Search Institute

Teacher Connection and Support Predicted Less Substance Use and More Positive Coping Strategies During the COVID Pandemic

Although some declines have been seen over the last 20 years, substance use continues to be a problem affecting millions of American youth, with some newer forms of using, such as vaping marijuana or nicotine, rapidly rising in frequency up to 2020.

The outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic that hit the U.S. in early 2020 had profound effects on use. The annual 2021 Monitoring the Future report (www.monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/monographs/mtf-overview2021.pdf) noted that there was an "extraordinary" and "atypical" decline in most drug use among youth in 2021, due to the pandemic keeping most students more at home, restricting interaction with friends, and in general dramatically decreasing the availability of and access to alcohol and other drugs. Nevertheless, prevalence rates remain unacceptably high for many types of drug use, underscoring the continuing need for ways to prevent and reduce substance use among America's youth.

In this Fact Sheet, we look at the results of a study of alcohol and other drug use that Search Institute conducted during the course of the pandemic, from March 2021 to June 2022, including the period of the Delta variant surge in 2021. In particular, we looked at the impact that connection and support from teachers during the pandemic had on youth-reported substance use in the last 30 days, perceptions of parent and peer disapproval of substance use (shown to be linked to less use), students' perceptions of risk from using various substances (shown to be linked to less use), and their use of positive coping strategies during the pandemic.

Who Was Surveyed?

A total of 7,612 youth between grades 4 and 12 (58% high school) from 22 communities participated in the ATOD study between March 2021 and June 2022, as part of a larger study. The data from the larger study were independently collected in schools and OST organizations across the United States by organizations and community coalitions. Search Institute provided guidance in the form of a User Guide and some technical assistance. Data were collected through an online survey platform. The ATOD data were collected only in schools because the OST organizations in the larger study chose not to administer the ATOD module.

The average age of students was 14.58 years and the average grade was grade 9. The sample included 6% African American/Black students, 5% Asian, 12% Multiracial, <1% Native Americans, 3% Other, and 51% White students, with 3% of students not providing race information. A total of 22% of the sample identified as Hispanic/Latina/o ethnicity.

In addition, 14% identified as LGBTQ in their sexual orientation, with 49% identifying as male, 48% female, and 3% other. 15% of the students were English Language Learners, and 12% had an Individual Education Plan. The sample was skewed toward more affluent and educated families, with just 3% each experiencing food or shelter insecurity, 27% reporting high or moderate financial strain, and 73% reporting their parents had graduated from college.

> The average age of students was 14.58 years and the average grade was grade 9.

14% Identified as **LGBTQ**

49% Identified as **MALE**

48% Identified as **FEMALE**

3% Identified as **OTHER**

Findings

FINDING 1: There was not much <u>recent</u> substance use in this large and diverse sample.

Our sample reported slightly higher rates of last-30 days alcohol use than the nationally-representative Monitoring the Future 2021 study (14% of our 6th-12th grade students vs. 13% for 10th graders in MTF), but lower rates of marijuana use (5% in the last 30 days vs. 11% for grades 8, 10, and 12 combined in MTF) and vaping (7% in the last 30 days vs. 15% for 10th graders in MTF). Annual and lifetime use percentages, of course, would have been considerably higher than use in the last 30 days, but only the 30-day use measure was included in this study.

FIGURE 1: Substance Use, Last 30 Days

Substance	Percent
Alcohol	14%
Vaping	7%
Marijuana	5%
Prescription Drugs	2%
Cigarettes	1%
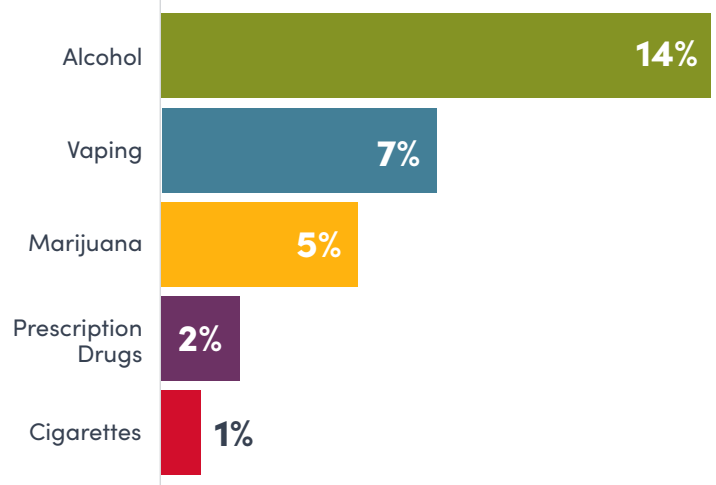
FINDING 2: Students say parents are far more likely than friends to think substance use is "very wrong."

FIGURE 2: Students Say Parents Are Far More Likely Than Friends to Think Substance Use is "Very Wrong"

58%   84%
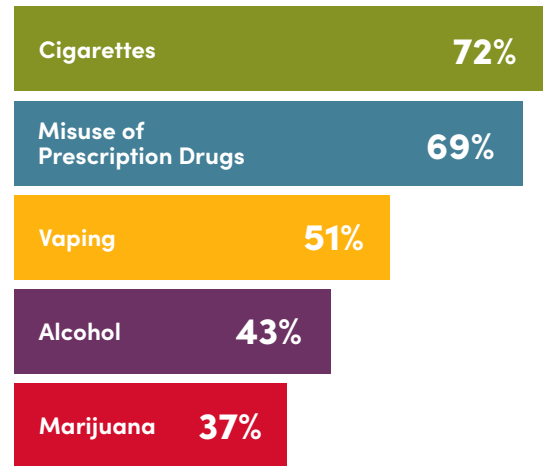
■ Parents   ■ Friends

(Average percent across substances: Alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, vaping, misuse of prescription drugs)

FIGURE 3: Percent of Students Saying Use of Substance is a "Great Risk"

- Cigarettes **72%**
- Misuse of Prescription Drugs **69%**
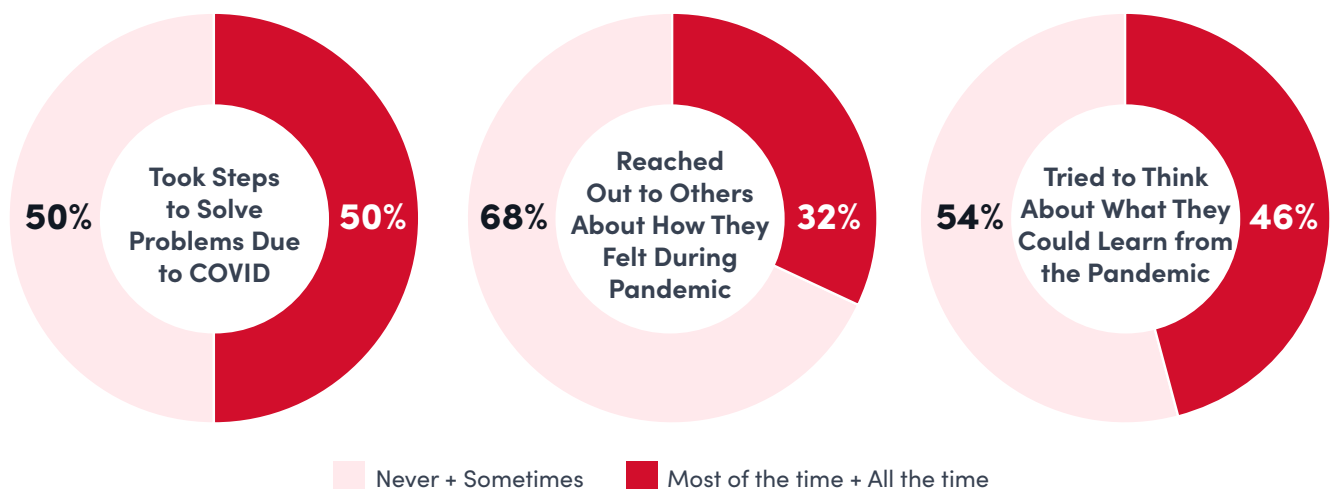- Vaping **51%**
- Alcohol **43%**
- Marijuana **37%**

FINDING 3: Students are split by substances on thinking they pose "great risk," with marijuana seen as the least risky and cigarettes the most risky.

FINDING 4: Nearly 70% of students felt somewhat to very stressed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

FINDING 5: A majority of students did not take positive steps to deal with COVID-related stress and problems.

FIGURE 4: Percent of Students Experiencing COVID-Related Stress

- 35%
- 34%
- 22%
- 10%

- Very stressed
- Somewhat stressed
- A little stressed
- Not at all stressed

FIGURES 5a, 5b, 5c: A Majority of Students Did Not Take Positive Steps to Deal with COVID-Related Stress and Problems

- Took Steps to Solve Problems Due to COVID — 50% / 50%
- Reached Out to Others About How They Felt During Pandemic — 68% / 32%
- Tried to Think About What They Could Learn from the Pandemic — 54% / 46%

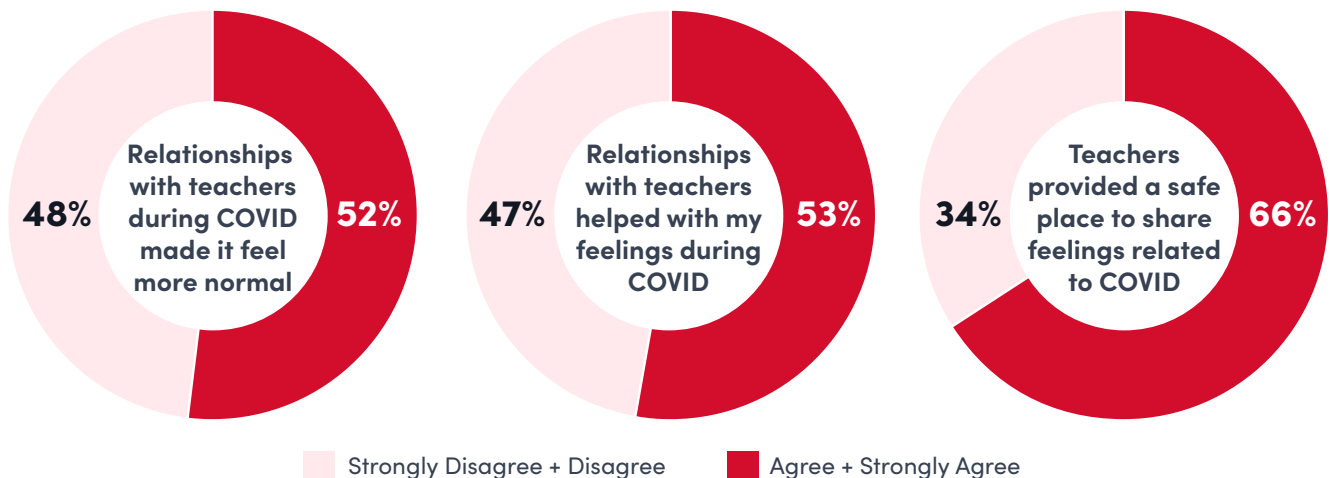- Never + Sometimes
- Most of the time + All the time

FINDING 6: More than 4 in 10 students did <u>not</u> feel connected to their teachers during the pandemic.

FIGURE 6: Percent of Students Feeling Connected to their Teachers During the Pandemic

Felt Connected— Strongly Disagree + Disagree	**42%**
Agree + Strongly Agree	**58%**

FINDING 7: One-third to one-half of students did <u>not</u> feel social-emotional support from teachers during the pandemic.

FIGURE 7a, 7b, 7c: Percent of Students Feeling Supported by their Teachers During the Pandemic

48% / **52%** — Relationships with teachers during COVID made it feel more normal

47% / **53%** — Relationships with teachers helped with my feelings during COVID

34% / **66%** — Teachers provided a safe place to share feelings related to COVID

Strongly Disagree + Disagree   Agree + Strongly Agree

Links among COVID Stress, Teacher Connection and Support, Use of Substances, and Positive Coping

We had three major research questions in this study: 1) Did greater COVID stress predict more use, less perception of disapproval of use and perception of risk from substance use?; 2) Did greater teacher connection and support predict less use, and more perception of disapproval and risk?; and 3) Did greater teacher connection and social-emotional support predict more positive actions to solve issues related to COVID?

All the following findings (derived from logistic regressions that yielded Odds Ratios) were significant at p ≤.05. Although significant, most findings reflected statistically small-sized effects. But in practical terms, these small but significant effects can be quite powerful.

For example, those with high levels of teacher connection were 32% less likely to report using alcohol in the last 30 days. By comparison, if an annual college tuition of $25,000 were reduced by 32%, tuition would only be $17,000, a savings of $8,000 per year or $32,000 over 4 years, which would be quite meaningful to the great majority of families in the U.S.

Question 1: Did greater COVID stress predict more use, less perception of disapproval and less perception of risk from using?

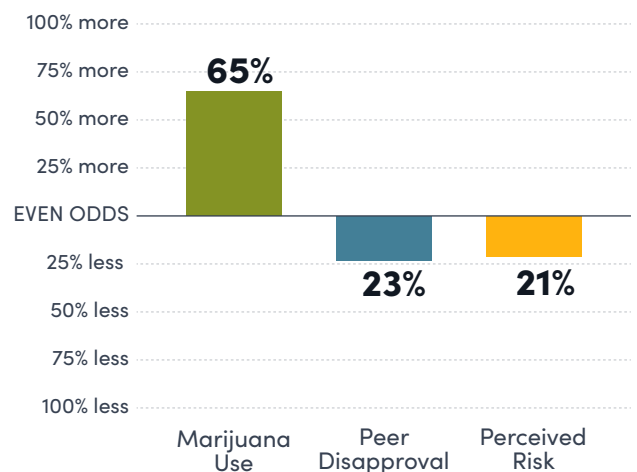
FINDING 8: COVID stress only predicted use, disapproval, and perceived risk for marijuana, not for the other four substances.

Odds ratios showed that COVID stress predicted 65% more marijuana use in the last 30 days, 23% less peer disapproval of marijuana use, and 21% less perceived risk from using marijuana.

FIGURE 8: Greater COVID Stress Predicted Less Disapproval and Risk for Marijuana Use, and More Use

NOTES:
- COVID stress was considered high if students said they were "very" or "somewhat" stressed because of COVID.
- Disapproval was the odds of parents or peers saying use was "very wrong."
- Perceived risk was the odds of students saying use of a substance posed a "great risk."
- Substance use was student-reported use in the "last 30 days."

FINDING 9: Generally, yes. Teacher connection was somewhat more predictive than teacher support but both predicted significantly less substance use and more disapproval of use and perception of risk from use, across substances.

Substance Use

Odds ratios showed that those with high levels of teacher connection were 32% less likely to use alcohol, 39% less likely to use marijuana, and 52% less likely to vape. Similarly, those with high levels of teacher support were 25% less likely to use alcohol, 44% less likely to use marijuana, and 53% less likely to vape.

FIGURE 9a: High Teacher Connection Predicted Less Substance Use
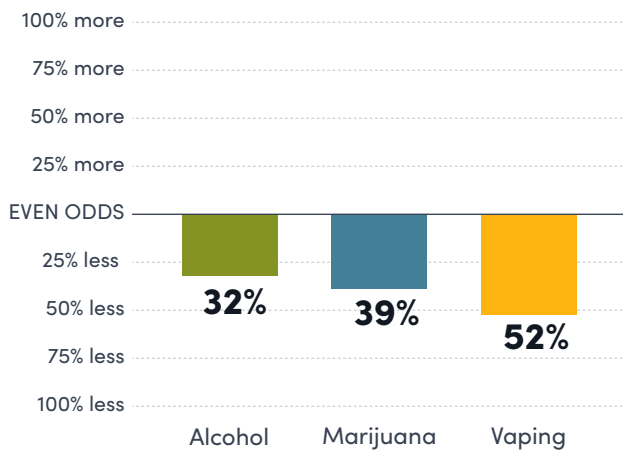
NOTES:

- Teacher connection was considered high if students responded "agree" or "strongly agree" that they felt connected to their teachers.

- Teacher support is not displayed for space reasons but had very similar results to teacher connection. Teacher support was high if students responded "agree" or "strongly agree" to three questions about relationships with teachers helping them feel more normal during the pandemic, helping with their feelings during the pandemic, and teachers providing a safe place to share feelings related to COVID.

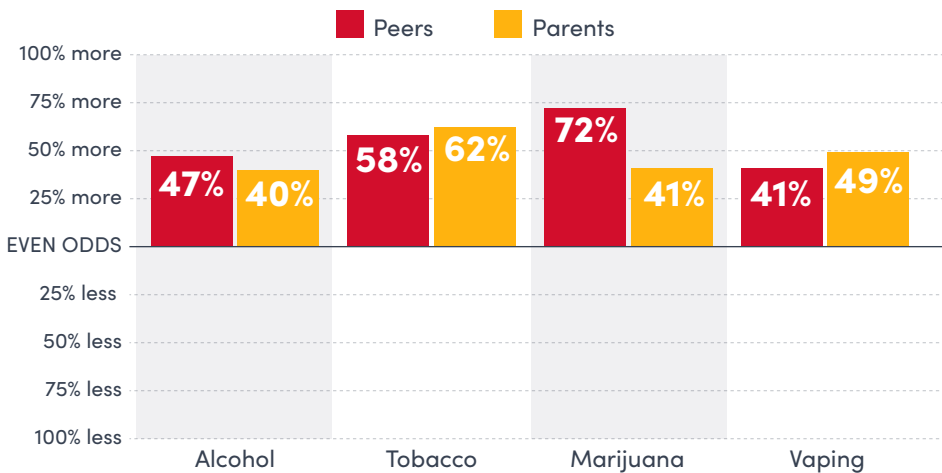- Substance use was student-reported use in the "last 30 days."

Parent and Peer Disapproval of Substance Use

Odds ratios showed that those with high levels of teacher connection were 40% more likely to say parents thought alcohol use was very wrong, 62% more likely to say parents thought tobacco use was very wrong, 41% more likely to say parents thought marijuana use was very wrong, and 49% more likely to say parents thought vaping was very wrong. Similarly, those with high levels of teacher support were 34% and 35% more likely to say parents considered it very wrong to use alcohol and marijuana, respectively.

Odds ratios showed that those with high levels of teacher connection were 47% more likely to say peers disapproved of alcohol use, 58% more likely to say they disapproved of tobacco use, 72% more likely to say peers disapproved of marijuana use, 41% more likely to say peers disapproved of misuse of prescription drugs, and 41% more likely to say peers disapproved of vaping. Likewise, high levels of teacher support predicted students being 25% more likely to say peers disapproved of alcohol use, 30% more likely to say peers disapproved of tobacco use, 42% more likely to say peers disapproved of marijuana use, and 28% more likely to say that peers disapproved of vaping.

FIGURE 9b: High Teacher Connection Predicted Greater Parent and Peer Disapproval of Substance Use

NOTES:

- Teacher connection was considered high if students responded "agree" or "strongly agree" that they felt connected to their teachers.

- Disapproval was the odds of parents or peers saying use was "very wrong."

Those with high levels of teacher connection were 72% more likely to say peers disapproved of marijuana use.
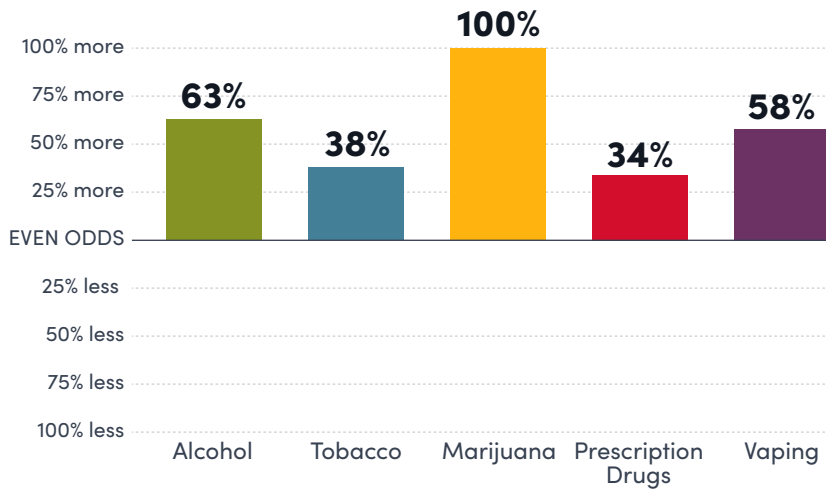
Perceived Risk of Substance Use

Odds ratios showed that those with high teacher connection were 63% more likely to perceive great risk in alcohol use, 38% more likely to perceive great risk in tobacco use, 100% more likely to perceive great risk from marijuana use, 34% more likely to perceive great risk from misuse of prescriptions drugs, and 58% more likely to perceive great risk from vaping. Similarly, those with high levels of teacher support were 43% more likely to perceive great risk from alcohol use, 83% more likely to perceive great risk from using marijuana, and 39% more likely to perceive great risk from vaping.

FIGURE Figure 9c: High Teacher Connection Predicted Greater Perceived Risk in Using Substances

63%	38%	100%	34%	58%
Alcohol	Tobacco	Marijuana	Prescription Drugs	Vaping

Y-axis: 100% more, 75% more, 50% more, 25% more, EVEN ODDS, 25% less, 50% less, 75% less, 100% less

NOTES:

- Teacher connection was considered high if students responded "agree" or "strongly agree" that they felt connected to their teachers.
- Teacher support was considered high if students responded "agree" or "strongly agree" to 3 questions asking how much relationships with teachers helped things feel more normal, and provided a safe place for sharting feelings about the pandemic.
- Perceived risk was the odds of students saying use of a substance posed a "great risk."

Those with high teacher connection were 100% more likely to perceive great risk from marijuana use.

FINDING 10: Yes, teacher connection and support predicted students using more positive coping strategies during the pandemic.

Odds ratios showed that those with high levels of teacher connection and teacher support were 121% and 177% more likely, respectively, to use positive coping strategies to deal with COVID-related problems and challenges. Positive coping strategies included taking steps to solve COVID-related problems, reaching out to others about their feelings about the pandemic, and trying to think of what they could learn from the pandemic.

FIGURE 10: High Teacher Connection and Teacher Support Predicted More Positive Coping Strategies
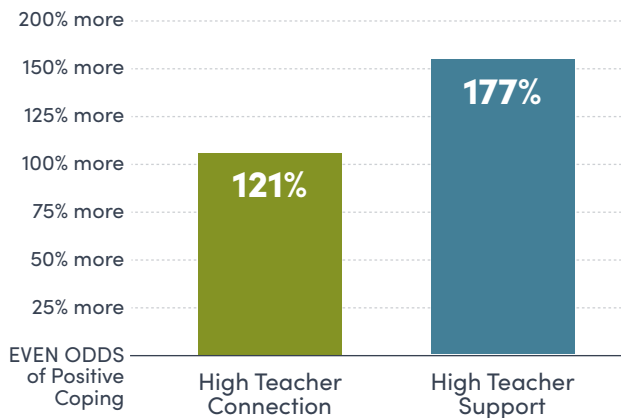
NOTES:

- Teacher connection was considered high if students responded "agree" or "strongly agree" that they felt connected to their teachers.

- Students had positive coping strategies if they responded that they "most of the time" or "all the time" took steps to solve COVID-related problems, reached out to others about their feelings about the pandemic, and tried to think of what they could learn from the pandemic.

Key Takeaway from This Study:

Relational connection and social-emotional support from teachers during the COVID pandemic was significantly and meaningfully related to students 1) perceiving more disapproval from parents and friends about using substances, 2) perceiving greater risk from using substances, and 3) using substances less.

Students with high levels of teacher connection and social-emotional support also were significantly more likely to use positive coping strategies for dealing with COVID-related stress.