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Exploring Perceptions of Sugar Sweetened Beverages Among Early Adolescents in Worcester, MA: a Qualitative Study

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INTRODUCTION

- Sugar sweetened beverage (SSB) consumption among youth in the United States is a major public health problem
- 10-15% of adolescents total calories are from SSBs.
- High consumption of SSBs is associated with weight gain and obesity
- A range of factors influence dietary behaviors and food choices.
- This study aimed to explore adolescents' attitudes and knowledge about SSBs, sources of influence, and reinforcements for SSB consumption using focus groups.

METHODS

- Recruited adolescents aged 12-14 years who attended one of the eight Youth Connect Worcester programs.
- Conducted gender stratified focus group discussions between November 2016 – September 2017.
- Semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate discussions.
- Transcripts were transcribed verbatim and double coded.
- Content analysis was conducted using a conceptual framework.
- Repetitive topics that emerged under each key construct were identified
- Data were coded and managed using Atlas.ti software.

KNOWLEDGE & MISINFORMATION

- "I think it slows down your cells in your head and when you go to class you're not as active as you are."
- "If you have too much sugar, you get too much cholesterol, and too much cholesterol makes your lungs something... and then you have a heart attack"
- "It's hard to digest so it makes it into fat"
- "Yeah but if it says zero sugar, that means it has fake sugar"
- "Sunny D is actually healthy; it has 100% vitamins. So y'all are wrong."



SSB REINFORCEMENTS

- "Because it's kinda addicting, the taste. Yeah, you crave it and want more."
- "If like afterschool if we're waiting for a bus to come here we all go to like the pizza place near our school or papa johns or corner store. When we go there they have the cheap drinks that I can get with my dollar."
- "Olde Time used to be really popular at our school too – it got so popular like kids always wanted it - like kids were like buying it and selling it (to each other) because they wanted it so badly."



SOURCES OF INFLUENCE

- "Well it depends on who's doing it. Like if it's a snap from someone you like then yes but not somebody you don't like then no."
- "My mom she was drinking coke and I'm like this is bad for you and she is like well it really tastes good. So yeah."
- "The school says don't drink soda but they are. My history teacher has one or two cokes a day. Yeah during class."
- "Yeah and if they're your friends, they'll know ways to make you want something. If they say, oh yeah this drink is really good you should probably have it then you're gonna."
- "Because our school has like two stores on the same street. I just get what I'm in the mood for like if I'm happy I get pineapple. If I need something to kinda pick me up I get cotton candy. (soda flavors)"



ATTITUDES ABOUT WATER

- "If I wanted to stay hydrated I would go with the water but if I wanted a good tasting drink I would go with the soda."
- "I don't like water that much. I mean I'll drink it if I'm dehydrated and stuff."

ATTITUDES

- "We're young and then when you grow up they tell you need to control your sugar. When you're younger you don't think about it."
- "Like teens you can't stop them they're gonna do what they want to do you know doesn't matter."

RESULTS

- Five focus groups with 33 participants 12-14 years old (n=16 boys in 3 groups) and (n=17 girls in 2 groups).
- 27% of participants identified as Hispanic, 24% black and 33% white.
- One third speaks more than one language at home and 63.6% consume SSBs daily.
- Qualitative analysis identified additional themes under the content areas of our framework: Attitudes, Reinforcements, Knowledge, and Sources of Influence.
- Adolescents had general knowledge about SSBs and their health impacts.
- Adolescents were not well informed about dietary recommendations around SSBs, they expressed independence around their behaviors, strong feelings about water only being for hydration, and were influenced by peer, media, and adult SSB behaviors.

DISCUSSION

- This research presents a deeper understanding of factors that influence Worcester adolescents' beverage choices from their own perspective.
- Adolescents' perceptions around SSBs are multifactorial and this study identifies specific areas that can be targeted to modify perceptions and behaviors around SSBs.
- These findings can inform future public health messaging in Worcester around obesogenic behaviors such as excess caloric intake from beverages.
- Potential Actions: parents, teachers, and coaches are encouraged to refrain from drinking SSBs in front of adolescents; water filters/pitchers may improve the taste of tap water and thus increase water's acceptability as a drink.