

Conformity: Drug and Alcohol Abuse  
within Adolescent Communities

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### **Introduction**

Drug and alcohol abuse is an ever growing problem within the adolescent communities of the United States. This problem can lead to dropping out, aggression, unplanned pregnancies, and crime. As an ever growing problem, the causes of this epidemic need to be explored in order to stop teenagers from trying them in the first place. By looking at the possible causes, factors, influences, and variances, researchers can help end this epidemic, and allow teenagers to live drug and alcohol free lives. This paper considers the possible reasons for the number of adolescents who are involved in drug and alcohol abuse, the role of conformity in their decision, the roles that friends and family members play, and the variances between those who choose to use drugs and alcohol and those who do not within the adolescent community.

### **Conformity Defined**

The concept of conformity plays a large part in an adolescent's life as they are trying to find friends, fit in, and progress through the changes into adulthood. This is typically what can turn curiosity into an action. Conformity is defined by Guandong, Qin Hai, Fangfei, and Lin (2012) as "a subject's behavior or attitudes following those of the object" (p. 1376). In this instance, an object can be another person or situation that directly or indirectly affects an adolescent. Conformity can be broken down into several different components, and one such component is compliance which falls under rational conformity. Compliance is when the individual does not internally believe the group's action or opinion is right, but agrees with the group externally, and assumes the action or opinion (Guandong et al., 2012). Teenagers can easily follow the crowd if they want to fit in with a particular group. If the group uses alcohol

and drugs, the adolescent is more likely to conform to what everyone in the group considers normal, including drug and alcohol use.

### **Importance of Acceptance to Teenagers**

Being accepted by peers is of critical importance to an adolescent's healthy development (McElhaney et al., 2008). Peer groups allow adolescents to explore their interest, grow as a person, gain social skills, and have relationships outside their family. Many teenagers are worried about how well they are liked and accepted by their peers, which would explain why adolescents often conform and adjust their behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs to those around them (McElhaney, Antonishak, & Allen, 2008). As adolescents grow up and move away from their families they develop closer peer relationships; this can be very stressful for those who fear they will not find a group who will accept them. Those who do not find a group that fits their values may choose a group who will accept them, and change to fit in, rather than searching for a group that may be a better fit. The social group an adolescent chooses, and possibly conforms to, can say what types of activities they will be a part, such as something healthy like sports or unhealthy like drugs and alcohol, of because of the amount of importance a teenager places on their own social status.

### **Causes of Conformity**

The causation of conformity is a mixture of different elements. These include: curiosity, perception, and the community in which they live, among others. These elements affect how a teenager will react in any social situation.

#### **Curiosity**

Curiosity is one of the elements that can lead an adolescent into a situation by choice where they may come into contact with drugs and alcohol. Once they become curious about the

effects or appeal of substances, they may seek out other adolescents or adults who have drugs and alcohol in order to try them for themselves. If they are accepted into the group, they may see the norm as using drugs and alcohol. This means the usage of the substances may increase even when the adolescent is not with the group. This is due to another element: perception. An adolescent's perception can affect how they act, see their world, and react within certain situations.

### **Perception**

An adolescent's perception of their environment can greatly influence what they do, and is more important than what may really be happening in their environment (Duan, Chou, Andreeva, and Pentz, 2008). If an adolescent perceives everyone else to be doing drugs, they are more likely to do drugs or increase their own drug use. As their perceptions of the peer drug use norm goes up over time, so does their own drug use. The amount of drugs used by an adolescent may vary dramatically depending on how often they believe other peers or role models may be using them. Seeing others use drugs and alcohol may lead adolescents to believe the substances are "cool", will not cause harm, or that they should be using them because everyone around them is. Helping an adolescent understand that not everyone is using drugs and alcohol will help them fight this perception and stay away from drugs and alcohol. This responsibility can fall on the family, positive peer groups, the school, or the community.

### **Community**

The local community and environment can play a large role in what an adolescent thinks of drug and alcohol use. If the community offers drugs and alcohol easily to adolescents, is lenient with rules dealing with drugs and alcohol, or drugs and alcohol are actually used by many members of the community, then adolescents are more likely to abuse them. If an

adolescent believes their community is safe and supportive, they are less likely to use drugs or alcohol (Mayberry, Espelage, and Koenig, 2009). This shows how much impact the environment can have. The environment of the schools can also affect substance abuse. The majority of schools try to give reasons for students not to use drugs and alcohol, such as the harming effects substances have. However, if the school is able to promote a perceived sense of togetherness in its environment, then the amount of drug use would vary dramatically (Mayberry et al., 2008). Perception plays a part even within their direct environment. If they see the school as a positive place, they are less likely to use substances. Students have a strong need to be accepted into their environment which affects what they chose to do in order to feel accepted by the people within their environment. This can be in a smaller group such as friends, or a larger setting such as their school or local community. Curiosity, perception, and community all influence the amount of conformity an adolescent may face while they are growing up.

### **Friends Role in Conforming to Substance Abuse**

Friends play an important role in adolescent's lives, and they offer a sense of self, sense of belonging, and peer pressure. All of these roles can be good or bad. Adolescents find friends through two different methods: selection and socialization. "Selection occurs when adolescents develop or retain friends based on their similarity of beliefs, attitudes and behavior, and socialization is where adolescents adjust their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors to conform to that of friends" (Simons-Morton, 2007, p. 672). Socialization is a major factor when it comes to adolescents who may not feel they are accepted by others and feel they cannot find a group who shares the same interests.

### **Belonging**

Adolescents will change their own beliefs, actions, and thoughts in order to find a group they can fit into rather than staying alone. If the norm of the group they find includes drugs and alcohol, then they may partake in that practice in order to maintain the newly found friendships or due to peer pressure from their new group. McElhaney et al. (2008) found “The combination of sociometric popularity and self-perceived social acceptance was significantly predictive of relative changes in peer-reported indices of adolescents’ social adjustment” (p. 728). This means that one’s social acceptance, popularity, and closeness of friends can affect an adolescent’s development. They may be well adjusted and be able to cope with struggles, including peer pressure, depending on how well they believe they are liked as they are. If they feel they are not liked, they may resort to socialization -- changing themselves according to what they think other people will want from them. This can lead to an identity crisis in some adolescents which may lead them to using drugs and alcohol to try to alleviate the confusion.

### **Peer pressure**

Peer pressure plays a part in this identity confusion. If peers influence the adolescent to try drugs or alcohol, they may comply with the request and not stay true to their own beliefs. Peer pressure strongly influences in what teenagers do in order to appear to fit in and follow the perceived norms. An adolescent who often asks for help from peers may have an inclination to neediness which can affect future anxiety (McElhaney et al., 2008). Emotional neediness can make it easier for others to influence the adolescents’ attitudes and self-perception because the adolescent is more susceptible to other’s beliefs and opinions. Independence is something that teenagers crave and need in order to have a steady self-image that is not easily manipulated by others through pressure. If a teenager is unable to create this self-image, it can lead to

dependency, which can lead to drug and alcohol use, especially in combination with friends that use substances themselves.

It has been shown that perception of peer's use will increase the amount of substance abuse in an individual. This is also true for the perception of a group of friends' substance abuse. The amount of substance abuse can depend on the number of friends one has who use substances, and the amount of substance abuse can influence the amount of friends the user has who also use drugs and alcohol (Simons-Morton (2007)). This is a reciprocal relationship that can change over time. The more friends one has that use substances, the more likely one is to use substances themselves. This can be due to the peer pressure from the group, conforming to fit in with the group of friends rather than being alone, or because they perceive more people as using substances because their immediate social circle uses them. In order to maintain a healthy, drug and alcohol free lifestyle, adolescents need to choose their friends carefully to make sure they are not around drugs and alcohol, create a strong, independent self-image, and maintain their own values and norms rather than that of the group.

### **The Family's Role in Conforming to Substance Abuse**

Adolescents are not strictly influenced by their peers alone; family also has a place in the probability of drug and alcohol use starting during an adolescent's life. Parents have a large role to play in a growing adolescent's life, such as guiding their children, helping them to find themselves, and staying on the right path through life. Simons-Morton (2008) states "because early adolescence is a period of rapid development that provides great parental challenges, positive parenting practices over this period may effectively influence adolescent behavior with respect to substance abuse" (p. 682). This can be done through communication, parental monitoring, and involvement.

**Communication**

If a parent is able to effectively communicate with their child, they can decrease the chances of their child using drugs and alcohol (King and Vidourek, 2011). Teenagers who do not talk to their parents about the effects of drugs and alcohol may not fully understand the potential consequences or the adverse effects of the substances. Because of this, their curiosity or peer pressure may lead them to try it. If parents open the line of communication, teenagers would better understand what they were getting involved with before going out to try it. This can also allow the adolescent to be open about their curiosity or concerns. However, the parent must understand the different components that this communication involves. “In order for the communication to be helpful, parents must talk frequently to children and display open communication – share personal feelings, address difficult issues, actively listen, and encourage children to ask questions and ask for help when needed” (King and Vidourek, 2011, p. 13).

In order to have the adolescent feel as though they are really being heard, parents need to be able to listen and understand what is being said and shown through non-verbal communication. Sharing personal feelings helps the adolescent feel like they can share their own feelings without the conversation being one sided. Sharing personal feelings against drug use can play a significant role alone. If a parent makes their disapproval known to their children, the children are less likely to partake in substance abuse (King and Vidourek, 2011). Trust can be built through the process of active communication which will allow even more communication to begin. If communication lines are open, parental monitoring becomes easier.

**Monitoring**

An adolescent who has a close relationship to their family can more readily give information about what they are doing and who they are friends with will help the parents



monitor their child's activities (Kim and Neff , 2010). By having this awareness, parents can help steer their child away from deviant peers who are using drugs or alcohol, or give their child the skills they need to resist the peer pressure from their friends. Parental involvement in a child's life can deter the later use of alcohol and drug abuse. Adolescents create "conventional bonds" which are what the adolescent commits to outside of the home, including church, school, and social and community activities (Kim and Neff, 2010). An adolescent's "conventional bonds" can start from having parental involvement in their life. If a parent knows what is going on in the teenager's life and understands their interests, they can encourage them to join in certain groups or activities outside of school. This is a good deterrent to drug use as the teenager will be around a positive group of people who are not using drugs and alcohol in their leisure time or pressuring the adolescent to try drugs or alcohol. Family can affect whether or not an adolescent takes part in substance abuse through their ability to relate to, communicate with, and be involved in their child's life. Teenagers do want independence, but parents still need to be there as a guide to their child's decisions, and if there is a bond between the two, the teenager is more likely to listen to their parents and take their advice.

### **Variances between Conforming and Nonconforming Teenagers**

Adolescents are not all alike and this includes their likelihood to conform to other people and to use drugs or alcohol. Variances in a teenager's choice to conform include their gender, involvement outside the home, held morals, and their school and local community.

#### **Gender**

Gender is something that needs to be considered because males and females are different when it comes to using drugs and alcohol. For instance, females are more affected by their social relationships with family members than males are (Danielsson, Romelsjö, and Tengström

2011). This means that when a female sees her family drinking or does not have a good relationship with her family, she will be more likely than males to start drinking. Males are more likely to take up drinking if they have a truancy record, which means parents need to make sure they are involved in their son's school attendance in order to reduce on the probability of them drinking (Danielsson et al., 2011.). This would be one less risk factor for the parents to worry about. There are some things that are the same between genders. Peers influence both genders in the same way. If the adolescent is around peers who often drink, smoke, or use substances, the adolescent's chance of using those substances increases (Danielsson et al., 2011). Parents need to pay attention to their children, despite gender, in order to avoid having their children having drinking problems. Both genders are at risk, but they are affected by different elements within their lives.

### **Involvement outside the Home**

“Conventional Bonds,” which were defined on page 9, have to do with involvement. If adolescents are involved in something that is not structured, supervised, or positive, then they might be doing something such as drugs or drinking with their friends. By having something positive to do where they have a responsibility to the team, group, or supervising adult, teenagers are more likely to maintain that responsibility and stay away from drugs or alcohol. All of this can be tied into an adolescent's morals.

### **Held Morals**

Morals are beliefs about what is right and wrong. If a teenager believes using substances is wrong, then they may refrain from using them simply because it conflicts with their morals. If a teenager knows right from wrong and has high sense of morality, then they can choose what they should and should not do. It was believed in the past that the adolescents who had high

morality were often excluded from social groups due to their choice to avoid delinquent behavior and the beliefs that cause them to do so. Due to this, it was believed isolation from peers was the key to an abstainer's decision (Brezina & Piquero, 2007). However, research has shown an adolescent's sense of morality is not affected by isolation from peers, nor is their decision to conform to other's wishes if they consider them to be bad or immoral. Brezina and Piquero (2007) conclude the role of moral attitudes in the development of adolescent conformity may suggest that such conformity can be viewed, at least in part, as a function of moral choice.

### **School and Community Environment**

The final factor that can influence whether or not a teenager will conform to drug and alcohol use is the community and school of which they are a part. The community can affect how adolescents perceive drug and alcohol abuse. If the community does not seem to disapprove of the use of substances, then the adolescent may not see them as being bad or harmful.

Monahan, Egan, Horn, Aurther, and Hawkins (2011) found "universal or community-level approaches to prevention of adolescent substance use may simultaneously reach large numbers of youth while also changing aggregated levels of factors that contribute to substance use during adolescence" (p. 494). If the whole community is involved in drug and alcohol use prevention, adolescents are more likely to avoid using them or looking for them. The amount of risk and protective factors that are in a community at one time can affect how many adolescents may abuse substances now and in the future (Monahan et al., 2011). This means community involvement in drug and alcohol prevention can help the adolescent's involved in it now, as well as those who will come into the community later. School is another resource for prevention in adolescent's lives.

Since adolescents spend most of their time in school, they are influenced greatly by what happens there. The school and peer norm can affect what an adolescent does. If students know substance abuse is not approved of by the school as a whole including the faculty and student body, they are less likely to try drugs and alcohol. This can also play a part in perception. If the school disapproves of drug and alcohol use, then the students may perceive other students as not using them either, which will decrease their own use or the likelihood of them using it at all. Adolescents are strongly influenced by the environment around them and their upbringing with morals, so everything within an adolescent's life can be a risk or protective factor that will influence their choice of using drugs and alcohol.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, adolescents are affected by a lot of different elements and people when it comes to their choices, including drug and alcohol use. As adolescents become more independent, they are vulnerable to the increasing pressure from peers to conform to their norms and values. This increased peer pressure can cause some adolescents to change who they are and comply with the requests that go against their original values. However, parental influence plays a large part in whether they feel they need to conform to their social society. If parents are involved, have open communication with their child, and monitor what their child is doing, then the adolescent is more likely to stay away from substances.

Other than parents, variances exist between those who do and do not conform to peer pressure. Such variances are gender, involvement, morals, community, and school life. Adolescents are very susceptible to their environment, and as such, need guidance in order to avoid going down the wrong path. This guidance can come from positive peer relations,

trustworthy parental relationships, community relationships and values, and their own perceptions of their environment.

This paper looked at the elements of adolescent substance abuse. The positive factors need to be studied more carefully in order to see what would be more helpful to children in the future. Future research can help stop this rising trend in the adolescent community.

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