

Social and Emotional Development as a Strategic Approach to Reduce Risk Factors and Bolster Protective Factors Associated With Underage Drinking

Understanding risk and protective factors for substance misuse is key to preventing underage drinking. Ideally, protective factors should outweigh risk factors, thus many prevention strategies to prevent substance misuse focus on strengthening protective factors to counteract the negative impact of risk factors.¹ This research summary focuses on social and emotional development as a strategic approach to reduce risk factors and bolster protective factors associated with underage drinking.

Risk factors are those that increase a person's risk of substance misuse.^{1,2} Examples of these risk factors are: "inappropriate classroom behavior, such as aggression and impulsivity; academic failure; poor social coping skills; association with peers with problem behaviors including drug abuse; and misperceptions of the extent and acceptability of drug-abusing behaviors in school, peer, and community environments."² Protective factors are those that reduce the potential for substance misuse.² Protective factors such as success in academics, involvement in extracurricular activities, and acceptance of social norms against drug abuse are associated with reducing risk of substance misuse.²

Social and emotional development is the building of critical life skills. These social and emotional skills include understanding and managing oneself, relating to others, and making responsible choices based on self and others. More specifically, these skills include being able to recognize and regulate emotions, empathize and care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, establish and maintain positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors.^{3,4} Social and emotional skills are associated with improved behavioral outcomes such as fewer conduct problems,^{5,6} lower levels of emotional distress,^{5,6} and positive wellbeing.⁶ Social and emotional skills are also associated with improved academic outcomes^{5,6,7} as well as positive employment outcomes such as obtaining stable employment and being employed full time.⁸

Social and emotional skill development is an important protective factor and can offset the negative effects of exposure to risk factors.⁹ More specifically, social and emotional skill development helps prevent many of the most pressing problems youth face including violence, bullying, suicide, and substance misuse.¹⁰

The four examples below show how social and emotional skills buffer risk factors for substance misuse (i.e., negative peer influence, social norms misperceptions, difficulty in school and academic failure, and managing negative emotion) and bolster protective factors.

Example 1

The Risk: Negative Peer Influence

Negative peer influence is a risk factor for underage drinking.¹ When with peers, youth are more likely to take risks, make risky decisions, and minimize how risky their decisions are, than when alone.¹¹ Negative peer influence is greater for youth than it is for adults.¹¹

Social and emotional skills help youth cultivate positive social relationships with a variety of people.¹² These specific skills include saying no to peer pressure and successfully negotiating conflict.¹² These skills then buffer negative peer influence and reduce underage drinking.¹³

Example 2

The Risk: Social Norms Misperceptions

Youth develop beliefs about what is normal regarding drinking by watching their peers around them.¹⁴ These beliefs are called norms and youth frequently have misperceptions of their social norms related to underage drinking. Young people tend to overestimate drinking by their peers.^{15,16} These misperceptions may increase the likelihood that youth make unhealthy choices and drink alcohol themselves.^{15,16}

The ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior is an important social and emotional skill.¹² Understanding accurate social norms reduces underage drinking because when youth misperceive the drinking behaviors of their peers, they are more likely to drink themselves.^{17, 18}

Example 3

The Risk: Difficulty in School and Academic Failure

Difficulty in school and academic failure are risk factors for underage drinking.² The development of social and emotional skills like self-discipline, self-motivation, goal-setting, and organizational skills improve academic success.^{5,6,7} Furthermore, youth who are successful academically are more likely to be connected to school, which is a protective factor against underage drinking.²

Example 4

The Risk: Difficulty Managing Negative Emotions

Depressive feelings increase the likelihood of youth who do drink moving to a pattern of heavy drinking.¹⁹ Further, drinking to manage negative emotions is common among youth who drink by themselves.²⁰

Social and emotional skills include the ability to accurately recognize, regulate, and manage one's emotions.¹² Strengthening the ability to manage emotions can serve to mitigate the effects of emotional distress and ultimately reduce underage drinking.

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