
Parenting for Prevention

Student Assistance Services Corp., 660 White Plains Road, Tarrytown, New York, 10591 April, 2012

Yearly Trip to DC



I always look forward to attending the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) conference in February as there is always information about the latest research and trends in alcohol and other drug use among teens. It is also an opportunity to share ideas and learn about initiatives from members of other coalitions from across the country.

This year's conference was especially interesting. We were all very excited to hear a presentation from Lloyd Johnston, Ph.D. who is the lead researcher of *Monitoring The Future*, the longitudinal study of alcohol and drug use among teens. Prevention professionals are always eager for the release of this yearly report to learn about the latest trends in drug use and related attitudes.

A presentation by James Fowler, Ph.D. about the impact of social networks and I do not mean Facebook, I mean real relationships was fascinating. I have reported on some of the points he made in his talk that illustrates the importance of social networks and how they relate to substance abuse prevention.

**Patricia Murphy Warble,
LMSW, CPP**

Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America Conference, 2011 *Monitoring the Future Researcher*

Many coalitions from Westchester County were represented at this year's Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) conference that is held each year in February. During the conference attendees heard many interesting presentations including one from Lloyd Johnston, Ph.D., the principal investigator of the *Monitoring the Future (MTF)* study which has tracked the drug and alcohol use of the nation's youth since 1975.

During his presentation Dr. Johnston discussed two concepts that have important implications for prevention. The first concerns the wide divergence in the trends of use of various drugs that shows to a considerable degree, that what determines the popularity of a drug is specific to each drug. The things that determine a drug's popularity includes both the perceived benefits and the perceived negative effects that are associated with each drug.

Dr. Johnston described the first phase of a drug's popularity as the "honeymoon period" when young people hear about how great a drug is to use and the consequences of its use are not yet known.

He went on to say that word about the supposed benefits of using a drug spreads much faster than information about its adverse consequences. Both the Internet and media reports can accelerate the spread of information regarding the positive aspects of using a particular drug. However, it usually takes much longer for the negative consequences to be documented and then have the information about the negative consequences disseminated.

Dr. Johnston described the first phase of a drug's popularity as the "honeymoon period" when young people hear about the benefit of a new drug and that the consequences of its use are not yet known. It then usually takes a year or more for the message to get out about the dangers of using a certain drug. Dr. Johnston identified ecstasy as an example of this dynamic. It became popular very quickly and then it took some time for the public to understand the severe negative consequences that can

result from ecstasy use. Currently, “synthetic marijuana” and “bath salts” are examples of drugs where adverse reactions are only catching up with the initial hype that these drugs received through the Internet and the media.

Dr. Johnston said that his research indicates that prevention must occur drug by drug. Young people do not necessarily generalize the adverse consequences of one drug to another. “Perceived risk” which is an important aspect of explaining drug trends can be vastly different from one drug to another.

The second concept that Dr. Johnston discussed is called “generational forgetting.” He pointed out that there are both new drugs coming all the time and older drugs that are being rediscovered by young people. Most youth are not aware of many of the negative consequences associated with a drug that was used by people who are older than them. The awareness of those consequences faded as “generational replacement” took place.

Currently, LSD, inhalants and ecstasy are showing some effects of “generational forgetting,” which means that perceived risk of those drugs has declined. There is concern that as a result of this “generational forgetting” there could be a resurgence in the use of these drugs. Dr. Johnston said, “Having another epidemic is a hard way to learn about the dangers of a drug.”

Dr. Johnston remarked that “generational forgetting” may also explain the rise of marijuana use by young people during the past four years. He also said “we took our

eye off the ball,” and did not continue targeted prevention efforts towards the dangers of marijuana. At the same time, young people interpret medical marijuana discussions as an endorsement of the drug. Students erroneously conclude, if marijuana can be used as a “medicine,” then it must be safe.

Other points that Dr. Johnston made considered the availability of drugs as a benchmark for use. He said that due to more aggressive enforcement of age restrictions regarding the sale and purchase of tobacco products, cigarettes are less available to young people. He felt that the same could be true of alcohol.

Coalition environmental initiatives like alcohol sales compliance checks and encouraging owners of establishments that sell cigarettes or alcohol to check a second ID if the first is an out-of-state license have also helped to decrease availability. Johnston feels that the decreased access to alcohol and cigarettes is reflected in this years MTF study which reports a decline in the use of both cigarettes and alcohol in 8th, 10th and 12th grade use.

He also said that several years ago federal agents shut down a huge methamphetamine lab and since that time methamphetamine has not been so available in large quantities. As a result, since it was not available it has dropped in popularity. On the other hand, marijuana has become more available and that is another one of the reasons for its increase use among young people.

Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks Lessons for Prevention

One of the keynote presenters at CADCA was James Fowler Ph.D. who wrote *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*. His work is relevant to substance prevention work as it has implications for how an individual is influenced by family and friends.

A social network is an organized set of people that consists of two kinds of elements: human beings and the connections between them. Real, everyday social networks evolve organically from the natural tendency of each person to seek out and make many or few friends, or to have large or small families, or to work in personable or anonymous workplaces.

There are two fundamental aspects of a social network. First, there is a connection which has to do with who is connected to whom. These ties can be complicated. They can be passing or intense, personal or anonymous. Most of these ties include family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors..

Second, there is contagion and that pertains to what, if anything, flows across those ties. That could include germs, money, violence, fashion, happiness or even obesity.

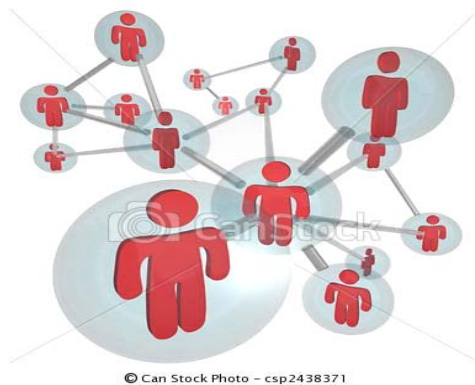
According to the author there are rules regarding connection and contagion, the structure and function of social networks.

RULE 1: WE SHAPE OUR NETWORK

Humans make and remake their social networks all the time. As they do there is something occurring that is called homophily which is the conscious or unconscious tendency to associate with people who look like us. We also look for people who share our interests, to put it another way the author describes this as “birds of a feather flock together.”

RULE 2: OUR NETWORK SHAPES US

Our network affects us. A person with many friends, therefore “connections,” has a different life than one who has none. Birth order, whether your social contacts are friends with one another and how many contacts your friends and family have is also relevant. If you have many contacts and they in turn have many contacts then you are more “central” in the network. If a person has fewer friends or contacts then that person is closer to the “edge” of the network. The illustration below shows this dynamic. A person who is more central is usually more susceptible to what is “flowing” within the network.



RULE 3: OUR FRIENDS AFFECT US

One fundamental determinant of flow between various connections is that human beings influence and copy one another. People have many direct ties to a wide variety of people and “each and everyone of these ties offers opportunities to influence and be influenced.” Students with studious roommates become more studious.”

RULE 4: OUR FRIENDS’ FRIENDS’ FRIENDS AFFECT US

It turns out that people do not only copy their friends. According Dr. Fowler, “they also copy their friends’ friends, and their friends’ friends’ friends.”

RULE 5: THE NETWORK HAS A LIFE OF ITS OWN

According to Dr. Fowler, social networks “can have properties and functions that are neither controlled nor even perceived by the people within them.” He goes onto say, that social networks have emergent properties. “Emergent properties are new attributes of a whole that arise from

the interaction and of the parts.” Dr. Fowler illustrates this concept by “human waves” that are often seen at sporting events. The “wave” is “bigger” than every individual involved in it. He also discusses “emergence” in terms of a cake. Nothing in a cake tastes like a cake but the taste of a cake transcends the simple sum of all its ingredients

In the same way, a social network becomes greater than the sum of its parts. In terms of teens, they will be associated for better or worse, with the reputation and characteristics of their “peer group.”

Dr. Fowler goes on to discuss a concept that all of us are familiar with called “six degrees of separation” which is based on research that shows on average, that most people are connected by “six degrees.” Dr Fowler’s research shows that the spread of influence in social networks obeys what he calls the “three degrees of influence.”

The impact on a friend is one degree, our friends’ friends is two degrees, and our friends’ friends’ friends is three degrees. Our influence wanes after three degrees and we are influenced by friends within three degrees but generally not beyond that. The “three degrees rule” applies to attitudes, feelings and behaviors and can influence “phenomena as diverse as political views, weight gain, and happiness.”

Implications for Prevention

The information about social networks is relevant for substance abuse prevention in terms of assessment, ways to implement effective initiatives and in helping your children understand the impact and importance of their relationships.

One of the hallmarks of adolescence is that young people are trying to find their own identity. Belonging and being part of a group of friends becomes one of their most important concerns. During adolescence parents can still influence their children, however, the approval and importance of a teen's peer group can often override the concerns of parents.

The information that Dr. Fowler has in his books illustrates the importance of how teens are influenced by their friends. Evaluating what is going on with your teen's friends is the first step to assessing what is going on with your own child. If your teen's friends are engaged in school and making

good decisions, it is likely your child is doing the same. However, if your child's friends are using drugs or alcohol, your child is probably also using those substances. That is why one of the first things to consider if you are worried about your child is what is going on with their friends or whether their peer group has recently changed.

Dr. Fowler also discussed the fact that a teen may not always respond to their parent's suggestions whereas another adult who is within "three degrees of separation" or a friend's friend may be able to make a positive intervention with a teen. It might be the parent of one of their peers, a teacher or a coach.

Helping a teen understand how their relationships are connected can give them insights into understanding that not only are they being influenced by others but that their actions are having an impact on their peers. It can be motivating for a teen to understand that their actions have a ripple effect that can influence others positively or negatively.

Upcoming Events

April 24 **7:00-8:30pm**

Fox Lane High School

What Every Parent Should Know About Prom and Graduation

Moderator: Ellen Morehouse, LCSW, CASAC

Contact: Lauren Beeson, 241-6064

April 30 **5:55-9:15pm**

New Rochelle Family U

Helping Teens Handle Stress,

Judith Siegel, Ph.D., LCSW

Communicating Effectively With Your Teen, Mike Nerney

Contact: 365-4728

May 2 **7:00pm**

John Jay High School

What Every Parent Should Know About Prom and Graduation

Moderator: Ellen Morehouse, LCSW, CASAC

Contact: Kiri Ryan, 763-7203

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