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Citation	Journal Of Adolescent Health, 2011, v. 48 n. 4, p. 418-420
Issued Date	2011
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10722/133335
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Overestimation of peer smoking prevalence predicts smoking initiation among primary school students in Hong Kong

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Acknowledgements: We thank Dr. Janice M. Johnston for language editing and Mr. KK Mak for his help in baseline survey management.

Funding: The Hong Kong Council on Smoking and Health.

Declarations of interest: None.

Abstract

Purpose: To investigate the relation between perceived smoking prevalence and smoking initiation among Hong Kong primary (grade) 2-4 students.

Methods: A cohort of 2171 students were surveyed in 2006 and again in 2008. Students who perceived peer ever-smoking prevalence as “none” or “some” were considered correct (reference group), and those who perceived “half” (overestimation) or “most/all” (gross overestimation) incorrect.

Results: At baseline, overestimation was cross-sectionally associated with ever-smoking ($P<0.01$). At follow-up, 7.2% of never smoking students with incorrect estimation at baseline had started smoking, which was 79% (95% CI: 3%-213%) greater than that of 3.7% for those with correct estimation. Among never smoking students with incorrect estimation, subsequent correct estimation was associated with 70% (95% CI: 47%-83%) lower risk of smoking initiation compared with persistent incorrect estimation.

Conclusions: Overestimation of peer smoking prevalence predicted smoking initiation among children. Interventions should evaluate whether correcting children’s overestimation of peer smoking could reduce smoking initiation.

(150 words)

Keywords: Children, perceived smoking prevalence, smoking, Chinese, Hong Kong

Introduction

Smoking experimentation in childhood predicts regular smoking in adolescence and young adulthood [1]. The Theory of Planned Behaviour posits that intentions and actions are influenced by subjective normative beliefs [2]. As a measure of norms, the perceived prevalence of peer smoking is positively associated with smoking in adolescents [3,4], but data are scarce in younger children. Such an association in young children may have important implications on how smoking in young people should be portrayed in smoking prevention campaign and in the media. We therefore investigated whether overestimating peer smoking was associated with smoking among primary school students in Hong Kong in cross-sectional and prospective analyses.

Methods

A school-based prospective study was conducted among primary 2-4 students (P2-4, equivalent to US grades 2-4) from 19 randomly selected schools in 2006, 14 of which were successfully followed in 2008. Invitation letters were sent to parents for passive consent where only declining parents were required to return a signed reply form. Even with parental consent, student participation was totally voluntary. Ethics approval was obtained, and detailed sampling methods were reported elsewhere [5].

Among 3508 students surveyed at baseline, 2171 (61.9%) were successfully followed. Students who were followed and those lost to follow-up were similar in baseline demographic characteristics (age and sex), parental smoking status, secondhand smoke exposure, smoking status and perceived smoking prevalence (all $P > 0.05$), suggesting that any non-response bias should be small.

1 Anonymous and self-administered questionnaires were used to collect information about
2 demographic characteristics, smoking, secondhand smoke exposure in the past 7 days,
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4 perceived smoking prevalence among children, and parental smoking. Similar questionnaires
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6 were used at baseline and follow-up, with individual data matched by demographic and
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8 partial identification information.
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14 Smoking status was defined using 6 response options [6]. Students who chose “I have never
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16 smoked” were classified as never smokers. Students who chose other options from “I have
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18 smoked only once or a few times” to “I smoke 7+ cigarettes/week” were classified as ever
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20 smokers (including former smokers). Smoking initiation was defined as never smoking at
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22 baseline but ever-smoking at follow-up.
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29 Perceived smoking prevalence was assessed by the question “What proportion of primary
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31 schoolchildren in Hong Kong do you think have ever smoked a few cigarettes?” [4]. Five
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33 options from none to all were provided. Responses of “none” or “some” were categorised as
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35 correct (reference group), “half” as overestimation, and “majority” or “all” as gross
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37 overestimation. Overestimation and gross overestimation were also combined as incorrect
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39 estimation. A change in estimation from being correct at baseline to incorrect at follow-up
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41 was categorised as “becoming incorrect”, while a change from being incorrect at baseline to
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43 correct at follow-up was categorised as “becoming correct”.
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51 Baseline cross-sectional relation between overestimation and ever-smoking was examined.
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53 For prospective associations, two approaches were used. First, baseline perceived smoking
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55 prevalence was used to predict smoking initiation at follow-up. Second, the effects of
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57 becoming correct and becoming incorrect on smoking initiation were investigated in two
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1 separate models. Logistic regression yielded odds ratios (OR) for smoking adjusting for
2 potential confounders [7] and school effects in cross-sectional and prospective analyses.
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6 7 **Results**

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9 Among 2171 students (mean age 8 years, 52% boys), 4.4% at baseline and 5.5% at follow-up
10 had ever smoked. Most students correctly estimated smoking prevalence (75%), but
11 substantial proportions overestimated (15.2%) and grossly overestimated (9.8%) smoking
12 prevalence.
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22 Table 1 shows that at baseline, the ORs(95% confidence interval) of ever-smoking increased
23 linearly from 1.98(1.29-3.02) for overestimation to 2.31(1.26-4.24) for gross overestimation.
24 Overestimation of smoking prevalence significantly predicted smoking initiation with an OR
25 of 1.79(1.03-3.13) compared with correct estimation. However, gross overestimation was not
26 significantly associated with smoking initiation.
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36 Table 2 shows that compared with persistent correct estimation of smoking prevalence,
37 becoming incorrect was associated with an OR of 3.46(2.15-5.56) for smoking initiation.
38 Compared with persistent incorrect estimation, becoming correct reduced the odds of
39 smoking initiation by 70%(OR: 0.30, 95%CI: 0.17-0.53).
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49 **Discussion**

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51 Our study provided the first evidence that overestimation of peer smoking prevalence was
52 cross-sectionally and prospectively associated with smoking among primary school students.
53 These results were consistent with previous research in adolescents [3,4]. In adolescents,
54 overestimation of smoking prevalence is a modifiable risk factor [8]. Although a
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1 comprehensive smoking prevention trial that included normative education failed to prevent
2 smoking among children and adolescents [9], no interventions focusing solely on normative
3 education have been reported.
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9 The temporality of the cross-sectional associations observed is uncertain because smokers
10 tend to mix with smokers to form high smoking prevalence groups; they may also normalize
11 their unacceptable behaviour of smoking with deliberate overestimation. However,
12 overestimation of smoking prevalence clearly preceded smoking initiation in our prospective
13 analyses. The insignificant prospective effect of gross overestimation on smoking initiation
14 might be due to the small size of this group.
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26 We have adjusted for demographic differences, parental smoking and exposure to
27 secondhand smoke, although residual confounding cannot be ruled out. In addition, we were
28 unable to adjust for peer smoking. Nevertheless, the risk estimates were stable across
29 different models, suggesting that the associations were robust. Among students who
30 overestimated smoking at baseline, becoming correct at follow-up predicted a lower risk of
31 smoking initiation, therefore satisfying the reversibility criterion of causality.
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43 As precise estimates of smoking prevalence used in adolescent studies [4] are difficult for
44 young children, we used crude descriptive responses as adopted in other similar research with
45 young children [10]. The positive correlation observed between the perceived and actual
46 smoking prevalence at the school level supported the validity of simple measures of
47 perceived smoking prevalence (Pearson coefficient=0.43).
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1 To encourage candid reporting of smoking, confidentiality was assured in this anonymous
2 survey. Items on smoking were asked towards the end of the questionnaire to minimise the
3 chance of the answers being seen by others. [Students answered all questionnaire items](#)
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5 regardless of smoking habits. Completed questionnaires were collected [immediately](#) in an
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7 opaque envelope by research staff without being handled by teachers. The association
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9 between parental and student smoking (P for Chi-square<0.01) also gave support for the
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11 validity of self-reported smoking behaviour. [Biological markers should be used in future](#)
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13 studies [to validate self-reported smoking behaviours.](#)
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22 **Conclusions**

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24 Overestimation of peer smoking prevalence among primary school students in Hong Kong
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26 predicted smoking initiation. [Interventions should evaluate whether correcting children's](#)
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28 [overestimation of peer smoking could reduce smoking initiation.](#)
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Table 1. Cross-sectional and prospective relations between ever-smoking and perceived smoking prevalence

	Ever-smoking %	Odds ratios (95%CI)	
		Crude	Adjusted ^a
Cross-sectional analysis			
Correct estimation	3.2	1	1
Incorrect estimation	7.7	2.50(1.63-3.83)***	2.12(1.40-3.21)***
Overestimation	7.1	2.26(1.35-3.79)**	1.98(1.29-3.02)**
Gross overestimation	8.8	2.87(1.64-5.02)***	2.31(1.26-4.24)**
P for trend		<0.001	<0.001
Prospective analysis			
Correct estimation	3.7	1	1
Incorrect estimation	7.2	2.04(1.31-3.17)***	1.79(1.03-3.13)*
Overestimation	8.0	2.29(1.38-3.79)***	2.15(1.31-3.54)**
Gross overestimation	5.9	1.65(0.85-2.22)	1.30(0.56-3.02)
P for trend		0.01	0.15

*P<0.05, **P<0.01, ***P<0.001.

^aAdjusting for sex, age, place of birth, clustering effect of schools, and baseline characteristics of parental smoking status and secondhand smoke exposure at home.

Table 2. Effects of changes in perceived smoking prevalence on smoking initiation at follow-up

	Smoking initiation %	Odds ratios (95%CI)	
		Crude	Adjusted ^a
Persistently correct	2.3	1	1
Becoming incorrect	8.4	3.85(2.24-6.63)***	3.46(2.15-5.56)***
Persistently incorrect	14.3	1	1
Becoming correct	3.9	0.24(0.12-0.50)***	0.30(0.17-0.53)***

***P<0.001.

^aAdjusting for sex, place of birth, clustering effect of schools, and baseline characteristics of age, parental smoking status and secondhand smoke exposure at home.