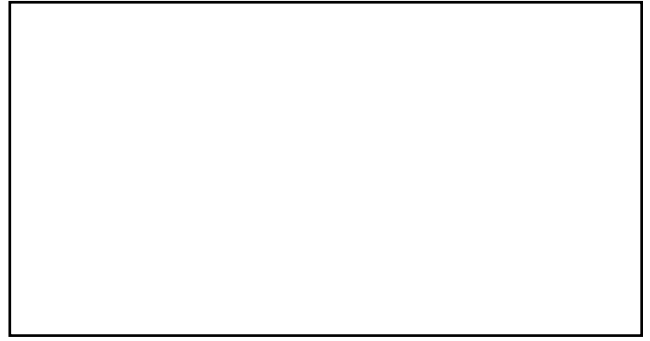


# HELPING HAND



Volume 17, Issue 4

## Bullying Keeps Overweight Children on the Sidelines

Most children are bullied at some point in their lives, but overweight children are more often the targets of bullies' slings and arrows. Now a new University of Florida (UF) study reveals this frequently leads them to avoid situations where they have been picked on before, such as gym class and sports.

About one out of every five children is chronically bullied, said Eric Storch, a UF assistant professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at UF's College of Medicine and the study's lead author. Aside from causing its victims to avoid events where they might be teased, bullying also is linked to depression and loneliness.

Either way, bullying spells serious trouble for children's health, Storch said. Negative attitudes toward exercise can last a lifetime, making it more difficult for overweight children to lose weight and making it easier for them to become obese adults, he added.

"We found that as rates of peer victimization among overweight kids went up, rates of physical activity went down," he said. "When you speak to overweight kids, one of the things you often hear is just this," he added. "Kids are targeting them. Kids are picking on them. You're going to end up avoiding those types of situations. The problem clinically is if kids are avoiding PE class or playing sports because of fears of negative peer relationships, their health status is affected."

Bullying not only contributes to children avoiding situations where they could be subject to ridicule, such as sports or gym class, but can also lead to depressed feelings that keep children from wanting to take part in activities.

"When you think about it, it makes intuitive sense, when you consider the hallmark signs of

depression — sadness, fatigue, lack of interest in things you used to like," Storch said. "When kids are having a tough time with peers, and struggling with depression, then this can translate to reduced rates of physical activity." Teasing and the stigma of adolescent obesity can have a big effect on children, said Mitch Prinstein, an associate professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

But bullying is just one of the issues that affects how much exercise an overweight child gets. For example, positive support from family and friends can lessen the blows bullies inflict, and some parents insist their children exercise at home when they don't at school, Storch said.

### How We Can Help

The best thing parents, teachers and doctors can do is to figure out what is causing the problem and find a way to work around it so overweight children still get exercise, Storch said.

Schools should create a zero-tolerance culture for bullying and perhaps provide gym teachers with training on how to recognize bullying and intervene, the researchers say.

Doctors should keep peer problems in mind when assessing overweight children and take not only a medical history of the child but also a social history, so they can pinpoint the underlying problem and devise a solution, Storch said. It's important to prevent the problem early before it gets worse, he added.

"Childhood is a time when we form many of our habits that we're going to hold over later," he said. "When one has multiple negative experiences that are centered around sports early on, this can often translate into adulthood with decreased involvement [in exercise]."



# Five Steps to Increase a Child's Confidence

Do you know any students who seem like they could use a boost in their self-assurance? Then you may want to share these tips with parents to help increase the students' self-confidence levels. Silvana Clark, author of *Parent-Tested Ways to Grow Your Child's Confidence* (Meadowbrook Press), offers the following tips for parents to develop children's self-esteem this school year and beyond.

1. Praise your child's accomplishments as appropriate: There's no need to clap and cheer if a 10-year-old uses a napkin at dinner. (Although there's nothing wrong with an occasional, "Thanks for using your napkin.") Parents sometimes feel they have to give a standing ovation to anything their child does. This school year, provide specific praise if your son decides to build his own kite for the science fair. It may not soar, but you can comment on his creative use of string and plastic bags.
2. Relax and laugh with your children: Children benefit from seeing adults

use humor in a positive way. So you all overslept — instead of yelling, have a race to see who gets dressed in the quickest time. The winner gets to choose dessert at dinner. Comment on how amazing it is that your family could oversleep and yet get out the door in such a short amount of time. Studies show that optimists have a higher level of self-confidence.

3. Encourage positive risk taking: Self-confident children have the inner fortitude to try new things even if it means a chance of failure. Encourage your children to try out for the school play or enter an art contest. As a family, read a book together on a subject new to all of you. Take a fall bike ride on an unfamiliar path, even if you don't know where you'll end up. Children soon learn they have skills to make



wise choices when taking risks.

4. Let your children solve problems: Do your children want you to buy them the latest designer clothes for the new school year? Have them check ads or call stores to get the best prices. Ask them to brainstorm ways to earn money for their name-brand items. Children develop self-confidence from solving problems appropriate to their abilities.

(Courtesy of FeatureSource.com)

## The Danger of Inhaling Mothballs

Among the many substances that teens often abuse to get a quick high are inhalants, such as spray paints, nail polish remover, hair spray, glues and cleaning fluids. Now a letter published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* sheds light on a lesser-known inhalant — mothballs.

In an editorial letter, doctors from Marseille, France, say that they were surprised to learn that an 18-year-old girl that they treated at a local French hospital had been sniffing and chewing mothballs. The girl, who was treated for a scaly rash, an unsteady walk and mental sluggishness, was apparently encouraged by classmates to use mothballs as a recreational drug.

Recent national surveys and scientific studies show that today, one in five students in the United States has used an inhalant to get high by the time he or she reaches the eighth grade. Inhalants can include anything from gasoline and glues to nitrous oxide and aerosol hair spray. Some estimates say that there are more than 1,000 inhalable products that are easily accessible and legal for young people to purchase. These chemicals are available in school, at home and in grocery, automotive and convenience stores — and are easier to obtain than alcohol.

Mothballs contain paradichlorobenzene (PDB), a substance that is found in other household products, such as insect repellents and air fresheners.

In the letter, the doctors note that while there have been very few reported cases of mothball abuse, because the symptoms can be hidden or easily mistaken for something else, experts may not have a true sense of its abuse.

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Troy, Michigan

Performance Resource Press, Inc.  
1270 Rankin Dr., Suite F  
Troy, Michigan 48083-2843  
248-588-7733  
www.PRPonline.net

Editor: Erin Bell  
Graphic Designer: Diane Chatterson

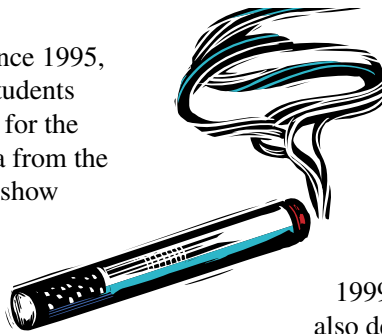
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# Many High School Students Still Drink or Smoke Before Age 13

While early initiation rates have declined since 1995, a considerable proportion of US high school students continue to report using alcohol and cigarettes for the first time before age 13. Recently released data from the national Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) show that 26% of US high school students reported drinking more than a few sips of alcohol, and 16% reported smoking a whole cigarette before age 13 in 2005, compared to 32% and 25%, respectively, in 1995. The percentage of students who reported trying marijuana before age 13 has remained stable at 8% to 9%. Previous studies have found a relationship between early drug initiation and drug dependence (see CESAR Fax, volume 13, issue 45 and volume 9, issue 38; available online at [www.cesar.umd.edu](http://www.cesar.umd.edu)).

**However, the good news is, the percentage of US high**



**school students reporting lifetime use of many illicit drugs has declined in recent years, according to data from the national Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS).**

The percentage of students in grades nine through 12 reporting lifetime use of marijuana has declined from a peak of 47% in 1999 to 38% in 2005. Methamphetamine use has also declined, from 9% when it was first measured in 1999 to 6% in 2005. The first half of this decade has also seen declines in cocaine and inhalant use; while steroid use has only recently declined (from 6% in 2003 to 4% in 2005). Heroin use has remained stable at around 3%. These results are consistent with those of other national surveys of youths, such as the *Monitoring the Future* survey and the National Survey on Drug Use and Health.

## Brain Chemistry Related to Family Addiction Traits

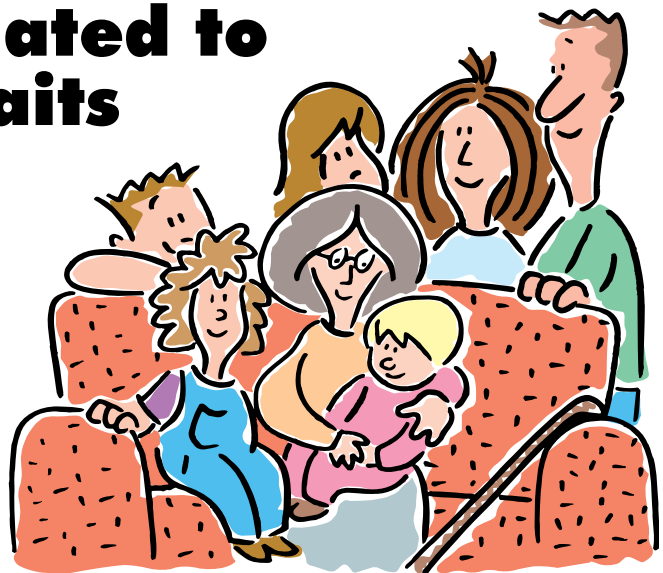
It's well known that family members of alcoholics are more likely to have drinking problems themselves, but **new research shows that brain-chemistry characteristics may provide high-risk family members with some protection from addiction.**

*Science Daily* reported that brain scans of family members of alcoholics found that those who were not problem drinkers themselves had higher levels of dopamine D2 receptors in their brains than nonalcoholics from families with no history of alcoholism. The dopamine system in the brain is intimately involved in addiction to alcohol and other drugs.

"This suggests that dopamine D2 receptors in these brain regions protect high-risk individuals from becoming alcoholic," said researcher Gene-Jack Wang of Brookhaven National Laboratories. "This protective effect may combine with emotional and environmental factors to compensate for higher inherited vulnerability."

The study also found that people with high levels of dopamine D2 receptors tended to be more extroverted and motivated by positive rewards, regardless of family history of alcoholism. Such "positive emotionality" is thought to decrease the probability of individuals developing drinking problems.

Researchers suggested that therapy centered on raising



dopamine levels could prevent addiction in other at-risk individuals. Animal studies have shown that genetically manipulating dopamine levels lowered alcohol consumption in rats.

"Higher levels of dopamine D2 receptors may provide protection against alcoholism by triggering the brain circuits involved in inhibiting behavioral responses to the presence of alcohol," said lead study author Nora D. Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

The study appears in the September 2006 issue of the *Archives of General Psychiatry*.

# Gang Members Relocated for Own Safety

Activists in some communities say they have to relocate gang members who quit their group in order to ensure their safety — a spin on the classic “witness protection program” that seeks to give a new start to former gangbangers.

*USA Today* reported that churches, community groups and police in cities like Durham, NC, Providence, RI, Washington, DC, and Richmond, VA., have helped relocate gang members, providing money, housing and other assistance.

“We’ve been involved with a number of tragedies here,” said pastor Kenneth Hammond of Durham’s Union Baptist Church, who recently gave a 15-year-old gang member money to help him and his family move to Ohio. “Sometimes, there is just too much danger to keep them here.”

Many gangs require members to pledge their loyalty for life, and those who break the oath are often targeted for violence or death. “You are dealing with a kid’s life here,” said John Reis, a former Rhode Island gang investigator who helped relocate a 16-year-old Latin Kings member in 2001. “If you don’t do something, they could end up dead tomorrow.”

Once relocated, there’s no guarantee that former gang members will avoid trouble in their new communities, but advocates say the move at least gives them a fighting



chance to change their lives. “With the Internet and the way everybody is connected these days, it’s hard to completely remove a kid,” said Reis. “There is really nowhere you can go to completely escape this. At some point, we’ll be flying kids all over the place to escape.”

**For more information, contact:**