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Comprehensive Research Makes Case for Why Adolescents With One Problem Like Smoking, Drinking, Delinquency, Drug Use More Likely to Have Host of Problems

Research Points Out Need for Federal and State Policy To Jointly Address ‘Multiproblem’ Youth Behaviors

WASHINGTON, D.C., April 28, 2004—The lives of close to 63,000 youth are lost each year to multiproblem behaviors, with the total annual cost ranging between \$335 and \$350 billion, according to a new book released today, *Helping Adolescents at Risk: Prevention of Multiple Problem Behaviors* (www.preventionresearch.org). Although adolescent health experts have long recognized that adolescent problem behaviors like substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, and aggression tend to co-occur, this book provides a first-ever comprehensive analysis of current knowledge on the ‘multiproblem’ phenomenon.

“Many adolescents who have one problem behavior have three or four problem behaviors. Some of these kids were in jeopardy for developing problem behaviors even before they were born because of their mother’s behaviors and circumstances; others succumbed to a host of family, peer and personal challenges; and many others were not able to take advantage of prevention programs that might have helped them toward a more normal life. But no matter how they came about, they need to be dealt with together and not one problem at a time,” according to the lead author of the book, Anthony Biglan, Ph.D., a senior scientist at the Oregon Research Institute in Eugene, Oregon.

Multiproblem youth are less than 20 percent of the adolescent population, but they account for 88 percent of arrests associated with violence, 72 percent of total arrests, 87 percent of health problems associated with drug use and 70 percent of problems associated with alcohol, according to Biglan.

“We used to call these kids ‘deviance-prone youth,’ but ‘multiproblem youth’ may be a better way to describe them. Research during the last 30 years has shown that substance abuse, aggression and other behavioral problems co-occur,” according to Biglan. However, according to the researchers, policy in America addresses these behaviors “in silos” with federal agencies charged with examining them as individual behaviors. The book’s authors argue that federal funding for research in the area of high-risk youth needs to be expanded to encompass the multiple behavioral problems encountered by adolescents.

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Similarly, the authors suggest that prevention and treatment practices at the local and state level need to be integrated so that they address the entire range of problems. Integration will require that drug and alcohol, mental health, and juvenile justice programs and schools develop coordinated efforts that address the entire range of problems of any given youth.

Biglan is a nationally recognized expert on child and adolescent problem behavior. The co-authors of the book are: Patricia Brennan, Ph.D., Emory University, an expert on aggression; Sharon Foster, Ph.D., Alliant International University, an expert on peer relations; and Harold Holder, Ph.D., Prevention Research Center at Berkeley, an expert on prevention of alcohol problems.

“We wrote this book to document the extent of multiproblem youth, help policy makers and community leaders understand what causes these problems, show that prevention and intervention programs can make a positive difference, and offer the promise that the next generation could be raised in communities that nurture and celebrate children,” Biglan said.

Biglan is the incoming president of the Society for Prevention Research, an international organization of researchers focused on science-based prevention programs.

“Prevention research during the last three decades has enabled us to develop evidence-based programs that can be implemented at the national, local and state levels to combat youth behavioral problems,” said Biglan.

“The vision of child-friendly communities is not fictional. Vermont has already experienced striking reductions in a wide variety of social indicators, including child abuse, high school dropouts, property crime, etc. The University of Kansas is assisting communities throughout the world in developing measurable goals for youth and community well-being. The University of Washington is helping communities adopt research-based strategies for promoting healthy behaviors,” continued Biglan.

Although the book is meant for policy makers, researchers and community leaders, it illustrates the complexity of the problem through vignettes that describe the life of an imaginary 16-year-old named Michael.

“We used Michael’s story so that the reader can relate the environment in which these kids grow up and the policies that affect the course of their lives to one single individual. There are many Michael’s in this country, but we have tried to capture the vastness of this problem in the story of one life. We have also been able to show that many of Michael’s problems can be treated and his children definitely have an opportunity to lead normal lives,” Biglan said.

(Editors Note: Biglan is incoming president of Society for Prevention Research (SPR). *Helping Adolescents at Risk: Prevention of Multiple Problem Behaviors* is published by The Guilford Press and is available in book stores now. Excerpts from the book are online at www.preventionresearch.org)

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