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### Do High School Students Influence 8th Graders' Behavior?

There are several combination middle and high schools in Vermont in which 7th and 8th graders attend classes on the same campus with 9th-12th graders. Does the behavior of high school students “rub off” on the middle school students at the same school? If so, would those 8th graders be more likely to engage in high risk behaviors such as using alcohol and other drugs, smoking cigarettes, fighting, and sexual intercourse?

To test this notion, we used data from the *1995 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)* to compare the prevalence of risk behaviors of 8th graders in combination schools with that of 8th graders in middle schools. Our preliminary analyses suggest that **8th graders who attend combination schools do not engage in risky behaviors more than 8th graders who do not**. The only difference we found was that 8th graders who attend school with high school students were more likely to report being offered, sold, or given illegal drugs on school property.

What could explain this apparent lack of differences? Perhaps there are differences, but not on the risk behaviors that we selected. Perhaps 8th graders in combination schools are not exposed to the high risk behaviors of older students because they are physically separated from high school students at school, and because they rarely socialize with high school students away from school. Perhaps the assumption that high school students engage in far more high risk behaviors than 8th graders is wrong. The YRBS shows that the prevalence of some risk behaviors is as high among 8th graders as it is among 12th graders (e.g., planning suicide), and in some cases, it is even higher among 8th graders (e.g., physical fighting).

Risk Behavior	Percent of 8th Graders		
	Middle Schools	High Schools	
<b>Alcohol Use</b> (past 30 days)	<b>40%</b>	<b>38%</b>	n.s.
<b>Tobacco Use</b> (past 30 days)	<b>30%</b>	<b>28%</b>	n.s.
<b>Marijuana Use</b> (past 30 days)	<b>19%</b>	<b>18%</b>	n.s.
<b>Offered, Sold, or Given Illegal Drugs on School Property</b> (past 12 months)	<b>30%</b>	<b>33%</b>	sign.
<b>Ever Had Sexual Intercourse</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>25%</b>	n.s.
<b>Physical Fighting</b> (past 30 days)	<b>47%</b>	<b>45%</b>	n.s.
<b>Suicide Plan</b> (past 12 months)	<b>22%</b>	<b>23%</b>	n.s.

n.s.: not statistically different  
sign.: statistically different

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