, in a study of risk taking behaviors and injury outcomes among 13–14 year old adolescents, Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, Shochet, and Romaniuk (2011) found that increased school connectedness predicted decreased engagement in transport and violent risk behaviors, as well as fewer associated injuries in these contexts. An Australian study of students aged 13–14 (grade 8) also showed that students with low school connectedness but high social connectedness faced an increased risk of frequent smoking, drinking and marijuana use in grade 10 (Bond et al. 2007). These findings have translated to behavior change programs whereby increased school connectedness has reduced negative outcomes for students (see review Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, & Shochet, 2013). Bonell et al. (2010) and Bond et al. (2004) too focus on school-ethos and find that promoting whole of school change has important benefits for students.

The way in which school connectedness operates to reduce risk is not well understood. There are a number of potential mechanisms by which school connectedness can create an environment that may promote protective behavior. The school

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