A Series of Information Resources on

Youth Subcultures:
Understanding Subgroups to Better
Address Barriers to Learning
& Improve Schools

As calls for addressing barriers to student learning and improving schools increase, better understanding of youth subculture is essential. This series is intended to stimulate thinking about the implications for policy and practice of the complex, multifaceted subgroups with which youth come to be identified and/or assigned by peers.

Public health and education policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and educators need to know as much as they can about the factors that lead youth to manifest behaviors stemming from group defined values, beliefs, attitudes, and interests. Such understanding is basic to promoting healthy development, preventing problems, intervening as soon as problems arise, and enhancing intervention impact on severe and chronic problems.

To these ends, the Center is producing a series of resources, such as this one, as aids for policy and practice analyses, research, education, and school and community improvement planning.

About "Preppies" as a Youth Culture Subgroup

Our focus here is on briefly highlighting:

(1) preppy subculture and identity

(2) the impact of this subgroup

(3) prevalent policy and practice efforts to address negative impact

(4) data on intervention efforts

(5) proposed new directions

(6) resources for more information.

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About "Preppies" as a Youth Culture Subgroup

While individual youth may adopt a negative label in referring to themselves as a defense against the sting of name calling, those who identify themselves as members of a specific youth group usually do so to stress their subcultural identity. And, the characteristics associated with the subcultural group often become benchmarks others use to gauge their status among peers. Research suggests these benchmarks are significantly but not inevitably related to feelings about self and to various forms of positive and negative functioning. And status distinctions that seem so central to the dynamics of interaction among groups in the middle school and early high school years tend to dissipate toward the end of high school (Brown, Von Bank, & Steinberg, 2007).

Our focus here is on youngsters, male and female, who are called preppies. The Preppy youth culture subgroup became popular in the l950s, through clothing style, musical groups (e.g., The Four Preps), and a surge in college aspiring youth.

During the 1960s counter cultural revolution, the subgroups' looks and values were targeted by those challenging the mainstream. However, as the hippie and disco scene faded in the l970's, preppy fashions made a come back.

Fashions aside, the Preppy subculture symbolizes an exclusive and elite subculture. The image emulated is that of students who attend exclusive east coast college preparatory schools. Although the proportion of students attending such prep schools is relatively small, the reality is that these school have generated a significant number of high status business and government leaders. Thus, those who identify as preppies are endeavoring to establish themselves as high on the social and class ladder.

To maintain their elite status, preppies tend to take steps to differentiate themselves from the "wannabes" who wear the clothes but do not come from families that have high status, money, and influence. The following guide by WikiHow for how to look preppy highlights the general public's perception of preppies and also suggests there are many wannabes:

> Get the attitude. An important quality of a prep is their ability to be happy, bubbly, and very social. Act friendly and outgoing ... a little shy is OK, but be nice. Smile. Stand up straight. Being snobby shows poor breeding. Play sports.
> Get your clothes from a traditional upper class store. Buy preppy style clothes: polo shirts, oxford shirts, rugby shirt, cable-knit vests, blazer, chino pants, khaki pants, bermuda shorts, skirts (madras plaid, seersucker, linen, preppy prints and patterns), tea dresses, tennis and golf shirts, skirts and dresses. Pearl necklaces, small handbags, headbands, ballet flats, top siders.
> Stay fresh and clean: shower, shave, Girls: keep makeup light, clear nail polish, shoulder length hair.
> Warning: If you make these changes all at once, people may call you a fake. Better to take it one polo shirt at a time.

The elitism associated with preppies has made them the target for humorists, satirists, and antagonists. For example, the popular l980 *The Official Preppy Handbook* is described as "a tongue-in-cheek guide to "prepdom." Jonathan Roberts, who came up with the original concept for the handbook viewed it as a way of demystifying the preppy mystique. "The subversive idea behind it was if you can reveal all of the secret systems and totems by which a portion of society keeps its elite status, you kind of pull the rug out from under them" (quotes in Rich, 2010). Lisa Birnbach, one of the authors, is updating the book and retitling it *True Prep: It's a Whole New Old World* (to be released 9/7/10).

Defining the Preppy subculture and identifying subgroup members

With respect to youth culture stereotypes, various writers have cautioned that specific subcultures tend to be quite diverse and cross-culture hybrids are common (Clarke, 1997; Traber, 2008). Traber makes this point by discussing a preppy hybrid called the "punk preppy."

Here are two, almost stereotypical, ways that preppies are described:

> "Preps are clean-cut – ironed, tucked, and ordered – with clothes not meant to offend others or distinguish themselves in their natal environment. The basic uniform of khakis, button-down and polo shirts, Weejuns, ties, suits, and anything tweed is a conservative style chosen to evoke affluence, tradition, and good taste rather than flagrant self-expression" (Traber, 2008).

> "Preppy is used to refer to a particular subculture, traditionally 'popular kids,' generally consisting of the children of middle to upper class families, typically characterized as shallow, transparent, primarily concerned with extrinsic things (e.g., popularity, physical appearance, and material possessions.) ... Preppy, also spelled preppie, is a shortened version of the word preparatory. Used in relation to northeastern private university preparatory schools. Term denotes a person seen as characteristic of these schools, including a particular subcultural speech, vocabulary, accent, dress, mannerisms, and etiquette. Preps often are associated with old, East Coast, upper class 'WASP' families. The styles usually worn by preps are usually more expensive than most other styles. Brands such as L. L. Bean, Ralph Lauren, Lacoste, Lilly Pulitzer, Brooks Brothers, Vineyard Vines, and J. Crew are frequently perceived as preppy styles. An example of preppy attire is a button down Oxford cloth shirt, an argyle sweater, cuffed chinos, and boat shoes. Among the more common sports played by preps are swimming, badminton, tennis, equestrianism, skiing, fencing, shooting, tennis, golf, rowing, field hockey, sailing, croquet, squash, lacrosse, polo, rugby and cricket" (Wikipedia, nd).

The term can be used in congratulatory or condescending ways It may be humorous and to a degree derisive. It often is stated as "an antagonistic epithet for the elite, used by those who are not in the upper classes" (Gianoulis, 2002).

What is the impact of this subgroup on society and on subgroup members?

There seems to be considerable ambivalence about preppy subculture by society, other subgroups, and even within the preppy subgroup. Preppies have their admirers and their detractors. They are admired by many as popular leaders; they are disparaged by some as elitists and conformists. As Gianoulis (2002) notes, Preppy is "part fashion, part breeding, and part attitude, preppiness denotes wealth, privilege, pomposity, and dissipation. The hostility with which the epithet preppy is hurled casts doubt on the reality behind the U. S. myth of the classless society."

At school. Because preppies set high benchmarks at school, other students can suffer by comparison. Preppies generally do well academically, assume leadership roles, and contribute to many positive school activities. They often are the recipients of greater attention and prestige from school personnel and segments of the student body.

At the same time, the comparison of preppies to less elite students may affect teachers' perceptions and the self-perceptions of non-elites and play into negative self-fulfilling prophecies. Moreover, by limiting their associations to a narrow range of peers, preppies reify their established subcultural values and may contribute to social and racial tensions and conflict among peers from different backgrounds and other subgroups.

[From a 1980s observational research study of high school lunch hour dynamics] "White students separated themselves into five groups: Frats, Stoners, Surfers, Punks, and Nerds. The most numerous group was the 'Frats.' These students adopted a 'preppy' look which is a fad advocated in popular fashion magazines for teens. Frat appearance for boys includes designer clothing, such as Calvin Klein jeans, LaCoste shirts, and penny loafer shoes. Frat girls wear skirts and blouses, in contrast to the more casual attire (e.g., jeans or pants) of non-Frat girls. ... Non-Frat students view this group as 'stuck-up or snobbish.' This group is not perceived as more successful academically in school than other whites even though they appear to 'dress for success.' ...although many black and Chicano students might qualify as Frats by their dress, Blacks, Chicanos and white all sat separately. ... Middle class Black informants told us that Black and Chicano students, regardless of class, considered white Frats to be a kind of economic elite. Minority students expressed resentment that white Frats were 'special,' i.e., that they received more attention and prestige from school officials or other groups. Yet, white Frat informants did not perceive themselves in that way, although they did view themselves as belonging to a higher socio-economic class than non-white students" (Gottdiener & Malone, 1985).

It is likely at some schools the elite status of preppies elicits various forms of relational aggression from those who react to the preppies special status, lifestyle, and group cohesion.

Mental health concerns. The popular image of a preppy suggests youth for whom success is preordained and a group with relatively few problems. It is, however, unclear to what degree those in the preppy subculture may experience common psychosocial and mental health problems. In reviewing the literature on adolescent peer group identification and characteristics, Sussman, Pokhrel, Ashmore, and Brown (2007) grouped preppies with other elites (e.g., populars, socials, hot shots). The findings they summarize suggest that elites may be involved in significant alcohol use and sexual activity. However, it is unclear whether these are problem behaviors in the preppy subculture since the behaviors are commonly associated with social events and interactions such party going.

Fashion. With respect to the clothing and fashion, preppies are a major market. At the same time, the fashions also generate concerns about promoting elitism. As Reddy (2008) notes:

"Ralph Lauren has built an empire by becoming the unofficial outfitter of the American Dream, marketing an idealized image of America's former ruling class to the nation at large. However, the WASP aesthetic he sells – think of characters from 'The Great Gatsby,' clothed in tennis whites and delicate tea dresses – has come to represent a classist and racist set of ideals, ... The Polo brand is built upon an aesthetic intended to communicate to the world, the wearer's successful assimilation into the traditional institutions of upwardly mobile American culture – the elitist world of typically WASP only country clubs, prep schools and cotillions."

According to Carpenter (2007), however, the preppy look is no longer a serious indicator of subgroups status. "Long the exclusive uniform of the WASP establishment, preppy fashion spoke a certain coded language understood only by fellow preppies." And she quotes fashion expert Susan Rolontz as saying: "preppy has gone democratic, with a small 'd,' taking on new adherents across cultures." (Also see Wallace, 2005.)

Fashion Retail Meets Civil Rights. In 2003, a federal class-action race and sex discrimination lawsuit was filed against Abercrombie & Fitch, a trendy retailer of preppy fashion. The suit accused the company of hiring a predominantly white work force and putting its Hispanic, Black, and Asian workers into low-visibility, back of the store jobs, stocking and cleaning up and reducing their work hours. Nine people who claimed they were either fired or refused a job because of ethnicity were

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represented by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. In 2004, Abercrombie & Fitch settled the cases by agreeing to "alter its well-known collegiate, all-American – and largely white – image by adding more Blacks, Hispanics and Asians to its marketing materials." The settlement also required the company to "stop focusing on predominantly white fraternities and sororities in its recruitment" (Greenhouse, 2004).

School Uniform Policy. The preppy look has been influential in shaping school policy related to uniforms. While school uniforms often are adopted as part of school safety measures, many educators also express the hope that certain dress styles, such as a college prep look, will lead students to take school more seriously and see themselves as on the path to college and a career. For example, the Fall River, Massachusetts newspaper reports that in unanimously approving school uniforms, the school committee suggested going "a step further and require button-down shirts and ties for male students and blouses for female students in order to help prepare them for future employment scenarios" (Richmond, 2010).

And, a PBS report indicated that across the nation public schools are "discussing, and in many cases adopting, the old private school idea. School uniforms are designed to help kids focus on algebra instead of high tops; to make students compete for grades rather than jackets. ... In many public schools, the formula looks like this: polos and oxford shirts on top; khakis, skirts and chino shorts and pants on the bottom."

As a result, in contrast to their preferred out-of-school outfits, many urban minority students find themselves mandated to purchase and wear preppie fashions. Even among those who favor mandating school uniforms, there is concern that the emphasis on preppy style uniforms indicates a cultural bias. Given that students who react against wearing uniforms are subject to disciplinary consequences including being reassigned to another school, the nature of a mandated uniform is not a benign matter.

What are the prevalent policy and practice efforts to address negative impact?

Given all the positives and the elite status associated with preppies, schools appear to pay little attention to the possibility that the preppy subculture may have some negative impact on other students and even on preppies themselves. And whatever general policies and practices are in place related to psychosocial and mental health concerns may or may not effectively embrace this subgroup. Clearly, this is an arena warranting research.

With respect to the impact of preppy clothing style on school policy mandating uniforms, it is noteworthy that those schools that adopt the preppie style represent the only place where a specific youth culture subgroup's clothing fashion is mandated for all students in a school. That is, most youth subgroups adopt clothing styles by choice to express their group identity (e.g., hip hop, surfer/skater, emo, goth, punk), and only a few subgroups standardize clothing for all members (e.g., athletic uniforms, cheerleaders). As noted, while the positive case for mandating preppy style clothes has been made, concern also has been raised about cultural and racial bias and the consequences brought against those that react against the mandated style. As McBrayer (2007) states:

> "Research concludes that not only are school uniforms ineffective in meeting the outcomes intended, but they can actually create negative outcomes. ... One example of a negative effect of school uniforms is the discriminatory and racist overtones in the schools that are requiring them. Most of the public schools with uniform policies serve the urban population. By wearing uniforms, these students are easily identified as opposed to their minority counterparts who attend more affluent suburban schools where uniforms are less likely to be required. The underlying message is one of social ranking and status. Poor and minority students whose schools are often identified as failing are typically the first to become uniformed."

Any data on intervention impact?

Given that high status groups seldom welcome any negative attention, society in general and schools in particular have emphasized the positives and avoided discussion of the negatives with respect to preppy subculture. Thus, with respect to the subgroup itself, there are no data on intervention impact.

With respect to the impact of preppy-style clothing on school uniforms, as noted above, research suggests that school uniforms in general do not accomplish the stated purposes and also can create negative outcomes (Brunsma, 2004; McBrayer (2007).

Finally, it is interesting to note the impact of the lawsuit against Abercrombie & Fitch. Rose (2008) reports that:

> "Four years after spending $50 million to settle discrimination lawsuits, Abercrombie & Fitch contends it's making impressive progress in adding faces of color to the work force of the preppy stores. The company says 35% of its 88,000 store employees are ethnic minorities. It takes part in and sponsors numerous diversity events and has launched a Diversity Management continuing studies program with Georgetown University in Washington. These efforts are overseen by the vice president of diversity and inclusion. ...The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission continues to monitor Abercrombie's progress as part of the consent decree. ..Marketing materials, taken as a whole, did not reflect diversity. Although African-Americans and Asian-Americans were pictured at a level generally reflective of their respective representation in the United States population, Latinos remained generally under represented.."

New Directions

Clearly, preppy subculture contributes positively to schools. However, there are negatives associated with the preppy subculture that need attention. As we have noted previously, the reality is that schools need to understand the impact of all youth subcultures. And, where any lifestyle is significantly interfering with any student's positive physical, cognitive, social and emotional development, action is warranted. However, the school's stance must be proactive not reactive.

A proactive approach avoids traditional tendencies to wait for problems to arise. It also avoids presuming every problem requires unique intervention strategies by understanding which concerns represent common youth cultural subgroup dynamics and which are associated mostly with one or a few subgroups. Analyses should consider a subgroup's behavior in terms of motivating factors (including efforts intended to enhance feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness to specific others), as well as social, cultural, and gender politics and economies.

Current new directions for policy and practice addressing student social-emotional problems reflect an increasing emphasis on enhancing social-emotional learning, school climate, and general wellness. For example, federal policy coming out of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools is on the verge of shifting. Assistant Deputy Secretary of Education, Kevin Jennings, is pushing his division to broaden its focus to encompass school climate as essential for ensuring school is a place in which students are both physically and emotionally safe and feel valued. (http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2010/02/obama_appointee_advocates_scho.html). This could have a significant impact on how schools and communities address many individuals previously only attended to tangentially. This, of course, has relevance to the tentative findings suggesting that elites such as preppies may have specific arenas where psychosocial and mental health concerns arise.

The impact, of course, is dependent on what a school does and what it stops doing so that all students feel "both physically and emotionally safe and feel valued." From the perspective of our

Center's work, what is needed is the development of a full continuum of interventions. A full continuum allows schools to begin with a focus on promoting healthy development and preventing problems for all students. Well designed systems for healthy development and prevention should be foundational features in every school and community. Beyond the benefits they provide directly, they also provide a platform for determining whether the impact of any subgroup is significantly interfering with positive physical, cognitive, social and emotional development and thus warrants special attention. Where it is clear that this is the case, early-after-onset interventions can be introduced based on an analysis of subgroup concerns associated with a particular lifestyle. Finally, if individuals are found to need specialized assistance, steps can be taken to address identified needs.

In sum, rather than waiting for problems, new directions thinking stresses a proactive approach to preventing school and student problems, enhancing personal well-being, and improving academics, and using a continuum of interventions that contributes to enhancing a positive school climate.

Below and in the box that follows, we illustrate approaching policy and practice proactively and with a full continuum of interventions. Embedded are a few examples to illustrate addressing concerns related to students designated as preppies.

- *Promoting healthy development and preventing problems*

  Examples:
  > providing information to educate school and key community stakeholders and policy makers about the positive and negative features of youth subculture in general and preppy lifstyle/subculture specifically and about how to counter any negative impact

  > establishing dialogues with students identified as preppies, with the intent of engaging them in ways that minimize identified problems and promote healthy social and emotional development (e.g., clarifying their impact on others and helping them learn how to turn around any problems stemming from the preppy lifestyle)

  > protecting all students (e.g., from injuries, from negative social and emotional impact, from discrimination and negative images)

- *Intervening when problems are noted*

  Examples:
  > implementing agreed upon promising practices to respond as quickly as feasible (e.g., watching for any impact on others or the preppies themselves and taking corrective actions)

  > ensuring a student's status as a preppy isn't interfering with success at school (e.g., enhancing engagement if the student appears bored or overly distracted by nonacademic pursuits)

  > ensuring medical, mental health, and learning supports are available for all in need (e.g., related to physical, social, emotional, and learning problems)

- *Attending to chronic and severe problems*

  For instance:
  > identifying and referring for appropriate individual interventions as necessary (e.g., to reduce serious and pervasive physical, emotional, and cognitive concerns)

  > establish a safety net of support (e.g., through school, family, community mental and physical health providers and agencies)

A Perspective on What Schools Should Do Based on the Work of our Center at UCLA

Schools experience many overlapping concerns related to youth subgroups and youth subculture. Of special concern is addressing any negative impact (e.g., criminal acts, bullying, sexual harassment, interracial conflict, vandalism, mental health problems). But, also essential is a focus on promoting healthy development and fostering a positive school climate.

As always, the more we understand about subgroups and individual differences, the more effective our interventions can be. But to keep from the tendency to focus on each concern as if it is discrete, schools need to work in a new way.

Given the complexity of the negative behaviors that arise in relation to youth subgroups, those in the school, district, and community who have responsibility for gangs, safe schools, violence prevention, bullying, interracial conflict, substance abuse, vandalism, truancy, and school climate need to work collaboratively. The *immediate objectives* are to (1) educate others about motivational and behavioral factors associated with a particular subgroup, (2) counter the trend in policy and practice to establish initiatives in terms of separate categories that lead to a host of fragmented and too often ineffective programs and services, and (3) facilitate opportunities on campus for youth subgroups to engage positively in subcultural activity and connect with effective peer supports.

By working collaboratively and differentiating the causes of observed problems, school staff and community stakeholders can integrate fragmented and marginalized initiatives for promoting positive youth development, preventing problems, intervening as soon as problems are identified, and providing effective ways to respond to pervasive, chronic, and serious problems. *Longer-term*, the aim is to help develop a comprehensive system of student and learning supports that (a) addresses a wide range of barriers to learning, teaching, parenting, and development and (b) re-engages disconnected youth. Such a system encompasses a continuum of integrated school-community intervention systems that are fully integrated into the improvement agenda for schools and communities (Adelman & Taylor, 2006a, b).

Toward these ends, schools must reach out to the community and establish a collaborative mechanism where those with specialized knowledge not only bring that knowledge to the table, but also work to build the needed comprehensive system of student and learning supports that addresses a wide range of barriers to learning, teaching, parenting, and development (Adelman & Taylor, 2007). And it is essential to remember that those with specialized knowledge include youth themselves (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2009).

Moving forward requires building a comprehensive and systemic continuum of interventions and fully integrating the system into the improvement agenda for schools and communities. To guide development of a systemic approach, we have suggested using a continuum of integrated school-community intervention systems as a unifying framework. This includes school-community systems for promoting healthy development, preventing problems, intervening early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible, and addressing chronic and severe problems.

Policy that helps schools and communities develop the full continuum of interventions is essential to moving forward in enhancing equity of opportunity. Such policy must effectively establish a *comprehensive intervention framework* that can be used to map, analyze, and set priorities. It must guide fundamental *reworking of operational infrastructure* so that there is leadership and mechanisms for building integrated systems of interventions at schools and for connecting school and community resources. And, it must provide guidance for the difficulties inherent in facilitating major *systemic changes*. By working in this way, we can counter the trend in policy and practice to establish initiatives in terms of separate categories that lead to a host of fragmented and too often ineffective programs and services.

For resource aids related to policy examples, intervention frameworks and related mapping tools, examples of ways to rework the operational infrastructure and develop key mechanisms such as a *Learning Support Resource Team*, guides for facilitating systemic change, and much more, see the Center's Toolkit at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm

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Source for Additional Information

See our Center's online clearinghouse Quick Find on ***Youth Culture and Subgroups*** http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/youthculture.htm

The Center's Series of Information Resources on *Youth Subcultures: Understanding Subgroups to Better Address Barriers to Learning & Improve Schools**

Online:

What is Youth Culture? A Brief Introduction

Glossary of Terms Related to Youth Culture Subgroups

Youth Subcultures: Annotated Bibliography and Related References

About Youth Gangs

About the Goth Youth Subculture

About Hip Hop Youth Subculture

About "Loners" and "Losers"

About "Jocks" as Youth Subculture

About Emo Youth Subculture

About Surfing and Skateboarding Youth Subcultures

About the Cheerleading Youth Subculture

About "Mean Girls" as a Youth Culture Subgroup

About "Nerds" and "Geeks" as an Identified Subculture

About "Preppies" as a Youth Culture Subgroup

About Sexual Minority (LGBT) Youth Subculture

Youth and Socially Interactive Technologies

About Raves as a Youth Culture Phenomenon

Others are in development

*Many of the terms used by youth in referring to subgroups often are pejorative and offensive. We do not condone such language. We do, however, recognize the need to go beyond adultcentric definitions and descriptions of youth subgroups if we are to understand youth perceptions and perspectives. So the *Information Resource* documents reflect the terms used by youth.