

# SHAPE Briefing



## Talking the talk: Are Hennepin County parents talking to their children about risky behaviors?

Number 10

Trends and insights from SHAPE, the Survey of the Health of All the Population and the Environment

### Highlights

- Among adolescents aged 12 to 17, more than 94 percent have ever had their parents talk to them about using *tobacco, alcohol or illegal drugs*.
- More than two out of three children aged 6 to 17 had *three or more* conversations with their parents about *tobacco use*, and about *being cruel or mean to others* over the past 12 months.
- Southeast Asian children and Black or African American children with African-born parents were significantly less likely to have ever discussed *tobacco or alcohol use* with their parents than all other groups of Hennepin County children.

### Upcoming Issues

- ◆ Child weight status
- ◆ Adult weight status
- ◆ Family Connectedness

### Introduction

This *Briefing* provides key findings on the likelihood that parents in Hennepin County have ever had conversations with their children about potentially risky behaviors such as smoking, using drugs, drinking alcohol and other preventable sources of risk. These data are drawn from the **SHAPE 2006 – Child Survey** which collected information on the health of Hennepin County children and key factors that affect their health. More than 4,000 households with children aged 0 to 17 participated in the **SHAPE 2006 – Child Survey**. An overview of the questionnaire and the data collection strategy for the **SHAPE 2006 – Child Survey** are available on our website at: [www.hennepin.us/SHAPE](http://www.hennepin.us/SHAPE).

### Tackling the tough topics

The **SHAPE 2006 – Child Survey** asked a series of questions about whether parents<sup>1</sup> have engaged their children in conversations about six specific health risk behaviors. These topics were included in the survey because of the magnitude of the potential health risks associated with these activities, and because there are significant public health intervention strategies associated with preventing youth from engaging in these activities. Many of the strategies are based on parental involvement in presenting information to children, and in having parents establish norms and expectations for healthy behavior. Overall percentages of Hennepin County children who were ever talked to by their parents (or other adults in the household) about these behaviors are presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Percentage of Hennepin County children whose parents reported that they had ever talked with them about each of six risky behaviors, 2006**

SHAPE 2006 – Child Survey results	
Tobacco use	91.4% of children aged 6 to 17
Alcohol use	85.9% of children aged 6 to 17
Drug use	79.5% of children aged 6 to 17
Being cruel or mean to others	90.1% of children aged 6 to 17
Being in a gang	42.1% of children aged 6 to 17
Sexual activities	84.3% of children aged 10 to 17

## When are parents most likely to begin having conversations about risky behaviors?

Findings from the *SHAPE 2006 – Child Survey* suggest that the child’s current age plays an important role in whether the parent has ever talked to them about risky behaviors. Older children, both because of their higher levels of emotional development and because they have more years in which they may have had these discussions with their parents, are more likely to have ever been talked to about these activities.<sup>2</sup> As shown in Figure 2, most parents of the younger children (those aged 6 to 11) reported that they had ever talked to their child about *being mean or cruel to others* (92.7 percent of the children). However, relatively smaller percentages of children aged 6 to 11 have ever engaged in discussions about *drug use* or *being in gangs*.

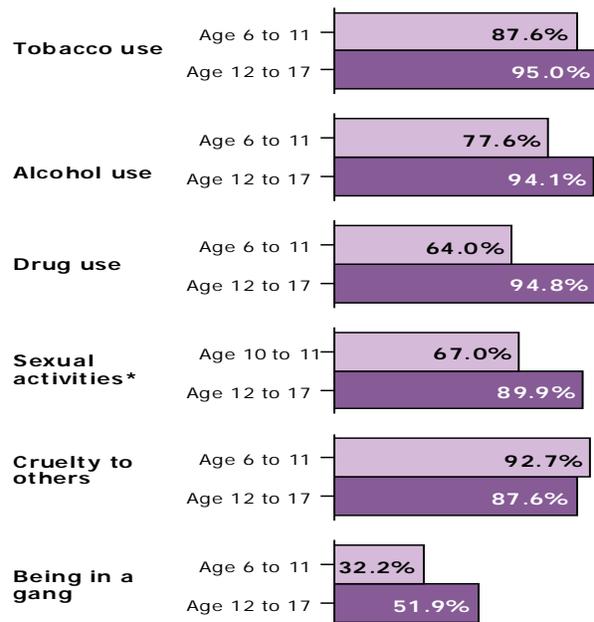
For Hennepin County adolescents aged 12 to 17, the survey data indicate a high likelihood of ever having had conversations with their parents about using *tobacco*, *alcohol* or *illegal drugs*; more than 94 percent of adolescents have ever had conversations with their parents on these topics. Yet, relative to the other topics, significantly<sup>3</sup> lower percentages of children in either of the two age groups have ever had their parents talk to them about the dangers associated with *being in a gang*.

For comparison, the median age (50th percentile) for having been talked to by a parent was calculated for each risky behavior. The median is an estimate of the age by which half of the children would have had their parents talk to them about these topics. Lower median ages indicate that children are more likely to be younger when their parents engage them in these conversations. The median ages range from age 10 years, 9 months old for *being mean or cruel*, to age 13 years, 6 months old for *sexual activities*.

## How often have parents had risk-prevention conversations with their children in the past 12 months?

As shown in Figure 4, more than two out of three Hennepin County children aged 6 to 17 had *three or more conversations* with their parents about *smoking or tobacco use*, and

Figure 2. Percentage of Hennepin County children whose parents reported that they had ever talked with them about each of six risky behaviors by age group, 2006



\* The item on sexual activities was limited to children aged 10 and over.  
Source: SHAPE 2006

Figure 3. Median ages of Hennepin County children whose parents reported that they had ever talked with them about each of six risky behaviors, 2006

SHAPE 2006 – Child Survey results	
Being cruel or mean to others	Age 10 years, 9 months median for children aged 6 to 17
Tobacco use	Age 11 years, 3 months median for children aged 6 to 17
Alcohol use	Age 11 years, 7 months median for children aged 6 to 17
Drug use	Age 12 years, 1 month median for children aged 6 to 17
Being in a gang	Age 12 years, 1 month median for children aged 6 to 17
Sexual activities	Age 13 years, 6 months median for children 10 to 17

about *being mean or cruel to others* over the past 12 months. More than two out of three adolescents aged 12 to 17 also had *three or more conversations* about *alcohol use* or about *drug use* with their parents in the past 12 months. The topic of *sexual activities or sexually transmitted diseases* was addressed on *three or more occasions in the past 12 months* with 36.1 percent of children aged 10 to 11, and with 59.1 percent of adolescents aged 12 to 17.

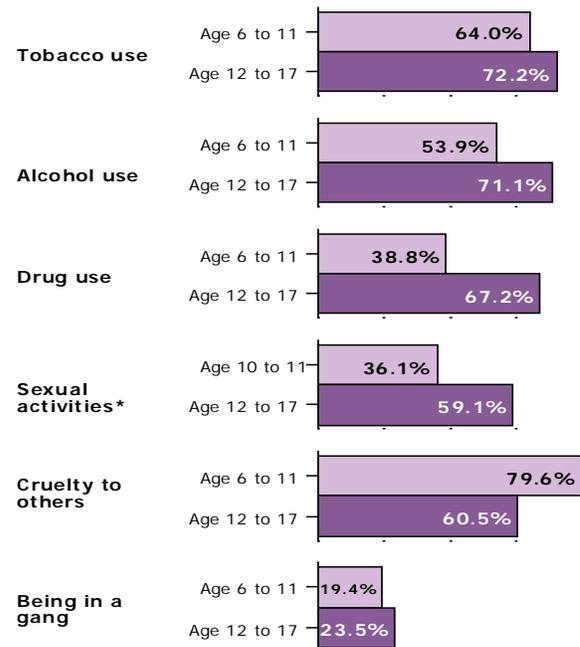
## Are some parents more likely than others to have talked about risky behaviors with their children?

Parental decisions about *when* or *if* to engage their children in conversations about risky behaviors are set into a complex social and cultural context. Parents may rely on their own past experiences, their current assessments of their child's level of understanding, the perceived immediacy of the risks to their child, and other significant cultural norms or values present in their communities to determine what is appropriate for their children. These underlying factors affecting parents' decisions about when or if to talk to their children about risky behaviors were found among families in Hennepin County.

Findings from the *SHAPE 2006 – Child Survey* suggest that children from various race and ethnic groups are not statistically different when it comes to whether their parents have ever talked to them about *using illegal drugs* or *cruelty to others*. However, on the topics of *tobacco use*, *alcohol use*, *being in a gang* and *sexual activities*, statistically significant differences in the likelihood that parents had ever talked to their children about these issues were detected for various race and ethnic groups.

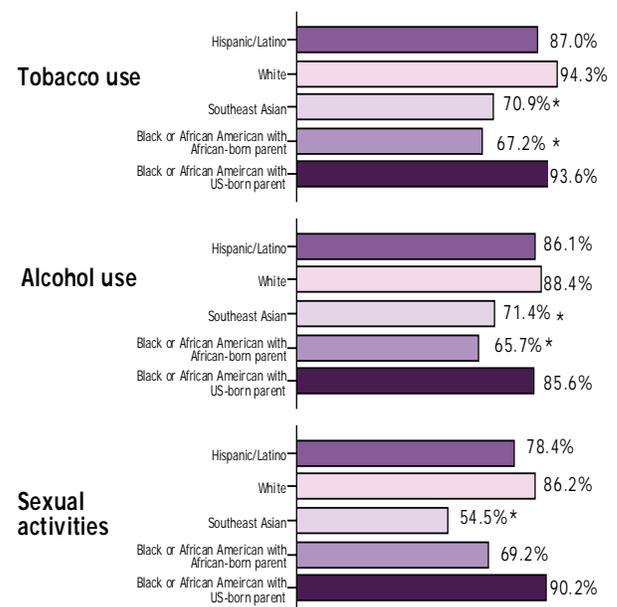
As shown in Figure 5, both Southeast Asian children and Black or African American children with African-born parents were significantly less likely than all other groups to have ever discussed *tobacco use* and *alcohol use* with their parents. Furthermore, Southeast Asian children were significantly less likely to have discussed *sexual activities* with their parents than all other groups. Additionally, although not displayed in the figure, among White children, the likelihood that their parents have ever had conversations with them about *being in a gang* is significantly lower, statistically, than all the other groups (31.1 percent for White children, compared with 69.0 to 78.0 for other groups).

**Figure 4. Percentage of Hennepin County children whose parents reported that they had talked with them on 3 or more occasions in the past 12 months, by age group, 2006**



\* The item on sexual activities was limited to children aged 10 and over.  
Source: SHAPE 2006

**Figure 5. Percentage of Hennepin County children whose parents reported that they had ever talked with them about each of three risky behaviors by race/ethnic group, 2006**



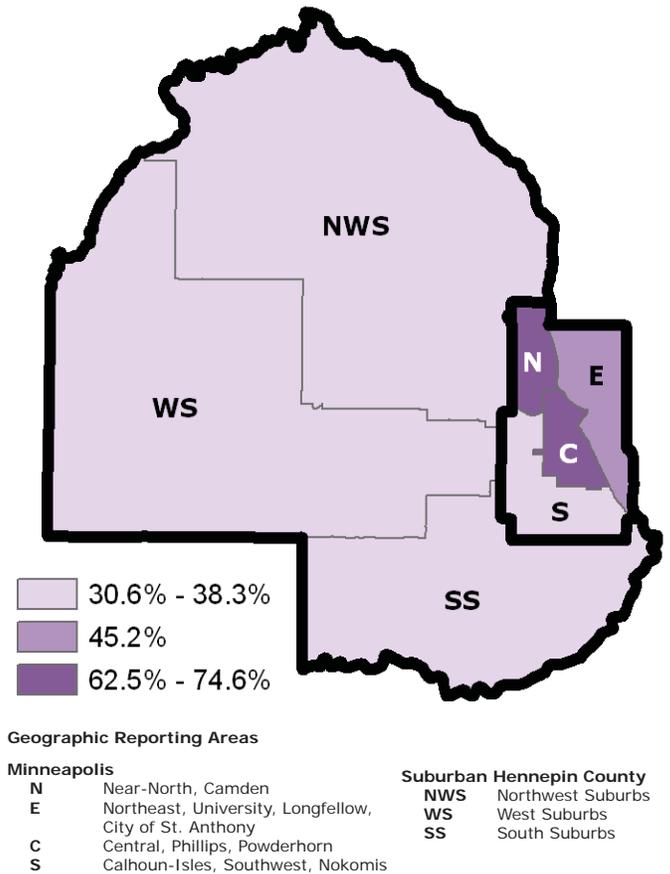
\* Statistically significant differences were detected among the starred and unstarred groups for this item at  $p < 0.05$  level.  
Source: SHAPE 2006

## Do parents in Hennepin County respond differently to discussing these topics based on place of residence?

As indicated previously in this Briefing, the issue of *being in a gang* received relatively low “coverage” from parents across Hennepin County, and among White children, the likelihood that parents ever had conversations about this topic with them is statistically significantly lower than all other groups (31.1 percent). In contrast to the other specific risk behaviors (which do not show statistically significant variations by place of residence), the issue of *being in a gang* is more likely to ever have been discussed by urban families than by suburban families. Overall, the findings show that children aged 6 to 17 who currently live in Minneapolis were significantly more likely to ever have been talked to by their parents about *being in a gang* than those of the same age who are currently living in suburban Hennepin County (61.7 percent and 38.0 percent respectively).

Figure 6 provides a further breakdown by geographic location for children whose parents have ever talked to them about *being in a gang*. Within the City of Minneapolis, children living in the Camden and Near North neighborhoods (N) and the Central, Phillips and Powderhorn neighborhoods (C) were most likely than children from other locations to have ever had conversations about gangs with their parents (74.6 percent and 62.5 percent respectively).

Figure 6. Percentage of Hennepin County children whose parents reported that they had ever talked with them about being in a gang, by geographic location, 2006



## Acknowledgments

The *SHAPE* project would like to thank the many individuals, community organizations, and subject-area experts who provided advice and support for the development of *SHAPE 2006*. A partial list of those who provided assistance to the *SHAPE 2006* project can be found on the *SHAPE* web site listed below. The *SHAPE* project would especially like to thank the more than 10,000 residents of Hennepin County who generously took the time to complete the *SHAPE* survey.

## For More Information

*SHAPE 2006* is a collaborative project between the Hennepin County Human Services and Public Health Department and the University of Minnesota School of Public Health.

For more information on this *Briefing* or other topics related to the *SHAPE* project, or to receive this information in an alternate format, please contact [SHAPE@co.hennepin.mn.us](mailto:SHAPE@co.hennepin.mn.us) or 612-348-6150.

[www.hennepin.us/SHAPE](http://www.hennepin.us/SHAPE)

## Notes:

1. Here and throughout, “parent” has been used as a generic term for the adult in the household most knowledgeable about the child’s health. In most cases this term is referring to the child’s biological, adoptive or step parents, although in a small number of cases, the survey was answered by another adult/guardian in the household.
2. The data collected in the *SHAPE 2006 – Child Survey* are from many different children taken at a single “point in time” rather than a cumulative series of repeated measures on the same set of children “over time.”
3. Here and throughout, statistically significant differences were identified at  $p < 0.05$ .
4. For an example of the impact of risk-prevention messages to children and adolescents, please see: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, “Sexual Risk and Protective Factors Factors Affecting Teen Sexual Behavior, Pregnancy, Childbearing And Sexually Transmitted Disease: Which Are Important? Which Can You Change?” (2005).



Human Services and Public Health Department