

FACTORS AFFECTING THE EXPERIENCES OF DRUG USE BY ADOLESCENTS IN A BANGKOK SLUM

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Abstract. The purpose of this research was to study the demography, financial status, social status, knowledge of amphetamines, perceived harmfulness of amphetamines, and life skills in the prevention of drug abuse in adolescents. The factors leading to drug use among young people were also studied. The study group was composed of 354 subjects aged 12 to 22 years, living in 2 slums in Bangkok. The research showed that about 7% of the sample group had used drugs before. Four percent had never used drugs, but someone had tried to talk them into using them. Almost 20% had friends who had used drugs, and 11% had friends who were still using drugs. About 13% of the adolescents in the study group had family members who used drugs and another 9% had family members who were still using drugs. In our study, we found that the most common drug group was amphetamines. On average, the participants had a low level of understanding about drug abuse, especially of the symptoms, side effects, and legal penalties. Most of the adolescents realized how harmful amphetamines and other drugs were and had a high degree life skills. Factors influencing adolescent drug use were (1) personal factors, such as monthly income/allowance and life skills; (2) family environment, such as drug abuse history in the family; and (3) social environment, such as a drug abuse history among friends. When studying the life skill factors of the adolescents, which is an independent factor capable of influencing the experience with drugs, the researchers found that the time spent with other members of the family and the family members' drug experiences were the only factors leading to life skills in the prevention of drug abuse in adolescents. In addition to letting children learn on their own, training them to acquire life skills is beneficial when faced with problematic situations. Creating relationships between adolescents and other members of the family, friends, and society can increase their life skills, diminishing the risk of drug abuse.

INTRODUCTION

Many researchers have sought the cause of drug abuse/addiction, so that effective treatments and preventive methods can be implemented. Research has found that the problem arises from many aspects: family sources, such as mother-father relationships, the way parents raise their children, the financial situation of the family, and the community, such as illicit gathering places, wrong or bad values, and neglect (Pisuttiwongse, 1996). The people adolescents spend time with also affect his/her habits. Adolescents who have friends using drugs are more

prone to become addicts themselves. Friends tend to introduce others to drug use (Adger, 1992). Another factor affecting drug abuse is the lack of knowledge of the drug's effects.

Because of the complexity of the problem, collaboration between several groups must be implemented to increase adolescents' understanding amphetamines and themselves, to enable them to develop self-worth and to prepare them to face drug temptations, learning to say "No" to drugs. Society should support these adolescents in preparing them for such situations. Friends, family, teachers and other members of the community should give support to adolescents so that they are emotionally and mentally ready to fight against drugs.

This research is part of a project called "Creative communication between friends to support drug (amphetamine) prevention habits among

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adolescents: a case study of a Bangkok slum". The research investigated basic information about adolescents in Bangkok's slums as a basis for implementing activities supporting the prevention of drug abuse among young people.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research was based on a survey. The sample group was composed of adolescents ranging in age from 12-22 years, living in Bangkok slums. A purposive sampling method was used to select 2 slums with different characteristics. Simple random sampling was used to select the 354 participants from the 2 communities. Data were collected by questionnaires filled out by the adolescents. A staff member was present to give assistance to the participants, such as explaining the meaning of the questions or how to fill out the questionnaire, and answer any concerns raised by the participants. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data collected. Frequencies, averages and standard deviations were calculated. Logistic regression analysis was used to study the factors influencing drug use habits.

RESULTS

Demographic, economic, and social characteristics

The sample group was comprised of more women than men, aged 15-19. Thirty percent of the participants' parents were separated. The parents were mostly employees or salespersons in street. They were mostly primary-school educated. Most of the subjects had finished middle school. The average family income was about 10,000 baht per month, providing for 5 family members. The adolescents received, on average, a 2,400-baht monthly allowance from their parents. The main problem the participants faced was financial. When any problems occurred, the participants turned to their parents first, then to their friends. The adolescents spent most of their time listening to music, watching television, and hanging out with friends in order to relax.

The drug habits of adolescents and their close ones

The research shows that about 7% of the

sample group had used drugs before. Four percent had never used drugs but someone had tried to talk them into using them. Almost 20% had friends who had used drugs, and 11% had friends who were still using drugs. About 13% of the adolescents in the study group had family members who had used drugs and another 9% had family members who were still using drugs. In this study, the most common drug group used was amphetamines.

Knowledge, perceived harmfulness, and promoting of life skills to prevent amphetamine addictive behavior

The adolescents had a low level of understanding regarding amphetamines, especially regarding their symptoms and side effects. Their main sources of knowledge were educators or schools. Nevertheless, these adolescents had high levels of perceived harmfulness of amphetamines, and had high score levels for life skills (Tables 1-3).

Factors influencing adolescent drug use behavior

The personal factors influencing the drug habits of adolescents were the amount of money the adolescent received per month, and the life skills promoting amphetamine-prevention attitudes. Adolescents with no financial problems were less likely to use drugs. Adolescents with skills to prevent drug abuse were at lower risk for drug use. The family environmental factor that influenced adolescent drug habits was the experience of drug use in a family member. An adolescent who had a family member who used drugs was 1.4 times more likely to have used them than an adolescent who had no family member using drugs. Previous drug use by friends, being a social factor, also increased the risk of adolescent drug habits. In other words, an adolescent who had a friend using drugs was about 1.5 times more likely to use drugs than someone who did not have a friend using drugs (Table 4).

Factors influencing adolescent life skills

On additional analysis, an independent factor, namely life skills, also influenced the drug experience of adolescents. The research found that the family environment, which included

Table 1
Percentage of adolescents classified by score level of knowledge of amphetamines, and their experience using drugs.

Score level for knowledge of amphetamines	Experience using drugs		Total
	Never	Experienced	
Low level of knowledge	43.0	33.3	42.4
Moderate level of knowledge	45.5	62.5	46.6
High level of knowledge	11.5	4.2	11.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
(Number)	(330)	(24)	(354)
Average score	3.99	3.96	4.02

Table 2
Percentage of adolescents classified by score level for perceived harmfulness of amphetamines, and their experience using drugs.

Score level for perceived harmfulness of amphetamines	Experience using drugs		Total
	Never	Experienced	
High level	69.7	45.8	68.4
Rather high level	22.7	41.7	23.8
Moderate level	5.8	8.3	5.8
Rather low level	1.8	4.2	2.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
(Number)	(330)	(24)	(354)
Average score	4.21	4.01	4.20

Table 3
Percentage of adolescents classified by score level for life skills promoting amphetamine-prevention attitudes, and their experience using drugs.

Score level for life skill	Experience using drugs		Total
	Never	Experienced	
Low level of life skills	2.8	8.7	3.2
Moderate level of life skills	37.4	60.9	39.0
High level of life skills	59.7	39.0	57.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
(Number)	(318)	(23)	(341)
Average score	25.53	23.65	25.19

spending time with family members and the drug experiences of family members, was the only factor influencing adolescent life skills: the more time spent with their family, the higher the level of life skills. Someone who had a family member with a drug history would have a higher level of life skills than someone who did not (Table 5).

DISCUSSION

Even though most of the participants had never used drugs before, some of them were still at great risk for drug use due to a family drug history. The most dangerous was when a friend in the group was using drugs, because adoles-

Table 4
Logistic regression analysis results of factors influencing adolescent drug use experiences.

Factors	B	SE	p-value	Exp(B)
Personal factors				
Gender (female ^a)	1.205	0.693	0.082	3.335
Age	0.124	0.143	0.389	1.131
Income	-0.001	0.000	0.019 ^b	0.999
Knowledge	-0.013	0.185	0.944	0.987
Perception	0.033	0.031	0.291	1.034
Skill	-0.228	0.097	0.018 ^b	0.796
Family environment factors				
Number of family members	-0.113	0.136	0.408	0.894
Marital status of parents (separated ^a)	1.319	0.785	0.093	3.740
Warmth	0.098	0.471	0.674	1.219
Restriction	-0.209	0.345	0.544	0.811
Quarreling	0.287	0.357	0.421	1.332
Conflicts	-0.003	0.425	0.994	0.997
Concern	-0.726	0.412	0.078	0.484
Spending time	0.140	0.325	0.666	1.151
Drug use experience in a family member (No family member experienced drug use ^a)	-1.486	0.662	0.025 ^b	0.226
Socio-environmental factors				
Community (participation ^a)	-1.086	0.851	0.202	0.338
Education (Vacation ^a)	0.495	0.939	0.598	1.641
Participation in drug activity in the community (never ^a)	0.912	0.793	0.250	2.489
Drug use experience among friends (never ^a)	-1.534	0.754	0.042 ^b	0.216

^aControl group; ^bp<0.05

B = Unstandardized regression coefficient; Exp(B) = Exponential of B; SE = Standard error of B

cents bestow a great deal of importance upon friends, putting the subject at increased risk for adolescent drug abuse. Suphap (1997) stated that adolescent behavior was greatly influenced by the behavior of members of the group or the group leader. Analysis of the factors influencing adolescent drug habits (mostly amphetamine addiction) showed that family or friends' drug habits do influence adolescent risk of drug use. This is consistent with the results of the research by Sussman *et al* (2000), which found that the drug use habits of friends were a predictive factor for adolescent drugs habits. Adolescents were more likely to be influenced if a member of the family, especially a parent, had a history of drug use. Adger (1992) found that the family factor influences the probability of alcohol and drug abuse by an individual. For instance, if a father

drank alcohol, his son was more likely to drink alcohol. An adolescent who had a drug-addicted friend was more likely to use drugs than someone with no friends who use drugs.

Adolescent culture revolves around friends. They are easily influenced by friends because of the need for peer recognition. Being shunned and isolated from the group is considered humiliating and the worst punishment. Curiosity increases the risk of drug abuse. To prevent the occurrence of such problems, a new referral group needs to be established and friends need to draw adolescents away from drugs.

Having a family member or friend who has used drugs does not mean that all adolescents will follow in his/her footsteps. Adolescent life skills also play an important role here. The research indicates that the higher the life skill level,

Table 5
Multiple regression analysis results of factors influencing adolescent life skills promoting drug-prevention behavior.

Factors	B	SE	Beta	t	p-value
Constant	22.794	2.356		9.675	0.000 ^b
Personal factors					
Gender (female ^a)	-0.056	0.379	-0.010	-0.150	0.881
Age	-0.089	0.069	-0.100	-1.312	0.191
Income	-0.000	0.000	-0.003	-0.043	0.966
Knowledge	0.029	0.090	0.022	0.332	0.740
Perception	0.016	0.016	0.069	1.060	0.290
Family environment factors					
Number of family members	-0.011	0.063	-0.011	-0.173	0.863
Marital status of parents (separated ^a)	-0.464	0.392	-0.008	-0.118	0.906
Warmth	0.176	0.257	0.056	0.685	0.494
Restriction	0.079	0.211	0.025	0.376	0.707
Quarreling	0.093	0.194	0.034	0.477	0.634
Conflicts	0.037	0.218	0.012	0.169	0.866
Concern	0.117	0.248	0.039	0.471	0.638
Spending time	0.412	0.178	0.159	2.311	0.022 ^b
Drug use experience in a family member (No family member experienced drug use ^a)	0.918	0.421	0.140	2.179	0.030 ^b
Socio-environmental factors					
Community (participation ^a)	-0.057	0.379	-0.010	-0.150	0.881
Education (Vacation ^a)	-0.793	0.467	-0.111	-1.697	0.091
Participation in drug activity in the community (never ^a)	0.379	0.358	0.068	1.057	0.292
Drug use experience among friends (never ^a)	-0.496	0.399	-0.081	-1.243	0.215

$R^2 = 0.112$; $F = 1.800^b$

^acontrol group; ^b $p < 0.05$

B = Unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = Standard error of B

Beta = Standardized regression coefficient; t = t value for B

R = Correlation coefficient; R^2 = Coefficient of determination; F = F value for regression model

the lower the risk of drug abuse. These skills include life adaptations, problem solving, communication, negotiation, analysis, reasoning, and coping with stress, especially when faced with peer pressure. Adolescents acquiring the latter skills can prevent drug abuse (Lapsirianankul, 2000).

To acquire such skills, adolescents need to learn from life experiences, and from their interactions with other members of society. Our study shows that monthly allowance also influences adolescent drug habits. Participants with no financial worries were less likely to use drugs. This does not mean that parents or guardians must

increase their children's allowances. Teaching financial values to adolescents can minimize financial problems.

Forty-two percent of participants had a low level of understanding regarding amphetamines, while 46.6% had a moderate level. Schools were the primary source of information regarding amphetamines and other drugs. The results of the study reflect those by Varalaksana (1995), which indicated that educators were the ones who really understood the threat of drugs and who communicated these risks to the students. One problem is that the age range of students influenced by drugs now starts in primary school.

Thus, drug awareness programs to prevent drug abuse need to be implemented in primary school age children. Even though adolescents had a low level of understanding of amphetamines and their side effects, the majority of them (68.4%) did comprehend the power of drugs over people. This can be considered a first step in preventing most young people from using drugs.

The study also shows that an important factor influencing life skill levels is the family environment. This means that the family is the source of life skills acquisition among adolescents, from spending time with members of the family. The more time spent with the family, the greater the learning process from parental experience and human interaction. These activities shape the values and behavior of adolescents. However, this can also be harmful to adolescents, since a family drug history can negatively influence children. This is consistent with a study by Low *et al* (1996), which found that being beyond the concern of the family can lead to drug use in adolescents. Nevertheless, family drug experience increases the life skills of those who have experienced them, compared with those who have not. This may be because they have faced drug problems before, and learned to say "No" to drugs, developing the necessary life skills.

This does not mean that people with no family drug experience have fewer life skills, since these skills can be acquired by one's own experience, and through interaction with other members of society in many different situations. Drug awareness activities can also be a method of teaching adolescents to understand the harm of using drugs and how to prevent such situations. Although a one-day, two-day, or one-week drug awareness activity cannot develop immediate skills for drug prevention, it can be combined with other life experiences to prevent the influence of drugs. Ko (1997) found that youth camps can be used to inform and educate adolescents about drugs and how to prevent drug use. Thus, a shield against amphetamines and other drugs can be achieved with close collaboration between the adolescent, parents, friends, educa-

tors, the community, and society.

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