



Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth

Working together to enhance the wellbeing and life chances of children and young people.

MEDIA RELEASE

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Target pre-teens to prevent youth violence

Programs to prevent youth violence need to start earlier and be sustained longer to be effective, according to a new report commissioned by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY).

The study, which was undertaken for ARACY by Murdoch Childrens Research Institute¹, found primary school age children were engaging in a range of risk-taking behaviours that put them in danger of developing long-term social and health problems.

As many as one in five Year 6 boys admitted to having drunk alcohol in the previous month, and one in twenty in the same group had drunk more than five alcoholic drinks in a row in the previous fortnight (classified as binge drinking). The rates were lower for girls, but increased for both genders in Year 8.

The study confirmed a link between recent alcohol consumption and violent and antisocial behaviour among students. The level of antisocial behavior and alcohol consumption increased for both boys and girls in secondary school.

ARACY Board Chair Professor Fiona Stanley AC said the findings sounded a warning about the long-term health and social problems that could be facing a worryingly large number of young Australians.

"We already know that young people are more susceptible to the effects of alcohol because of major changes occurring in the wiring of their brains during this critical period of development. We also know that the younger children start drinking, the more likely they are to have serious alcohol problems by the time they reach young adulthood," Professor Stanley said.

"I believe that these results send a strong message to parents and to those who are in contact with these young people such as school principals and teachers. The urgency for us in Australia is to give parents and teachers of young people the capacity and evidence to prevent children from using alcohol at all. Given the level of acceptance of alcohol by Australian adults and the negative effects of some high profile role models, this is challenging."

The report analysed the impact of 20 risk factors and nine protective factors associated with violent and antisocial behaviour.

¹ Based on survey data of more than 8000 students in Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia conducted as part of the Healthy Neighbourhoods Project.

The range of risk factors included:

- Low community involvement and attitudes to substance use
- Poor family relationships and management
- Parental attitudes favourable to drug use
- School failure and disengagement
- Rebelliousness, sensation seeking and interaction with anti-social peers

Protective factors included:

- Opportunities to be involved and rewarded within the community
- Family attachment and involvement
- Positive interaction with the school
- Peer and individual social skills and values

Almost 80% of young people who had four or more risk factors reported having used alcohol in the past month and/or having been involved in violent or antisocial behaviour in the past year.

Almost 80% of young people with the maximum nine protective factors had not recently consumed alcohol or engaged in violent/antisocial behaviours.

ARACY CEO Dr Lance Emerson said the study highlighted that preventive programs needed to start in early adolescence - *before* problem behaviours became an entrenched pattern in a young person's life.

"We need to be putting more effort into ensuring that children develop skills and lifestyle habits that will equip them to lead healthy, socially responsible lives as they move through their teenage years into adulthood," Dr Emerson said.

"It's clear that if young people are to succeed in life, they need adult support and guidance to help them develop the range of emotional and social skills that will enable them to achieve their potential and contribute to society."

The report is the first stage of the ARACY Preventing Youth Violence Project. ARACY is now convening an expert panel that will oversee the production of a national discussion paper and roundtable.

The paper can be downloaded at

http://www.aracy.org.au/cmsdocuments/violent_and_antisocial_behaviours.pdf

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The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) is a national non-profit organisation working to create better futures for all Australia's children and young people.

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