# Drug and alcohol prevention among culturally diverse northern Australian adolescents: Investigation of a school drug and alcohol prevention program for year 8 students

## Researcher

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## Summary

This research explores themes associated with adolescent drug and alcohol prevention among culturally diverse Northern Australian adolescents. It was undertaken because important differences are often associated with specific cultural groups and local knowledge is often needed as a means of informing effective prevention programs.

Five studies are presented, each with its own data, hypotheses and conclusions. In consultation with teachers a new universal school-based drug and alcohol prevention program was developed addressing the four most commonly used substances among Australian adolescents: alcohol, cigarettes, cannabis, and inhalants.

The aim of the first study, Cultural Identity and Peer Influence Risk, was to identify any correlation between cultural identity and substance use. While the second and third studies focused on an evaluation of the DAPPY: 8 (Drug and Alcohol Prevention Program for Year 8), which is a universal school prevention program based partly on the social influence model and including alcohol harm minimisation messages. The fourth and fifth studies examined the combined effect of parental substance use, school connectedness, deviant disposition, and felt rejection on the level of peer influence on adolescent substance use, and the role of parental substance use as a moderator for social influence of risk.

## Outcomes

The research in the first study confirmed that there is no simple association between cultural identity and substance use. One explanation confounding the anticipated positive effect of cultural identity was risk from the influence of substance using peers. For cultural reasons Indigenous youth may find it more difficult to say “no” to offers of alcohol from their peers than from their non-Indigenous counterparts.

An evaluation of DAPPY:8 found that a key strategy of social influence programs is the provision of normative education. This takes the form of feeding back to students, results from classroom surveys indicating that most of their peers don’t do drugs. However, it was also found that young people who have already been initiated into drug use may not be convinced that this information is relevant to them as they are more likely to have a number of substance using friends. In this case, a harm minimisation approach may be more useful as a means of reducing harmful behaviours. The risk of including both models in the same program is that non-initiates may be misled into believing that drug or alcohol use among young people may be more wide spread than it is.

The DAPPY:8 Curriculum Development and Implementation Evaluation found that less than half the interactive activities (49%) were completed, compared with those that were non-interactive (84%). The low completion rate of the interactive components may go some way to explaining the limited success of the DAPPY:8, particularly in reducing smoking rates.  
In the investigation into school, peer, parental, and personality influences, while it was found that individual, family, school and personality factors were not as strong as peer influence, the combined effect of these variables was strongly associated with the number of substance-using friends. The results were reported in terms of the direct and indirect effects of the independent variables on adolescent substance use. The study found the level of peer influence on adolescent substance use was associated with the combined level of parental substance use, school connectedness, deviant disposition, and felt rejection. Additionally, adult drinking had a strong influence on adolescent drinking independent of the effect from peers. Similarly, a lack of school connectedness was directly associated with adolescent drinking and smoking.

The final study also confirmed the prominent role of peer influence and identified the different ways it acted to confound cultural identity in each of the two cultural groups: Indigenous and non-Indigenous. It was concluded that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth would benefit from a prevention program that promoted resistance skills against peer substance use risk.

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