# Peer social networks in the development of harmful alcohol and drug use in early high school

## Researcher

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## Summary

This project investigates the influence of peer social networks on the development of alcohol and other drug use by following a cohort of students through the early high school years. 24 Melbourne metropolitan secondary schools supported the data collection and intervention activities in three waves: Year 7 to Year 9.

Throughout the study it was found that almost all students in the first year of secondary school had one or more close friends using alcohol. Growth in student alcohol use from age 13 to the first annual follow-up (Year 8) was predicted by early-age (Year 7) alcohol use and by family, community, and peer characteristics that normalise adolescent alcohol use. Parents who reported that they allowed their Year 7 student a sip during celebrations or with the family meal increased the risk that the student would report being an alcohol user in Year 8. In addition to family influences, it was found that a higher number of friends, or a higher density of alcohol or tobacco users in the school friendship network were each independently predictive of progression to alcohol use in Year 8.

## Outcomes

Year 8 students that were randomly assigned to the Resilient Families Intervention reported a general trend to experience improvements relative to students in the control schools. The four significant intervention effects were increased family attachment, increased school rewards, reduced school absence, and an unexpected trend for anxiety symptoms to improve.

In addition to these general benefits students whose parents attended the parent education events reported lower rates of poor school grades, less bullying, increased positive problem solving and, in separate analyses, reductions in depressive symptoms.

Findings suggested that the intervention could be further enhanced if it was initiated in primary school.