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Editor's Note: The following research will be released at the Society for Prevention Research (www.preventionresearch.org) 2003 annual meeting, "Research to Policy," June 12-14, 2003

GIRLS MORE SUSCEPTIBLE TO DEVELOPING DRUG DEPENDENCE THAN BOYS

New Studies Analyze Girls' Drug Abuse, Delinquency Behavior

- Can boys and girls be treated the same way when it comes to preventing drug use?
- What can mothers do to prevent their daughters' drug use?
- Are African-American girls who reach puberty at an earlier age more likely to use drugs? Why?

Although early surveys of adolescent substance use showed that boys engage in more substance use than do girls, recent data reveal few gender differences. Evidence suggests that once girls use drugs, they are more likely to develop drug dependence than are boys. Drinking and other illicit drug use can lead to high-risk behaviors with particularly dangerous implications for girls. Research shows that there are differences among girls and boys in risk and protective factors for substance use. For example, although shyness and aggression are precursors of substance use in boys, the same strong relationship is not true for girls. Family bonds are associated with lower use of some substances among boys and girls. However, lack of attachment to parents correlates more with cigarette smoking, alcohol use and marijuana use among girls than among boys.

One study to be presented at the Society for Prevention Research annual meeting focuses on building positive mother/daughter rapport. Previous studies have shown that families can effectively intervene in reducing substance use among adolescents. For example, the researchers looked at mother-daughter closeness and communication, parental monitoring and time spent together. The study shows that daughters' strong relationships with their mothers appear especially important as a protective factor for substance abuse among African-American females.

Another study examines the effect of puberty on drug use in a sample of urban, minority girls. The researchers found that early maturation may result in problem behaviors, as the girls have less opportunity to develop skills prior to meeting challenges associated with a more mature physical appearance. It has also been suggested that early maturing girls associate more with older, deviant and/or older, male peers, and this serves as a pathway to drug use. A survey of 1,225 6th-grade girls drawn from public and parochial schools in a large metropolitan area (45 percent of the girls were African-American, 29 percent were Latino, and the rest were of mixed ethnic/racial groups and White) indicates that early-maturing girls were significantly more likely to have tried alcohol than other girls. However, they were not more likely to have used cigarettes. Early maturers were significantly more likely to "intend to drink" and use marijuana (in the next year), than other girls.

Sources: Kristin Cole, Columbia University; Tracy Nichols, Weill Medical College of Cornell; Catherine Lillehoj and Richard Spoth, Iowa State University; and Julia Graber, University of Florida.