



# The influence of family relations on trajectories of cigarette and alcohol use from early to late adolescence

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## ABSTRACT

### Keywords:

Alcohol use  
Cigarette use  
Stage-environment fit  
Family relations  
Ethnicity  
Gender

The present study examines growth curve trajectories of cigarette and alcohol use from 13 to 19 years, and investigates how family relations (i.e., decision-making opportunities, negative family interactions, and positive identification with parents) relate to contemporaneous and predictive alcohol and cigarette use during adolescence. Data came from a longitudinal study of European American and African American families from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds ( $n = 1160$  for alcohol use;  $n = 1102$  for cigarette use). European Americans had higher levels and faster rates of alcohol and cigarette use than African Americans. European Americans females had the greatest likelihood of increased cigarette use. Negative family interactions and positive identification had contemporaneous and predictive associations with alcohol and/or cigarette use. Negative family interactions were related to increased smoking and drinking, whereas positive identification was associated with decreased use. Family relations differentially affected cigarette use according to ethnicity and gender, but had similar effects on alcohol use.

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Adolescence is a critical period in the initiation and continued use of alcohol and cigarettes. Research, for example, indicates that nearly all first use of tobacco occurs by the age of 18 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1994) and the rate of alcohol and cigarette use increases throughout adolescence (Lloyd-Richardson, Papandonatos, Kazura, Stanton, & Niaura, 2002). Gender and ethnic differences are also evident in the use of alcohol and cigarettes. In both the UK and US, male adolescents tend to drink more alcohol, whereas female adolescents are more likely to smoke cigarettes (National Centre for Social Research, 2008; Webb, Bray, Adams, & Getz, 2002). In the US, European American adolescents initiate smoking at an earlier age and have higher rates of cigarette and alcohol use compared to African American adolescents (Bray, Adams, Getz, & Baer, 2001; Wallace et al., 2002). In the UK, white adolescents are more likely to smoke and drink alcohol regularly compared to adolescents from minority ethnic groups (National Centre for Social Research, 2008).

A developmental perspective may be useful in understanding engagement in health-compromising behaviors during adolescence (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1999; Turner, Mermelstein, & Flay, 2004). Within the framework of stage-environment fit theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993), risk-taking behaviors may result from a mismatch between the needs of developing adolescents and the opportunities afforded to them in their various social environments. Many of the developmental changes during adolescence precipitate strained family relations that may contribute to engagement in unhealthy behaviors (Eccles, Lord, & Roeser, 1996; Eccles et al., 1993; Gutman & Eccles, 2007). Successful prevention efforts necessitate an understanding of the dynamic processes that predict escalation in the longitudinal trajectories of these behaviors. Few

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studies, however, have examined how changes in family relations are associated with cigarette and alcohol use from early to late adolescence.

In order to fill this gap, the present study examines trajectories of alcohol and cigarette use during adolescence. We investigate how salient dimensions of family relations (i.e., decision-making, negative family interactions, and positive identification with parents) relate to contemporaneous and predictive alcohol and cigarette use from early to late adolescence, examining gender and ethnic differences in these processes.

### **Family relations during adolescence**

Relationships with parents often undergo a stressful period during adolescence (Eccles et al., 1993; Smetana, 1988, 1989, 2000). As children in the U.S. mature, their relationships with their parents evolve from being asymmetrical in terms of authority to becoming more independent and, ultimately, taking primary responsibility for their own lives. These changes may lead adolescents to question their parents' authority and push for more decision-making power with their parents. Parents, on the other hand, may become more concerned about their safety and provide fewer opportunities for autonomous decision-making than they did during the period of middle childhood.

In accordance with stage-environment fit theory, adolescents who perceive that their parents give them decision-making opportunities may not feel the need to seek unhealthy outlets for self-expression. Previous studies support these predictions (Bray et al., 2001; O'Byrne, Haddock, & Poston, 2002). For example, Bray et al. (2001) found that developing an autonomous relationship with parents while maintaining a positive connection with them was a protective factor against adolescents' alcohol use. Similar findings have been reported for adolescent smoking (O'Byrne et al., 2002). Considering this, adolescents whose parents provide more decision-making opportunities may be less likely to smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol than adolescents with fewer decision-making opportunities.

Researchers have also examined whether the effects of decision-making on adolescent outcomes vary across gender and ethnicity. While several studies report no gender differences in the effects of decision-making on engagement in problem behaviors (Goldstein, Davis-Kean, & Eccles, 2005; Herman, Dornbusch, Herron, & Herting, 1998), there is evidence to suggest that the effects of decision-making differ according to ethnicity. For example, studies have found that parental decision-making is associated with more positive outcomes for lower- and middle-income African American adolescents than their White counterparts (Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Daddis, 2004). As parental decision-making may be considered normative in African American families (Smetana et al., 2004), fewer decision-making opportunities may not be associated with more risk-taking behaviors for African American adolescents in comparison to European American adolescents.

During adolescence, emotional closeness and time spent with parents tend to decrease (Reed, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996; Steinberg, 1990), whereas family conflict tends to increase (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998; Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991; Smetana, 1989). Although adolescents desire more autonomous, symmetrical relationships with their parents, at the same time, they often want more emotional closeness to, and open communication with, their parents. Parents, however, may respond to their adolescents' desires for autonomy by detaching themselves from their children's lives or by demonstrating increased hostility to prevent the emergence of problem behaviors. Each of these responses is likely to increase the mismatch between parents and adolescents, which, in turn, could lead to increase in risk-taking behaviors often seen during adolescence.

In accordance with stage-environment fit theory, researchers posit that adolescents' substance use may be partially the result of problems in the context of family relationships including increased conflict and lower cohesion (Bray et al., 2001; Latendresse et al., 2008; Lloyd-Richardson et al., 2002). Studies indicate that family conflict relates to an increase (e.g., Bray et al., 2001; Flay, Hu, & Richardson, 1998), whereas family cohesion relates to a decrease in cigarette and alcohol use (Bray et al., 2001; Lloyd-Richardson et al., 2002). Therefore, adolescents who have a better relationship with their parents may be less likely to use cigarettes and alcohol.

Relatively few studies have examined whether the effects of family relationships on smoking and drinking vary according to gender and ethnicity. Although evidence suggests that there are no ethnic differences in the effects of family conflict and cohesion on adolescent alcohol usage (Bray et al., 2001), there is some evidence to suggest that the smoking behavior of girls may be more susceptible to parental influences than that of boys (Chassin, Pillow, Curran, Molina, & Barrera, 1993; Flay et al., 1998). As gender development theory suggests that relationships with parents are more important for females (Geuzaine, Debry, & Liesens, 2000; Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hammer, 1990), negative family relations may create a greater mismatch for females thus having a stronger association with their risk-taking behaviors compared to males.

### **The present study**

Previous studies have examined how family relations relate to alcohol and cigarette use at one specific point in time or how family relations predict changes in the use of these substances during adolescence. Using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM), we extend previous research by investigating how family relations relate to contemporaneous and predictive cigarette and alcohol use across four time points from 13 to 19 years of age. Within the framework of stage-environment fit theory, we expect that adolescents who perceive an increased role in decision-making, fewer negative family interactions, and greater positive identification with their parents will engage in less cigarette and alcohol use from early to late adolescence.

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