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Good grades in high school have "halo effect"
that protects against smoking, other drug use
into young adulthood, U-M study shows.

ANN ARBOR---With smoking on the rise among American teen-agers, the question of how to keep them away from cigarettes and other drugs has assumed renewed urgency. A University of Michigan study suggests that part of the answer is to increase children's educational success.

Not only are students who get good grades less likely to smoke in high school, they're also less likely to smoke during their 20s, U-M researchers found.

"Less than 10 percent of those who earned A's in high school are half-pack a day smokers in the decade following high school," says John Schulenberg, a researcher at the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR) and first author of the study, published in the current (March 1994) issue of the Journal of Health and Social Behavior.

"Over one-third of those who earned C's and D's in high school smoke half a pack a day, by comparison."

With ISR researchers Jerald Bachman, Patrick O'Malley and Lloyd Johnston, Schulenberg analyzed high school educational success and subsequent substance use among more than 3,000 young men and women, who were surveyed as part of a larger, 20-year project, "Monitoring the Future," directed by Johnston, Bachman and O'Malley.

The link between good high school grades and reduced use of cigarettes and other drugs holds firm regardless of what else is going on in young adults' lives, Schulenberg notes. "Doing well academically in high school seems to be a robust, long-term protective factor," he says.

Students who earn higher grades and plan to go to

(more)

college tend to be more conventional, Schulenberg explains, and smoking and drug use are more common among less conventional students. "But our findings also indicate that more than mere conventionality is behind the link," he says.

"Getting good grades and planning to continue one's education can foster a sense of competence and feelings of control over one's present and future. Such feelings may serve as both an immediate and long-term protective 'shield' against smoking and other drug use."

Schulenberg cautions that educational success is only one piece of the puzzle, and that the use of cigarettes and other drugs is due to several factors. He adds that "the trick is not to simply encourage young people to get good grades. Rather, the trick is to provide them with educational challenges that they can meet successfully."

The study findings have implications for drug and smoking prevention programs, Schulenberg notes. "Our findings argue for the importance of prevention programs that give some attention to increasing educational success among young people," says Schulenberg.

"My colleagues and I support a prevention approach that reduces the 'demand' for cigarettes among young people. Evidence we've gathered over the years concerning illicit drugs suggests that simply attempting to limit the supply of drugs to young people doesn't work."

The study shows that the long-term protective effects of high school educational success are not as powerful against alcohol and other drug use. This is especially true for alcohol use. While in high school, students who plan to attend college are less involved in alcohol and other drugs than their peers who do not plan to attend college. But they tend to rapidly increase their alcohol use, relative to their peers, once they enter college. According to Schulenberg, this rapid increase in alcohol use is probably due to the change in living arrangements. "The pressure to drink hits many young men and women hard when they live away from home for the first time," he notes.

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(JSchulenberg;ISR)(R1A,2A;ISRA;D1,2;Ed1,2)(TC/1-8)[schu]