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Editor's Note: The following research will be released at the Society for Prevention Research (www.preventionresearch.org) 2005 annual meeting, May 25-27, 2005, Washington, DC.

IT'S PROM SEASON: WHY DO FRIENDS LET FRIENDS DRINK AND DRIVE?

Studies explore why teens fail to intervene to stop risky behaviors

- Why don't young people confide in adults if a friend is planning or doing something that could be harmful to themselves or others?
- How do teenagers' responses to their friends' risky behavior change as they grow older?
- What influence does teenagers' trust in society have on their feelings of responsibility towards their friends?

Alcohol-related fatalities among teens are highest in April, May and June – prom season, when parties are common and peer pressure is high. Peer pressure is typically seen as a negative force among teenagers considering whether to drive drunk, use drugs or alcohol, or smoke cigarettes. Prevention programs are often aimed at strengthening teens' individual resolve to resist peer pressure and make healthy choices. But some programs have shown that peer pressure can be a positive force in kids' lives. In what circumstances can friends also act as allies when teens are making these choices?

Researchers from Pennsylvania State University will share a variety of findings from the Social Responsibility and Prevention Project, a research project that has followed children in Michigan and Pennsylvania from early to middle to late adolescence (5th through 12th grade).

The research team emphasizes that, when teens engage in risky behavior, they typically are with friends who care about each other. If they're worried about friends, will they intervene or do they think it's "none of their business"? Studies of adults find that people tend to look out for one another more in communities where people feel a sense of social responsibility and mutual give and take – what is known as social capital. Researchers will share their findings on age differences in teens' beliefs that "it's none of my business" and how for any age group, an ethic of social responsibility and sense of inclusion at school and in the community influence teens' willingness to intervene with friends.

Other researchers will discuss findings on how loyalty to friends or beliefs about health choices change teenagers' willingness to tell adults or take other action to stop friends' risky behaviors, and how these factors are different for early, middle, and late adolescents.

Sources: Elvira Elek, PhD; Constance Flanagan, PhD.; Mike Stout MA; Amy Bertelsen BS; Pennsylvania State University.