Association with peers

Adolescence is a part of life during which individuals develop their personalities and refine their interests. Adolescents thus easily absorb influences, images, and models that they are exposed to. In this sense, spending time with friends who are motivated by school will shape young people's attitudes toward school. The Youth in Transition Survey[1] sheds significant light on this reality. Sixty-five percent of dropouts surveyed declared that their friends thought it was important to finish high school, while among high school graduates, this figure was 86 percent. No less than 50 percent of dropouts had a friend who had also dropped out, while only 20 percent of high school graduates had a friend who had dropped out.

What the research says

Janosz[2] reported a number of studies showing that future dropouts tend to spend time with peers who have dropped out, who may potentially drop out, or who have low educational goals. Through modeling, a group of delinquent friends could harm a student's engagement with school and be a factor in their eventual dropping out. The work of Dishion[3] in particular illustrates clearly how modeling by peers, social pressure, and the positive reinforcement of inappropriate behaviour, all contribute to influencing behaviour and increasing delinquent conduct.

> Studies tend to show that the greater involvement parents have in their children's lives, the less they tend to imitate the delinquent behaviour of others.

Vulnerable youth are easily influenced, and high-risk students are generally more receptive to the models presented by their peers. They are therefore more susceptible to influences coming from their social background and the educational environment. Insufficient or absent family support and supervision may put these youth at a disadvantage. However, time spent with family is a factor that can greatly moderate the effects of these influences, irrespective of their sphere of life.

Some studies also show that family environment, neighbourhood of residence, and social network have an influence on the dropout process. Young people who are part of a group of friends that reject school are much more vulnerable. In such situations, non-conformism becomes the group norm that must be adhered to in order to avoid rejection.

PARTNERSHIP

TRAINING

For more information

L'influence des pairs : un entraînement à la déviance
http://rire.ctreq.qc.ca/media/pdf/champs/1221_DesbiensAQETA2010Hand-out.pdf
L'impact des loisirs sur la persévérance scolaire
http://www.loisirquebec.com/uploads/Biblio_perseverance.pdf

[1] Youth in Transition Survey: http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=4435.
[2] M. Janosz (2000), L'abandon scolaire chez les adolescents : perspective nord-américaine, *VEI Enjeux, 122,* Sept. 2000.
[3] T. J. Dishion and K. A. Dodge (2006), Deviant peer contagion in interventions and programs: An ecological framework for understanding influence mechanisms. In K. A. Dodge, T. J. Dishion, & J. E. Lansford (Eds.),
Deviant peer influences in programs for youth. New York: Guilford.

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Taking effective action

At-risk youth need more opportunities to interact with positive and conventional peers, and these interactions must foster the development of friendships. Extracurricular activities are an especially promising opportunity. Access to rich and varied activities open to all students, and especially to those at risk, is a protective factor that acts on students' sense of belonging at school, self-esteem, and in the development of positive social networks.

Participating in extra-curricular activities should be used starting in elementary and continue on into high school. Such activities benefit from being run jointly by schools, cities, and community organizations, with a view toward continuity of services and a holistic approach to dealing with at-risk youth. For these youth in particular, whether the activity takes place at school or in the community, the goal is not so much to enrich the services offered but rather to stimulate the demand for them. Targeted recruitment must be carried out to encourage involvement and participation, such that peer-group leaders are attracted to these activities.

It is vital to implement, both at school and in the family, proactive disciplinary strategies that focus on positive reinforcement, modeling of expected conduct, frequent feedback, and providing the support the youth needs.

It is also essential to focus on positive relationships between youth and adults at school in order to reinforce the quality of adult-youth relations. A good way to do so is to implement mentoring or guidance programs with adults at the school or in the community. Parents must also be encouraged to get involved with their children's schooling, even at a time when youth are trying to distance themselves from their parents. It is also important to target the parents of at-risk students and find ways to maintain a balance between parental supervision and the need for self-affirmation and experimentation that is inherent to adolescence.

Schools, families, and communities must also be especially attentive to the moments and places when youth are likely to engage in at-risk behaviour so that suitable means of early intervention can be undertaken.

Programs exist with a proven track record of training youth to develop what are called "resistance skills," or means of countering negative peer influence. For example, the Keepin' it REAL program was designed to teach kids to resist peer pressure to smoke, drink and use drugs.[1] This program has also shown that the strategies it teaches can be used by youth to avoid other harmful conduct as well.

Avenues for effective action related to association with peers

Increase opportunities to interact with positive peers:
- through inclusive activities that strengthen youths' sense of belonging, self-esteem, and feelings of competency and engagement (sports tournaments, improvisation activities, group artwork, graffiti, talent shows or contests, poetry slams, music, dance, cultural and sports outings, outdoor activities, travel, etc.).

Offer varied extracurricular activities that interest youth, including outreach activities to specifically ensure the participation of vulnerable youth.

Identify high-risk locations, moments, and situations to facilitate rapid interventions that offer alternative activities for youth with the purpose of equipping them to better resist negative influences from their peers during these high-risk circumstances.

Build positive partnerships with families, despite the greater distance between parents and children when youth enter high school (look for shared solutions, take complementary action, focus on youths' strengths, etc.).

Establish a positive disciplinary system at home and at school (expectations rather than criticism, consequences of actions on others rather than punishment, emphasis on the benefits, etc.).

Promote joint school-family-community actions:
- by offering a range of activities attractive to youth (extracurricular activities, access to facilities, etc.),
- by promoting activities that allow youth to develop their social skills in a setting outside of school and the family, while maintaining a connection with them (mentoring, resistance skills training, psychosocial monitoring, etc.).

Association with peers

[1] http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/ViewIntervention.aspx?id=133

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