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Sex, Drugs, and Alcohol: What Adventist College Students Say About the Role of Parents and Religion

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The college years often involve experimentation with alcohol and other drugs that can start in the adolescent years and extend during the college years (Misch, 2010). Such behaviors are influenced by decreased parental supervision along with increased interaction with a larger number and variety of peers (Misch, 2010). Three-fourths (75.6%) of U.S. college-age youth have consumed alcohol in the past year, with 57.9% who admit to being drunk over that same time period, one-third meeting the criteria for binge drinking in the previous month (Johnston et al., 2014). Many college students believe heavy drinking is a normal part of their college experience (Luquis, Garcia, & Ashford, 2003). While alcohol is the most commonly used substance, it is not the only substance being used on campuses. Marijuana is the most commonly used illicit drug on college campuses in the U.S., with about one-third (35.5%) of college students reporting marijuana use in the last year (Johnston et al., 2014).

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A large majority of those who are college age in the United States are sexually active; approximately 65% had sex in the last 12 months (American College Health Association, 2011). There are a number of problems associated with various forms of sexual activity, these include multiple sex partners and unprotected sexual activity that can lead to transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies (Centers for Disease Control, 2009).

Research has looked at a number of variables that may influence sexual behavior. Religiosity does not appear to substantially reduce sexual activity; 80% of 18-29 year old unmarried evangelical Christians participate in sexual activity (Albert, 2009). This rate is similar to unmarried adults of the same age at about 88% in their lifetime (Albert, 2009). The use of alcohol and other drugs has been found to increase sexual risk taking among college students (Klein, Geaghan, & MacDonald, 2007).

Research affirms that parents influence their children's' drugs, sex, and alcohol behavior in a variety of ways. Close parental monitoring through the adolescent years has been associated with less alcohol and drug use which then indirectly curbs high-risk drinking in the college years (Arria et al., 2008). During the college years, the family makeup and certain characteristics of the students' family during the adolescent years influence later beliefs and behaviors.

Davidson and colleagues (2008) found that intact families, where spouses have remained together and are affectionate towards each other, had a stronger impact on sexual risk behaviors than religiosity.

Andrews University, a Seventh-day Adventist institution located in Michigan, USA, conducts a youth health risk and protective factors survey about every five years since 1990. Researchers report that the results from the latest survey conducted in 2012 are similar to the last few surveys conducted in 2005 and 1999. Results showed much lower participation in drug and alcohol use and premarital sex than the general college population (Helm et al., 2009; Hopkins et al., 2004; Helm et al., 2009; Baltazar, VanderWaal, & McBride, 2012). Data analysis has shown that such variables as religious belief and participation in religious activities close family bonds, and relationships with other adults accounts for lower rates of drug and alcohol use and premarital sex.

Data analysis from the 2012 study show there are particular areas where religion and parents have the biggest impact on alcohol, the most commonly consumed substance on campus. The strongest religion variable was to believe that ‘God wants me to take care of my body by avoiding alcohol, tobacco, and drugs’; in other words, believing that ‘my body is the temple of God’ appears to be a safeguard against alcohol use. Those who strongly agreed with this question were 61% less likely to consume alcohol in the last week. The strongest parenting variable was to believe you can ‘talk to your mother about sensitive issues like drugs, sex, and alcohol’, which resulted in being 30% less likely to consume alcohol in the last week.

For sexual behavior, some of the same variables had similar relationships, with some differences between men and women. Females who are comfortable talking to their mothers about drugs, sex, and alcohol, attend church regularly, read their Bible frequently, or believe God wants them to take care of their bodies are significantly less likely to have multiple sexual partners in their lifetimes. For males, frequency of attending church, reading the Bible, or knowing he can turn to God because he enjoys spending time with Him resulted in being significantly less likely to have multiple sexual partners in a lifetime.

While this information is useful and encouraging, it is important that we tell the rest of the story; hearing from the young people themselves about what they think of drug and alcohol use and sexual behavior with a particular emphasis on the role religion and parents play. Focus group research was conducted during winter of 2013 to better understand the results of the survey.

Andrews University students’ leaders recruited students from psychology, sociology, and family studies classes to participate in one of six focus groups. All participants were undergraduate students of Andrews University. To participate in the study they had to be between the ages of 18-25 and unmarried. Students were asked a list of semi-structured, open-ended questions that explored the reasons why students engaged in specific health risk behaviors such as alcohol and drug use, and sexual behavior. There were a total of 53 participants with 57% females and 43% males. Ethnic composition was 43% White, 25% Black, 15% Latino/a, 11% Asian, and 6% Asian/White.

The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed and common themes were identified and processed. The most common identified themes will be reported here, in order of frequency. A few quotes from the participants have been included for clarification purposes.

When students were asked what they think of alcohol and drug use they reported:

- It is something done at parties or social occasions.
- It is considered a normal part of the college experience.
- Use varies, with some students totally abstaining to others using substances regularly.
- Many of the students reported that they believe that alcohol and drug use is wrong. “I think because around here, it’s taboo.”

When students were asked what influences substance use among college students they reported:

- It is a way of coping with stress, helping them sleep, and a way to escape their problems. “It relieves stress.”
- They reported it is easy to find friends who use or don’t use substance. They denied there was

peer pressure, but they said when students do use substances they are usually with their peers at social occasions.

- There is a certain amount of curiosity in relation to trying substances and they think it is a way to have fun. “You’re tired of being calm and doing things people tell you, and you want to be a bit different and do something bad.”

When group members reflected on why students may binge drink (defined as 5+ drinks in one sitting) they responded:

- It may be accidental because they may not have been aware of how many drinks they have consumed already.
- The person may have an addiction to alcohol.
- It could be a way to escape their problems and numb emotional pain.

When asked what role they felt religion played the most common themes identified were:

- Religion sets moral standards that influence behavior. “I think religion plays a role in that it tempers most religious people from going into drinking or binge drinking.”
- They believe the body is the temple of the Lord so shouldn’t consume harmful substances. “That saying about your body is a temple of God.”
- Religious influence varies depending if the young person has internalized the values that have been taught to them.

The roles parents play include:

- Parents who model not using substances are a good influence on their children. Parents that use substances can model what not to do, especially if the child perceives that their parent’s substance use has been detrimental to them.
- Group members felt parents shouldn’t be too strict or lenient. They felt if parents are too strict then the child might want to rebel, but if they are too permissive, their children may think their parents don’t care if they use substances. When parents implement more authoritative parenting where there is more interaction between the parent and the child regarding rules this also aids in more open communication. “I think it comes down to, when parents give good reasons why they shouldn’t be doing it, not just enforcing a bunch of rules that don’t have any substance

or background to them, so actually having a rationale for the rules, or the things that parents try to implement to their kids.”

- A child’s relationship with their parent was also viewed as important. If you have a close relationship with your parent then you don’t want to disappoint them by doing something you know they don’t want you to do.

There was more variety in the responses to the participants’ perception of sexual behaviors among Adventist college students.

- Sex is considered a taboo subject on campus.
- There is great variation in beliefs about sexual behaviors, from those who will not even kiss before their wedding to those who think casual sex is perfectly fine.
- Students believe there is not enough information regarding foreplay standards. At what point is it going too far?
- There is a double standard where it is more acceptable for males to have sex than females, which showed gender bias since both genders are equally involved.
- Females often feel pressured to have sex in order to keep their boyfriend.
- Group members generally believe that sex is meant for marriage- “That you [should] wait until marriage.”
- Students have difficulties dealing with sexual urges. “Even though they know that it is not right, maybe, they’ve convinced themselves differently.”
- There are some who struggle with masturbation and pornography.
- They are aware that sex can hurt their relationships and their mental health.

Participants identified factors that influenced their perceptions of sex:

- Peers who encourage them to have sex. “I mean, you listen to your peers right? And if they have something to say about it, you’ll listen to it.”
- Media and music that normalizes sex.
- If the couple has been together for a while there is more pressure to have sex.

There are specific ways religion has an influence on sexual behaviors:

- Religious values teach that sex is for marriage. “Cause since I’m a religious person, I understand why God wants you to wait until you are married.”

- If you have religious faith it gives you strength to resist sexual urges that you know are meant for the marriage relationship.
- Participants felt the Bible was not very clear in regards to premarital sex. They don't feel there is a verse that explicitly says, 'Thou shalt not have premarital sex.' The students reported there are plenty of stories where Bible heroes had premarital sex so this sends a mixed message.

Parents play a similar role in influencing sexual behavior as they do in substance use behavior.

- If you have a close relationship with your parents you are not going to want to disappoint them, particularly if you know they want you to wait to have sex until you are married. "There's obviously correlations between the relationship with your parents, and actually with waiting."
- If parents waited until they got married to have sex, it sets a standard and sends a message to their children that if their parents were able to wait, then they can wait.
- It helps if parents send very clear messages regarding their standards regarding sexual behavior. "If your parents don't talk to you about it at all, and just kinda get educated by your peers, almost guarantee that's gonna be worse indication than if your parents discussed it with you."

In conclusion, there are many factors that influence whether young people will use substances or have premarital sex. Our research shows that young people struggle with urges to use substances and have sex and need to learn healthier ways of coping and having fun. The biggest sexual struggles are with masturbation and pornography; how to manage a relationship that progresses to where sexual urges seem overwhelming, and when there is pressure for the female to give in to her boyfriend's desire to have sex or lose the relationship.

Young people believe the Bible sets standards regarding their behavior. The most powerful Biblical message against substance use is believing the body is the temple of the Lord, as shown in the survey and follow-up focus groups. This shows the power of the health message among Adventist youth. Sexual involvement is more complicated. Although the message from the church is that sex should wait for

marriage is clear to them, they feel the Bible isn't explicit on this issue. This means that parents and mentors need to reinforce this message through clear communication and modeling.

Relationships with peers, parents, and God make a difference in the behavior choices of youth. If a young person spends time with peers who don't use substances and are planning to wait until they get married to have sex, they are less likely to engage in these behaviors. In addition, if the youth has a close relationship with parents who clearly state their standards regarding substance use and premarital sex, they are less likely to practice these behaviors. Finally, when the young person has a close relationship with God, they are more likely to care about the religious standards such as, the body is God's temple and sex is for marriage.

Recommendations for family ministry leaders:

- Maintain clear standards while recognizing that youth make mistakes.
- Reinforce the life-affirming value of SDA health principles.
- Encourage a personal relationship with Christ.
- Focus on prevention and minimizing the impact of risky choices.
- Practice love and acceptance for those who struggle in these areas.
- Teach parents the importance of:
 - Nurturing close relationships through family dinners, special outings, and establishing traditions.
 - Early, clear, and repeated communication regarding substance use and premarital sex.
 - Positive parenting where the child has input and understanding of established rules.
 - Modeling the behavior you want in your children.
 - Monitoring media and peer relationships to make sure they are reinforcing the messages you are teaching.

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