

Does leading a meaningful and purposeful life protect adolescents from engaging in vaping? insights from a latent class growth analysis conducted in an adolescent cohort in Canada

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Introduction: Experiences that foster meaning and purpose in life are known to be protective to health. During adolescence, such experiences may represent an “intangible asset” that help young people to flourish. One mechanism that leads to better states of health is a reduction in overt risk-taking behaviours. We examined how perceptions of leading a purposeful and meaningful life evolve over time during adolescence, and how such changes are related to engagement in vaping, a contemporary form of substance use, and one focused indicator of overt risk-taking.

Methods: The study employed a longitudinal design and person-centred approach using three cycles (2021-2023; n=9,151) of Canadian secondary school students’ survey data from the COMPASS study. Latent class growth analysis was employed to identify growth patterns in meaning and purpose, and logistic regression was employed to relate such patterns to adolescent vaping behaviour, stratified by gender.

Results: Four growth patterns of meaning and purpose were identified: “emergent” (20.8% prevalence), “steady high” (63.9%), “steady low” (6.4%), and “declining” (8.8%). Compared to the “steady low” pattern, only the “steady high” group showed a significant protective association with vaping in both cisgender females (OR = 0.59, CI: 0.45–0.78) and males (OR = 0.63, CI: 0.41–0.99). Among control variables, parental support was protective against vaping for both females (OR = 0.86, CI: 0.80–0.92) and males (OR = 0.80, CI: 0.74–0.88). Conversely, older age, friend social support, and depressive symptoms were associated with an increased likelihood of vaping.

Conclusion: Most adolescents had favourable perceptions of meaning and purpose in their lives; however, over one-third had lower levels at some point across the three years of study. Maintaining a meaningful and purposeful life appears to be a protective health asset for this illustrative form of substance use. Fostering opportunities to experience meaning and purpose among adolescent populations may prove a valuable and novel strategy for substance use prevention.

Keywords: Adolescence, Latent class growth analysis, purpose and meaning, substance use, Vaping

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Biography

Francis Acquah is a dedicated child psychologist based in Canada, specializing in the emotional and behavioral development of children and adolescents. With a strong background in clinical psychology and developmental science, he works closely with families, schools, and healthcare providers to support youth facing challenges such as anxiety, trauma, learning disabilities, and behavioral disorders. Francis earned his master's degree in child psychology and has contributed to several community mental health initiatives focused on early intervention and culturally responsive care. His approach blends evidence-based therapies, including cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and play therapy, with a compassionate, individualized focus. Passionate about advocacy, he is also involved in training programs aimed at promoting mental wellness among immigrant and minority youth. Through his work in private practice and collaborative school settings, Francis Acquah continues to make a meaningful impact on the mental health and well-being of children across diverse Canadian communities.

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