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Original Article

Information, beliefs and attitudes of schoolchildren about the use of alcohol and other drugs

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Objective: to know the level of information, beliefs and attitudes of schoolchildren about the use of alcohol and other drugs. **Method:** a cross - sectional, descriptive and exploratory study with a 240 students sample from the municipal education network of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil. The Scale of Social Representations of the Consumption of Alcohol and Drugs in Adolescents was used. Data was analyzed using Student's t-test, Mann-Whitney test and Spearman Correlation. **Results:** alcohol and other drug use was indicated by 29.2% of the sample. It has been identified that the level of information influences non-permissive attitudes and positive beliefs. **Conclusion:** the training of schoolchildren on the subject is an important strategy for intervention in schools, and should be carried out in an intersectoral way, involving health and education, because in this way, the stigma that associates the issue with marginalization can be reduced.

Descriptors: Street Drugs; Alcoholic Beverages; Adolescent; School Health Services; Adolescent Health; Health Promotion

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Informação, crenças e atitudes de escolares
acerca do uso de Álcool e outras Drogas

Objetivo: conhecer os níveis de informação, crenças e atitudes de escolares acerca do uso de álcool e outras drogas. **Método:** estudo transversal, descritivo e exploratório com uma amostra de 240 escolares da rede municipal de educação de Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brasil. Foi utilizada a Escala de Representações Sociais do Consumo de Álcool e Drogas em Adolescentes. Os dados foram analisados por meio dos testes *t-Student*, *Mann-Whitney* e Correlação de *Spearman*. **Resultados:** o uso de álcool e outras drogas foi apontado por 29,2% da amostra. Foi identificado que o nível de informação influencia em atitudes não permissivas e crenças positivas. **Conclusão:** a capacitação de escolares sobre a temática é uma importante estratégia para intervenção em escolas, devendo ser realizada de maneira intersetorial, envolvendo saúde e educação, pois desse modo, pode-se reduzir o estigma que associa a temática à marginalização.

Descritores: Drogas Ilícitas; Bebidas Alcoólicas; Adolescente; Serviços de Saúde Escolar; Saúde do Adolescente; Promoção da Saúde

Información, creencias y actitudes de escolares
acerca del uso de alcohol y otras drogas

Objetivo: conocer los niveles de información, creencias y actitudes de escolares acerca del uso de alcohol y otras drogas. **Método:** estudio transversal, descriptivo y exploratorio con una muestra de 240 estudiantes de la red municipal de educación de Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brasil. Se utilizó la Escala de Representaciones Sociales del Consumo de Alcohol y Drogas en Adolescentes. Los datos fueron analizados a través de las pruebas *t-Student*, *Mann-Whitnney*, y la correlación de *Spearman*. **Resultados:** el uso de alcohol y otras drogas fue señalado por el 29,2% de la muestra. Se ha identificado que el nivel de información influye en actitudes no permisivas y creencias positivas. **Conclusión:** la capacitación de escolares sobre la temática es una importante estrategia para intervención en escuelas, debiendo ser realizada de manera intersectorial, involucrando salud y educación, pues de ese modo, se puede reducir el estigma que asocia la temática a la marginación.

Descriptores: Drogas Ilícitas; Bebidas Alcohólicas; Adolescente; Servicios de Salud Escolar; Salud del Adolescente; Promoción de la Salud

Introduction

The prevalence of the use of alcohol and other drugs by adolescents has increased over the last few years. Data from the National Survey on the use of licit and illicit drugs among school-age adolescents in the United States of America in 2017 points to an increase in the prevalence of lifelong use [1]. In Brazil it is no different; data from the Brazilian Center for Information on Psychotropic Drugs (CEBRID) reveals that 25.5% of Brazilian schoolchildren reported using some type of illicit drug in their lives. This data shows the magnitude of the problem that goes through health, social and political dimensions [2].

The increase in the use of drugs among school adolescents is an alert for authorities responsible for public policies in this area, given the specificities of adolescence as a life cycle and the need for actions that consider protection and risk factors associated with adolescence with regarding drug prevention [3].

It is known that the adoption of unhealthy lifestyles, among them the consumption of alcohol and other drugs, is common in adolescence and the chemical dependence installed in this age group impacts the life of the individual, their family and the social network in which they are inserted, which contributes to the development of diseases and grievances in health, in addition to fragile psychosocial issues [3].

Preventing the use of alcohol and other drugs in schools is a strategy used worldwide [4]. A study carried out with the objective of evaluating the efficacy of preventive actions on the abuse of psychoactive substances among school adolescents pointed out that, for smoking among schoolchildren, the most effective interventions were school-based prevention programs targeted at families, as well as campaigns from media; for alcohol use, interventions to prevent alcohol in the school environment were associated with a reduction in drinking frequency, while family-based interventions were ineffective. Regarding illicit drug abuse, school interventions based on the development of social skills have demonstrated a protective effect on the development of this ability to prevent drug use, especially the use of cannabis [5].

The beliefs and level of information that an individual presents on a particular subject are closely related to their behaviors in the daily life of social relations and are manifested through feelings, stereotypes, attitudes, phrases and expressions [6]. Research on the level of information, beliefs, and attitudes toward alcohol and other drug use is important in the adolescent school population. Curiosity, a characteristic featured in this age group, is one of the main reasons for experimenting with a psychoactive substance, licit or illicit, that is, an inherent characteristic of this life cycle becomes a risk factor for chemical dependence [7].

The school is considered one of the main places for the development of actions to prevent substance use due to the time of attachment of the adolescent to the school space [8]. Therefore, due to the importance of the role of the school as a space for protection and prevention of the use of alcohol and other drugs, this study aimed to know the levels of information, beliefs and attitudes of schoolchildren about the use of alcohol and other drugs.

Method

This is a cross-sectional, exploratory, descriptive study carried out in the city of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil.

The municipality is subdivided into nine administrative units, being: Barreiro; South Center; East; Northeast; Northwest; North; West; Pampulha and Venda-Nova. The study was carried out with adolescents enrolled in nine schools of the municipal education network, one belonging to each sub-district.

The choice of schools was made by members of the group of studies on alcohol and other drugs of the Belo Horizonte Municipal Education Department (SME - BH), which used, as criteria, the schools whose professionals were mostly effective employees; had more time left until retirement and had a lower percentage of absenteeism, because this way, it would favor the use of the results of the research in the development of actions of prevention to the use of drugs in the schools.

The population eligible for the survey was students enrolled in the 7th and 8th year of regular education and in the Youth and Adult Education (YAE) program of the selected schools. As inclusion criteria, adolescents who consented to participate in the research and had the consent of the legal guardian through the Term of Assent, in the case of minors under 18 years were defined.

Probabilistic, stratified and proportional sampling was carried out. For the sample calculation, an expected frequency of 60% was used for alcohol use, considered to be the most frequent event [2]. The minimum sample calculated was 239 students for a Confidence Interval of 90% and Sample Error of 5%. At this amount, 20% were added considering losses and/or refusals, totalizing a sample of 287 students.

For data collection, a self-administered structured questionnaire was developed, containing questions for sociodemographic and consumption characterization (sex, age, use of drugs in life, type of drug used) and the Scale of Social Representations of Alcohol and Drug Use in Adolescents (ERSCADA). This scale, originally published in Portugal, was validated for Brazil. It is

composed of 33 items subdivided into three subscales: Information; Attitudes and Beliefs [9-10].

The Information subscale contains 12 questions in order to assess the amount and quality of information that the adolescent has about the different types of substances, whether they are considered drugs, and whether they can cause dependence (i.e., "1 - Marijuana is a type of drug "; " 11 - The use of Alcohol can cause addiction ")[9-10].

The 12 items that make up the subscale Attitudes refer to the behavior of adolescents when exposed to a substance-friendly situation (i.e., "13 - If I were with my friends at a party and they encouraged me to consume alcoholic beverages I would accept "22 - If in my family almost everyone consumes alcoholic beverages I feel" tempted "to consume them")[9-10].

In the Beliefs subscale, the nine items that compose it have the objective of evaluating the positive and/or negative beliefs associated with the consumption of alcohol and other drugs (i.e., "26 - The family is the appropriate environment to discuss the use of drugs ";" 29 - Adolescents who drink alcohol drink to relax") [9-10].

The responses to each item were on the Likert scale ranging from 5 to 1, with 5 being totally agreeing and 1 totally disagreeing. Thus, the higher the score, the higher the level of information, the more permissive the attitudes and the greater the number of positive beliefs associated with the use of alcohol and other drugs, except in item 25, where the scale order would be reversed for 1 to 5[9-10].

The data was collected from September to November of 2016, in the dependencies of the participating schools. In order to reduce potential information biases, the application of the instruments was previously scheduled and performed with all students concomitantly. In this way, it would prevent the participants from feeling coerced or embarrassed to answer a question and be identified, even though anonymity was guaranteed.

For the elaboration of the database and later analysis, the statistical programs EpiInfo ™ 7.2 and Data Analysis Statistical Software (STATA 12.0) were used. Data analysis was performed using descriptive statistics with absolute and relative frequencies. To verify the difference between groups, the Student's t test for parametric and Mann-Whitnney data was used for non-parametric data. To verify the existence of correlation, the Spearman Correlation Test was used. In all tests, a significance level of 5% was adopted.

The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Minas Gerais under Opinion num. 37574914.3.0000.5149 and the confidentiality of the participants was guaranteed throughout the research process, as well as their safety.

Results

A total of 240 adolescents participated in the study, with a 16% rejection. The results showed a predominance of male adolescents (52.9%), aged ten to 14 years (79.6%) and who reported never having used any type of drug (70.8%). Table 1 with absolute and relative frequencies:

Table 1 – Socio-demographic and drug consumption characterization of 7th and 8th grade school adolescents and Youth and Adult Education of nine municipal schools of Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil, 2016 (n = 240)

Variable	N	%
Sex		
Female	113	47.1
Male	127	52.9
Age group		
10-14	191	79.6
15-19	49	20.4
Use of any type of drug ever in life		
No	170	70.8
Yes	70	29.2
Type of drug		
Alcohol	68	28.3
Tabaco	17	7.1
Illicit (marijuana; crack; cocaine; thinner; LSD*; ecstasy)	22	9.3

*Lysergic Acid Diethylamide

Regarding the Information subscale, the participants presented satisfactory knowledge about the drugs and their effects. As for the Attitudes subscale, the result revealed predominantly unfavorable attitudes regarding the use of alcohol and other drugs. On the other hand, the subscale Beliefs, with an average of 3.19, showed that adolescents were neutral regarding the possible causes and effects of drug use, that is, they did not express positive or negative beliefs. The results are detailed in Table 2:

Table 2 – Average of subscales Information, Attitudes and Beliefs, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil, 2016 (n = 240)

Subscale	Average (95%IC)	Standard deviation
Information	4.46 (4.37 – 4.54)	0.043
Attitudes	1.68 (1.57 – 1.79)	0.056
Beliefs	3.19 (3.09 – 3.29)	0.050

Table 3 shows the existence of an association between level of information and age group.

Table 3 – Differences between averages of subscales according to group variables, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil, 2016 (n = 240)

Variables	Information	Attitudes	Beliefs
Sex	0.763	0.649	0.990
Age group	0.003	0.144	0.584
Use in life	0.551	0.094	0.057

Table 4 shows a negative (-, 2913) and significant (p <0.0001) correlation between the Information and Attitudes subscales, indicating that the scores between the two scales are inversely proportional, so that the higher the level of information, the less favorable are the attitudes of adolescents regarding the use of alcohol and other drugs.

There was also a significant correlation (p <0.0005), positive (+, 2102) between the subscales Information and Beliefs, showing that the higher the level of information, the more positive are the beliefs regarding alcohol and other drugs.

Table 4 – Correlation between subscales Information, Attitudes, Beliefs, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil, 2016 (n = 240)

Spearman's rho	Information	Attitudes	Beliefs
Informação			
Coef.	1.000	-.2913	.2102
Sig	0.000	**0.0001**	**0.0005**
Attitudes			
Coef.	-.2913	1.000	-.0228
Sig	**0.0001**	0.000	0.9959
Beliefs			
Coef.	.2102	-.0228	1.000
Sig	**0.0005**	0.9959	0.000

Discussion

The results of this study on the prevalence of drug use do not differ from the literature, the prevalence of alcohol use, followed by the use of illicit substances and tobacco [2]. Because it is an licit substance and widely used in recreational moments, alcohol has a higher prevalence of use, such a fact is worrisome when added to the fact that illicit substances are used by schoolchildren, which requires thoroughly planned inter-sectoral actions for the awareness of the personal, family and social repercussions of these substances[3].

The objective of the study was to know the level of information, attitudes and beliefs regarding drugs and from the results it is pointed out that the information offered to the students should be carefully treated, so as not to arouse curiosity about the consumption, because to consider that curiosity is a characteristic of adolescence [8].

The study points out that when the information is obtained through the school, this is considered less relevant and is still characterized as vague or incomplete, which was verified in that study when no interviewed student was able to respond or to remember the information that they obtained in the school about the theme alcohol and other drugs[8].

The level of information on the subject among the students was satisfactory and was demonstrated in this study. The information is something dynamic, easily diffused and, for the most part, freely accessible.

When you think about health and the topic of alcohol and other drugs, the question is the quality and the source of information that is spread and understood by schoolchildren in a technological world where information is quickly absorbed and discarded at the same speed. It is a matter of thinking about the power of information in changing attitudes and adopting healthy lifestyles regarding the theme [8,11].

The experimentation preceded by the information obtained in the family was considered the second largest source of information[8], this fact deserves attention in the planning of prevention actions aimed at this age group in the school context that include the family, because in this way, school adolescents can be prepared to handle the adversities of adult life[11].

Perceptions of non-permissive attitudes towards use and a tendency toward positive beliefs were noted. Beliefs are related to the idea of values, to what the individual defines as right or wrong and are obtained through previous experiences with users of alcohol and other drugs [12-14].

Through the level of information, attitudes and beliefs, one can know the perception and feelings of the adolescents about the use of substances. The level of information increases, as the age increases, result set out in Table 3, which shows a significant difference in the level of information between the analyzed age groups. The literature indicates that groups and friends can influence the use of alcohol and other drugs, which may be related to age, since, due to immaturity, younger schoolchildren can be influenced [12-14].

Due to lower levels of information, schoolchildren with a younger age become vulnerable to the influence of groups and may have the consequence of using alcohol and other drugs, the reason for this is based on the sense of belonging to the group, an important factor in school life [14]. This data reveals an important focus of intervention to work with protective factors, among them, information influencing family attitudes and support.

The importance of the role of information was perceived through the existence of a negative correlation between information and attitudes. The higher the level of information, the less permissive are the attitudes of adolescents, however, it must be taken into account that the information also comes from negative experiences such as drug use, living with relatives, friends or neighbors who use them[12-14].

The potential of access to information in a positive way that is reflected in non-permissive attitudes towards use is pointed out, this data signals to public policies for the area in which prevention, through the diffusion of knowledge, is still the best action in the promotion of the school adolescent's health and of the school, a privileged

space for the development of these actions regarding the clinical side of the chemical dependence [4-5].

A study on the role of information as a protective factor revealed that among a group of non-drug users, information was the main reason for not using, in contrast, among a group of adolescent users, lack of information or the existence of vague knowledge were the main reasons that led them to use, corroborating the idea that information is a protective factor for drug use and an effective action for the prevention of chemical dependence [8].

Negative beliefs are often associated with stigmas which, in turn, when associated with ignorance, are triggers of prejudice [16]. The fact that this sample shows a slight tendency towards positive beliefs and a discreet positive correlation between information level and beliefs (Spearman's rho +, 2102 / sig p <0.0005) shows, even if incipient, the influence that the level of information about the beliefs about the use of alcohol and other drugs, which can act in the reduction of stigmas on users [16].

The use of drugs among schoolchildren can cause impairments in the development of children and adolescents, and may extend throughout life, hence the need to know the level of information, their beliefs and attitudes about the subject among schoolchildren regardless of age. With this information in mind, schools and public administration managers can plan and develop assertive actions to promote health and prevent drug use in these places, enhancing resources, optimizing investments and making actions more efficient and effective in preventing use of psychoactive substances.

Conclusion

The study allowed for the recognition of satisfactory levels of information about alcohol and other drugs, non-permissive attitudes and slightly positive beliefs regarding the use and abuse of these substances. It was also noticed that the level of information influences non-permissive attitudes and positive beliefs, revealing that the training of schoolchildren on the subject is an important strategy for intervention in schools, however, inter-sectorial approaches involving health and education should be used, because in this way, one can reduce the stigma that associates the issue with marginalization.

This study does not allow for generalizations, but points out the need to carry out researches to be developed in different contexts, in order to corroborate their findings. It collaborates on the state of the art on substance use among school adolescents and enables research scenarios and their managers to elaborate and develop substance use prevention actions based on a situational diagnosis regarding information, beliefs and attitudes of students on the subject.

The public policies for the area should be elaborated from scientific evidence that can potentiate and invest resources in a rational way, therefore, new studies, especially of a longitudinal type, are suggested that evaluate the results of interventions performed with schoolchildren, since innovative strategies with results should be disseminated among professionals.

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