

Protective Factors

Overview

Prevention research and work is grounded in the identification of risk factors that increase the probability of substance abuse, and protective factors, that help reduce the risk of substance abuse in the future. Targeted interventions that decrease risk factors, increase protective factors, or combine both approaches, have been shown to be effective in decreasing problem substance use. Risk and protective factors are relevant at all stages of life, and across several domains. Generally, researchers identify several levels, or domains, for intervention: the individual level, family level, peer level, and community level. At different stages in a person's life, one domain may play an outsized role in comparison to another. Cleveland, et al. (2008) found that peers and the school environment had a greater influence on older adolescents' substance abuse, than younger adolescents. In contrast, families and the outside community had a greater impact on younger children than peers or schools. Effective prevention programming should target risk and protective factors that are most salient at each life stage, and best-suited for the domain in which the intervention will be implemented.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse makes the case that prevention programs should target risk and protective factors that have been shown to have the most impact at each developmental level (2003). Early interventions, even at the preschool level, can play a powerful role in reducing risk throughout the "developmental risk trajectory" (p. 6). Similarly, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration website notes that risk factors are "correlated and cumulative" – that is, having a risk factor early in life increases the likelihood of having more risk factors later in life. Many of the risk and protective factors that are associated with problem substance misuse or abuse are also associated with mental health conditions, so efforts to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors associated with substance abuse should also have an impact on future mental health status.

Individual risk factors include personality traits, such as impulsivity, risk-taking, antisocial behaviors, and emotional problems. Protective factors include traits such as adaptability, empathy, and good social skills. Attitudes about life are also important: academic achievement, hopes for the future, self-efficacy, and the willingness to follow rules, to name a few. Data from the 2015 Delaware Youth Risk Behavior Survey illustrates the importance of academic achievement in relationship to substance abuse and mental health status. In Delaware, students that do well academically, and have higher grades, use substances at a lesser rate, and have lower rates of depression, self-harm, and planning and attempting suicide than students who have low grades in school.

Family protective factors include: consistent discipline, parental involvement, family stability, and clear expectations. Child abuse, parental substance abuse, lack of supervision, and poor relationships with parents (which are also ACEs, previously discussed) are a few of the risk factors that have been associated with future substance abuse. The Delaware YRBS asks a number of questions about students' relationships with their parents. Data from the 2015 survey show that the way parents interact with their children has significant impact on not only youth substance abuse, but also their mental health status. Youth in Delaware high schools who reported that their parents never or almost never told them they are proud of them used substances at higher rates and had higher rates of depression, self-harm, and planning and attempting suicide, than youth whose parents told them they were proud of them sometimes or always. This same pattern emerged when youth were asked, "How often do you get along well with your parents," and "I can count on my parent(s) to be there when I need them." Better mental health status and reduced substance abuse is also consistent with questions concerning parental monitoring and supervision. Youth who have parents who ask them where they are going and who they are going with use substances at lesser rate, and have better mental health status than youth who do not. Youth who reported that their parents have consistent rules and expectations also have better outcomes than youth who did not.

Relationships with peers can also reduce or increase the risk of substance abuse. Maintaining friendships with peers that use substances, and/or minimize the risk associated with the use of substances, increases the likelihood of future substance use; however, friendships with youth who do not use substances, or participating in pro-social afterschool activities with friends, can reduce the likelihood of future substance abuse. The 2015 Delaware YRBS asks students to report whether their friends would

think it was wrong if they smoked marijuana, used prescription drugs, smoke tobacco, or have one or two drinks nearly every day. Across all categories, the students who reported that their friends would think that it was wrong used substances at a lesser rate than students whose friends did not think substance abuse was wrong.

Schools operate at the intersection of the peer and community level—they are the location where most peer interactions occur, but can also provide a powerful protective function if school leaders find ways to enhance school connectedness and promote healthy norms (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Community-level factors include social disorganization, norms favorable or unfavorable to substance abuse, and community safety. A report from the CDC (2009) explains how school connectedness – that is, the extent to which youth feel connected to the school community – can reduce the risk of mental health and substance abuse problems in youth. Schools can promote school connectedness by providing adult support, supporting the formation of positive peer groups, promoting the importance of education, and creating a safe and positive school environment.

The literature on risk and protective factors is extensive, and these are just a few examples at each level of intervention (see: CDC; SAMSHA; Cleveland, et al., 2008; etc.). The Delaware data presented here is a sample of the ways in which we can use Delaware survey data to better understand the influence of risk and protective factors on youth substance abuse in Delaware.

Student Risk and Protective Factors (Self-reported)

Data Notation:

The data in the following section deals with small subcategories of Delaware public high school student sample population and because of that will not be weighted. Applying weights to small categories can lead to inaccuracies in analyses.

The following protective factors have been shown to have a statistically significant relationship with both substance use and mental health. The significance is at $p < .05$, unless specifically noted.

2015 YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY

Individual protective factors and past month substance use (in percentages)

Academic achievement

	Mostly As	Mostly Bs	Mostly Cs	Mostly Ds or Fs
Cigarettes	4	9	17	24
Males	4	10	18	25
Females	4	8	16	23
Alcohol	24	32	37	49
Males	20	27	34	54
Females	27	36	41	41
Binge Drinking*	10	15	22	26
Males	8	14	23	30
Females	11	16	22	18
Marijuana Use	12	20	32	46
Males	12	19	33	43
Females	13	21	30	50
Rx drugs without a prescription	4	6	7	18
Males	4	5	7	23
Females	4	7	8	10

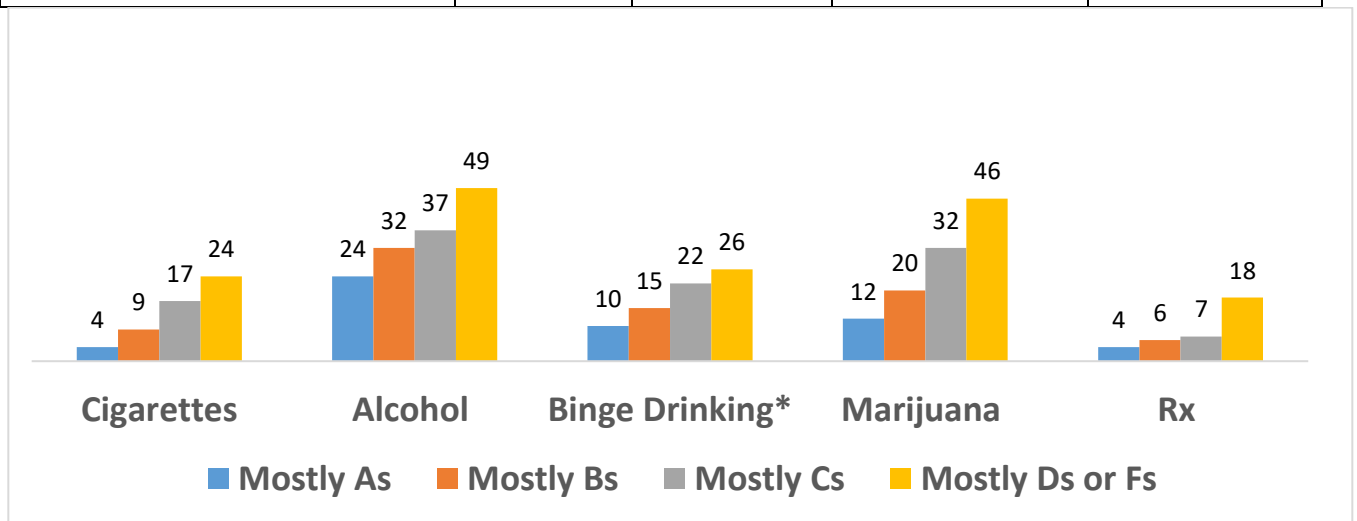


Figure 114 Individual protective factors and substance use

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Notes: Unweighted Data

*Binge drinking is having 5 or more drinks in a row within a couple hours in the past month

Source: ["2015 Delaware Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(Administered by the Center for Drug and Health Studies, University of Delaware\).](#)

2015 YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY

Family protective factors and past month substance use (in percentages)

There are clear rules and consequences in my home?

	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Unsure	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree
Cigarettes	8	12	22
Males	10	18	23
Females	7	6	20
Alcohol	28	32	48
Males	26	36	44
Females	30	28	51
Binge Drinking*	14	16	28
Males	14	21	27
Females	13	11	29
Marijuana Use	20	25	35
Males	21	31	35
Females	19	21	35
Rx drugs without a prescription	5	9	16
Males	5	12	16
Females	5	6	16

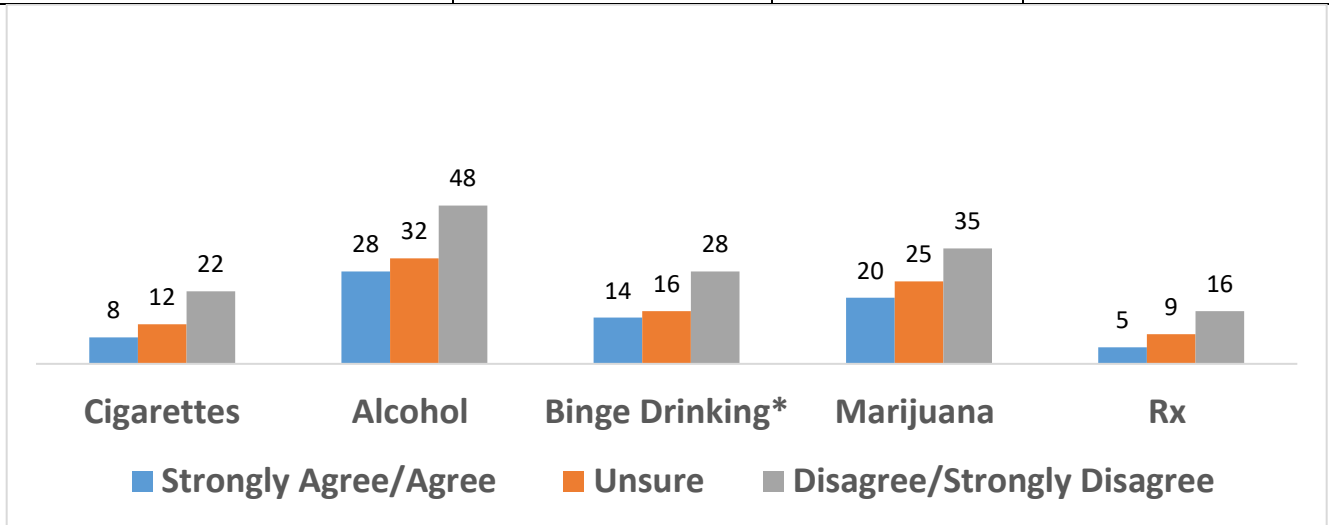


Figure 115 Family protective factors and substance use

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Notes: Unweighted Data

*Binge drinking is having 5 or more drinks in a row within a couple hours in the past month

Source: ["2015 Delaware Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(Administered by the Center for Drug and Health Studies, University of Delaware\).](#)

2015 YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY

Family protective factors and past month substance use (in percentages)

My parents or adult in my home asks where I'm going or with whom I will be?

	Always/ Most of the time	Sometimes	Never/Rarely
Cigarettes	8	13	20
Males	9	12	25
Females	8	14	11
Alcohol	29	36	36
Males	25	33	40
Females	32	41	29
Binge Drinking*	13	20	20
Males	12	18	28
Females	14	22	11
Marijuana Use	18	32	29
Males	18	32	34
Females	18	31	20
Rx drugs without a prescription	4	10	16
Males	3	9	18
Females	5	11	12

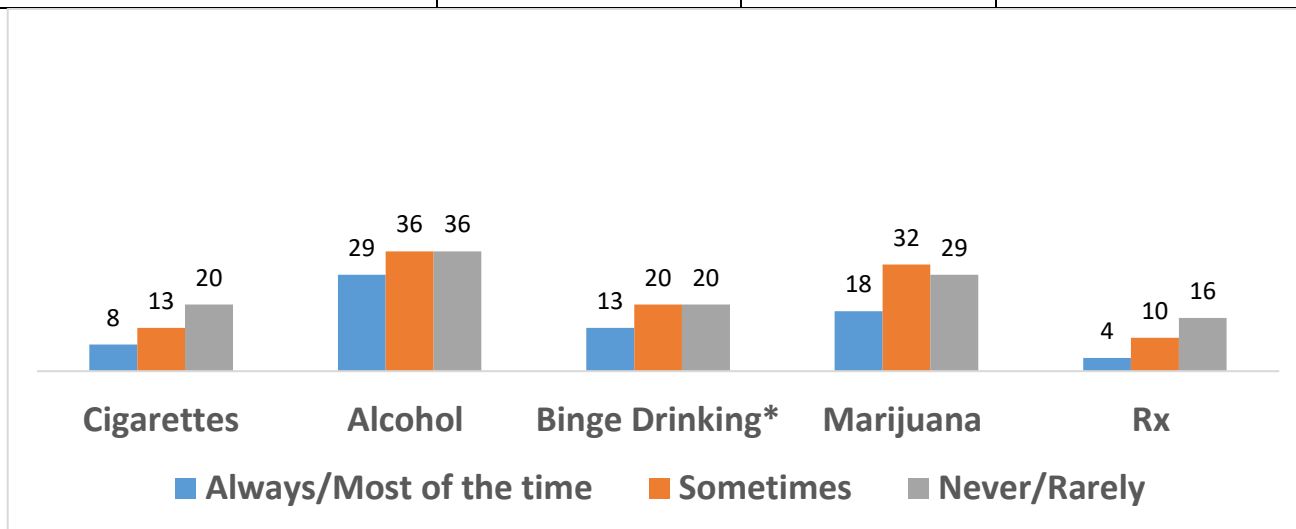


Figure 116 Family protective factors and substance use

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Notes: Unweighted Data

*Binge drinking is having 5 or more drinks in a row within a couple hours in the past month

Source: ["2015 Delaware Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(Administered by the Center for Drug and Health Studies, University of Delaware\).](#)

2015 YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY

Peer protective factors and past month substance use (in percentages)

How wrong do your friends feel it would be for you to have one or two drinks of alcohol nearly every day?

	Not Wrong	A little Wrong	Wrong/ Very Wrong
Cigarettes	19	14	6
Males	20	16	7
Females	19	13	5
Alcohol	45	42	23
Males	43	37	20
Females	48	49	25
Binge Drinking*	27	22	10
Males	26	24	9
Females	29	19	11
Marijuana Use	36	30	16
Males	36	30	16
Females	36	30	15
Rx drugs without a prescription	12	10	4
Males	12	9	4
Females	13	10	4

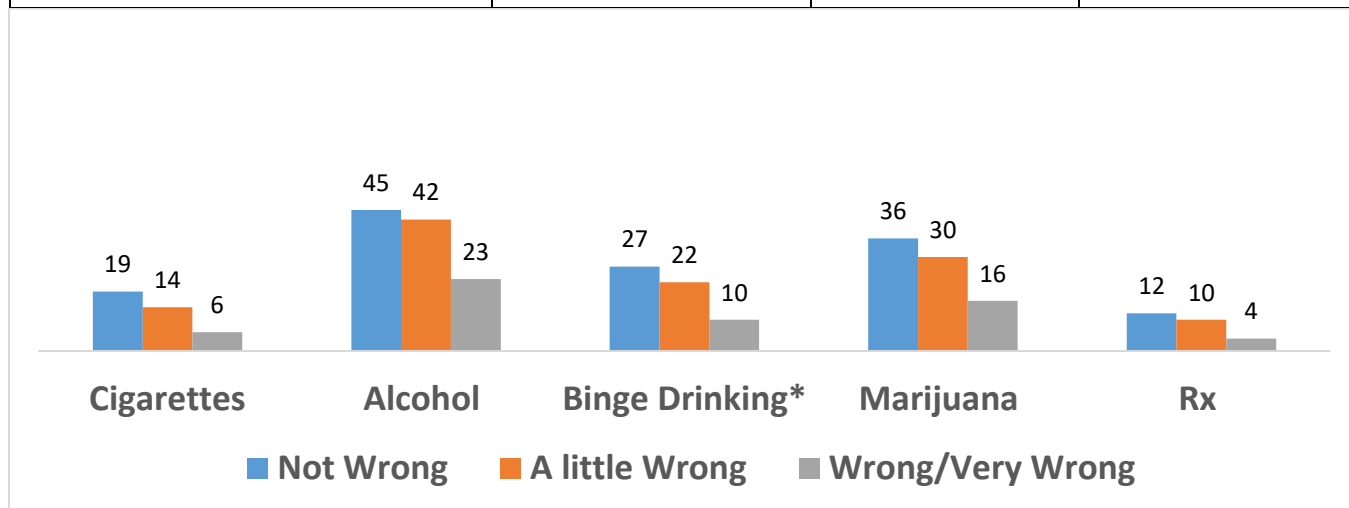


Figure 117 Peer protective factors and substance use

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Notes: Unweighted Data

*Binge drinking is having 5 or more drinks in a row within a couple hours in the past month

Source:

[“2015 Delaware Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\).” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(Administered by the Center for Drug and Health Studies, University of Delaware\).](#)

2015 YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY

Peer protective factors and past month substance use (in percentages)

How wrong do your friends think it would be to take an Rx without a prescription?

	Not Wrong	A little Wrong	Wrong/ Very Wrong
Cigarettes	21	18	7
Males	21	20	9
Females	21	15	6
Alcohol	37	31	29
Males	30	37	27
Females	52	30	30
Binge Drinking*	26	26	13
Males	22	25	14
Females	35	26	12
Marijuana Use	37	31	19
Males	36	31	21
Females	41	32	18
Rx drugs without a prescription	18	16	4
Males	19	13	4
Females	17	19	4

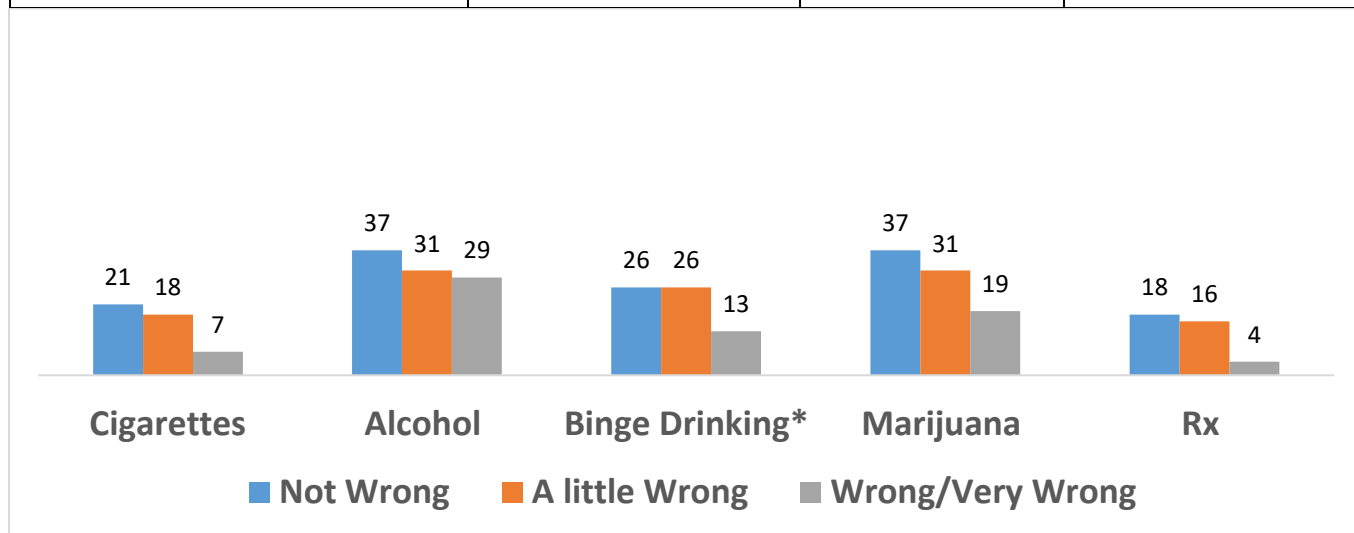


Figure 118 Peer protective factors and substance use

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Notes: Unweighted Data

**Binge drinking is having 5 or more drinks in a row within a couple hours in the past month*

Source: "2015 Delaware Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Administered by the Center for Drug and Health Studies, University of Delaware).

2015 YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY

Individual protective factors and past year mental health: Academic achievement (in percentages)

	Mostly As	Mostly Bs	Mostly Cs	Mostly Ds or Fs
Depressed for two weeks at a time	18	27	28	39
Males	8	17	19	30
Females	25	37	41	55
Self-Harm	12	13	13	19
Males	7	4	8	17
Females	15	20	20	21
Attempt Suicide	4	8	9	13
Males	3	4	6	10
Females	5	11	13	18

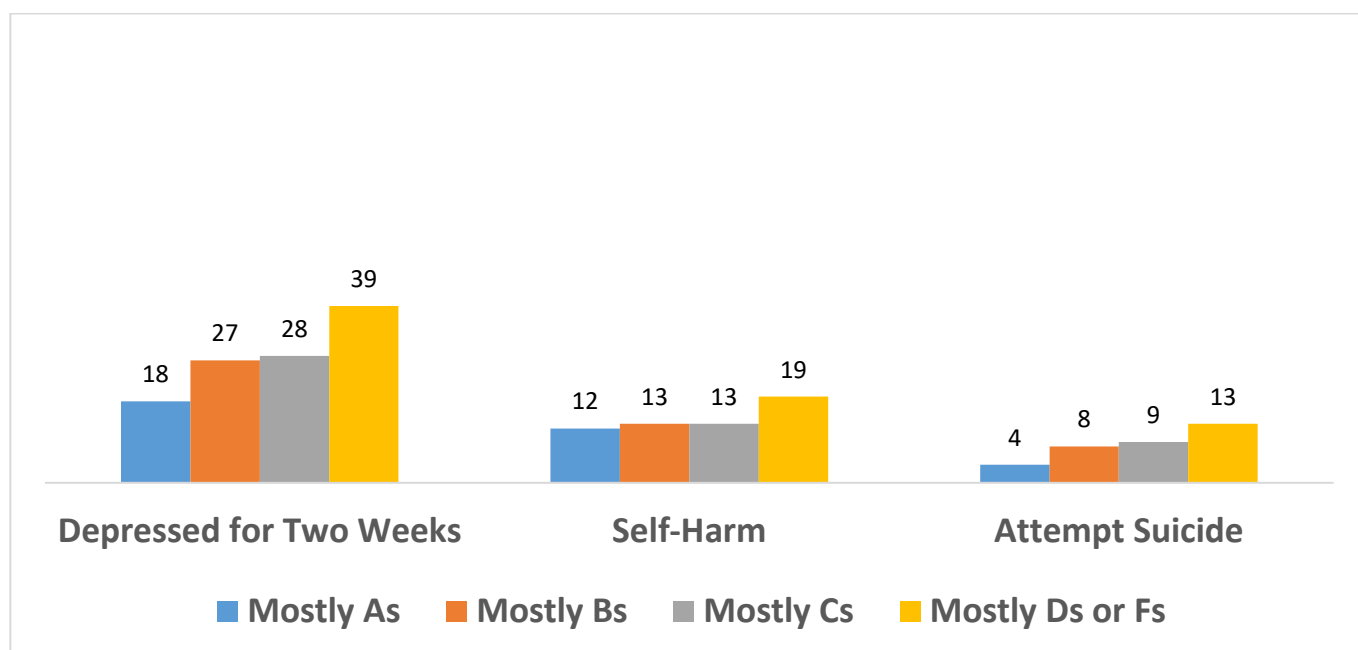


Figure 119 Individual protective factors and past year mental health

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Notes:

Unweighted Data

Source:

["2015 Delaware Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(Administered by the Center for Drug and Health Studies, University of Delaware\).](#)

2015 YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY

Family protective factors and past year mental health (in percentages)

There are clear rules/consequences in my home?

	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Unsure	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree
Depressed for two weeks at a time	21	36	41
Males	12	23	31
Females	30	47	47
Self-Harm	11	17	22
Males	5	12	13
Females	16	22	30
Attempt Suicide	5	9	12
Males	3	5	12
Females	7	12	12

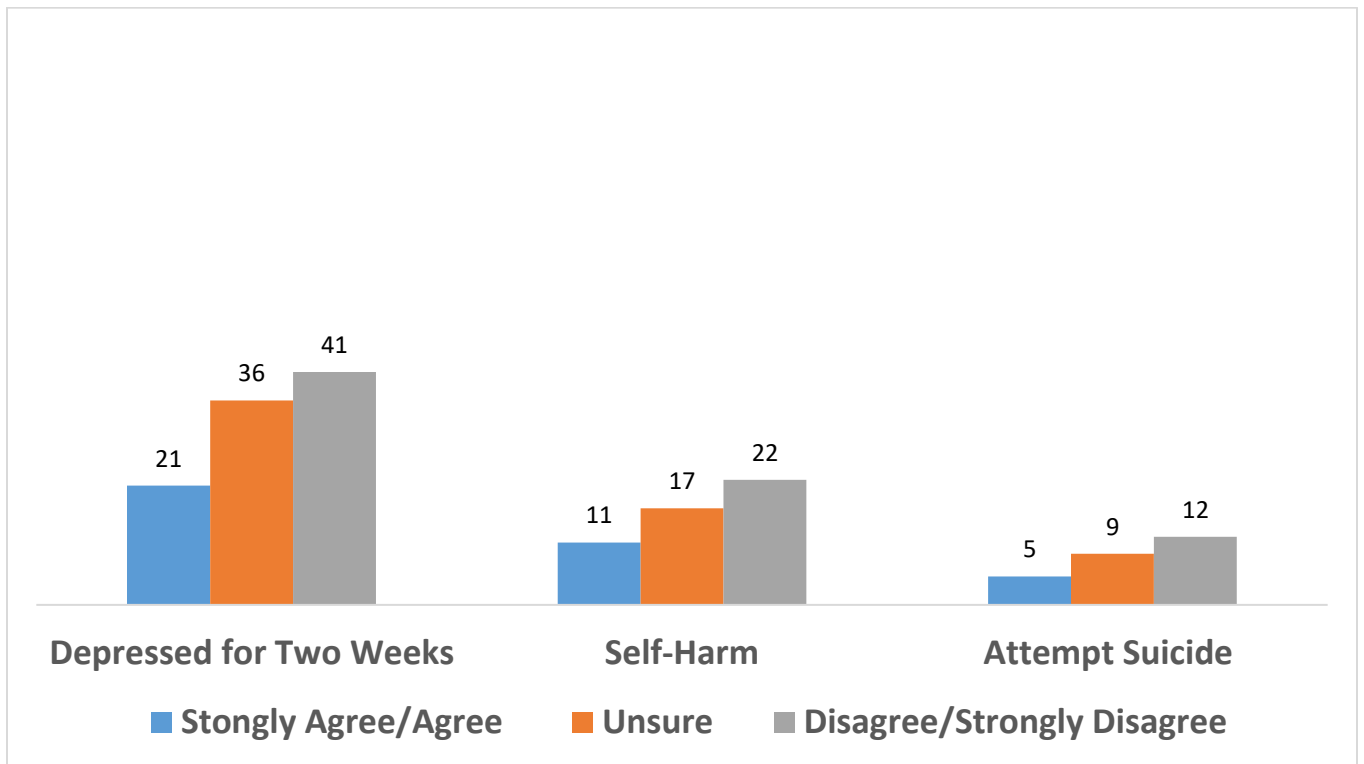


Figure 120 Family protective factors and mental health

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Note:

Unweighted Data

Source:

["2015 Delaware Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(Administered by the Center for Drug and Health Studies, University of Delaware\).](#)

2015 YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY

Family protective factors and past year mental health (in percentages)

My parents or adult in my home asks where I'm going or with whom I will be?

	Always/ Most of the time	Sometimes	Never/Rarely
Depressed for two weeks at a time	25	29	23
Males	14	19	18
Females	33	42	31
Self-Harm	12	13	14
Males	5	8	11
Females	18	20	20
Attempt Suicide	6	7	11
Males	4	2	10
Females	7	14	13

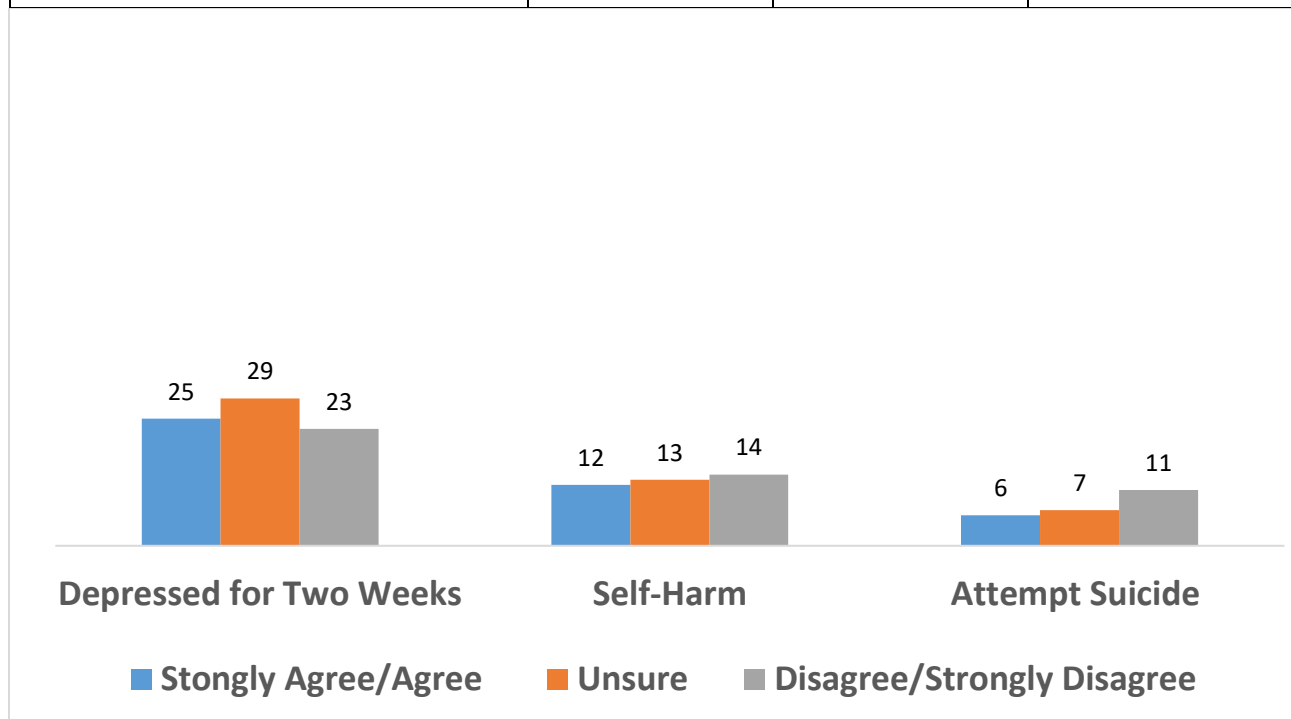


Figure 121 Family protective factors and mental health

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Note:

Unweighted Data

Source:

["2015 Delaware Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(Administered by the Center for Drug and Health Studies, University of Delaware\).](#)

2015 YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY

Peer protective factors and past year mental health (in percentages)

How wrong do your friends feel it would be for you to have one or two drinks of alcohol nearly every day?

	Not Wrong	A little Wrong	Wrong/ Very Wrong
Depressed for two weeks at a time	27	29	23
Males	20	19	12
Females	37	39	31
Self-Harm	17	15	11
Males	13	8	5
Females	22	22	16
Attempt Suicide	11	7	5
Males	8	4	4
Females	15	10	7

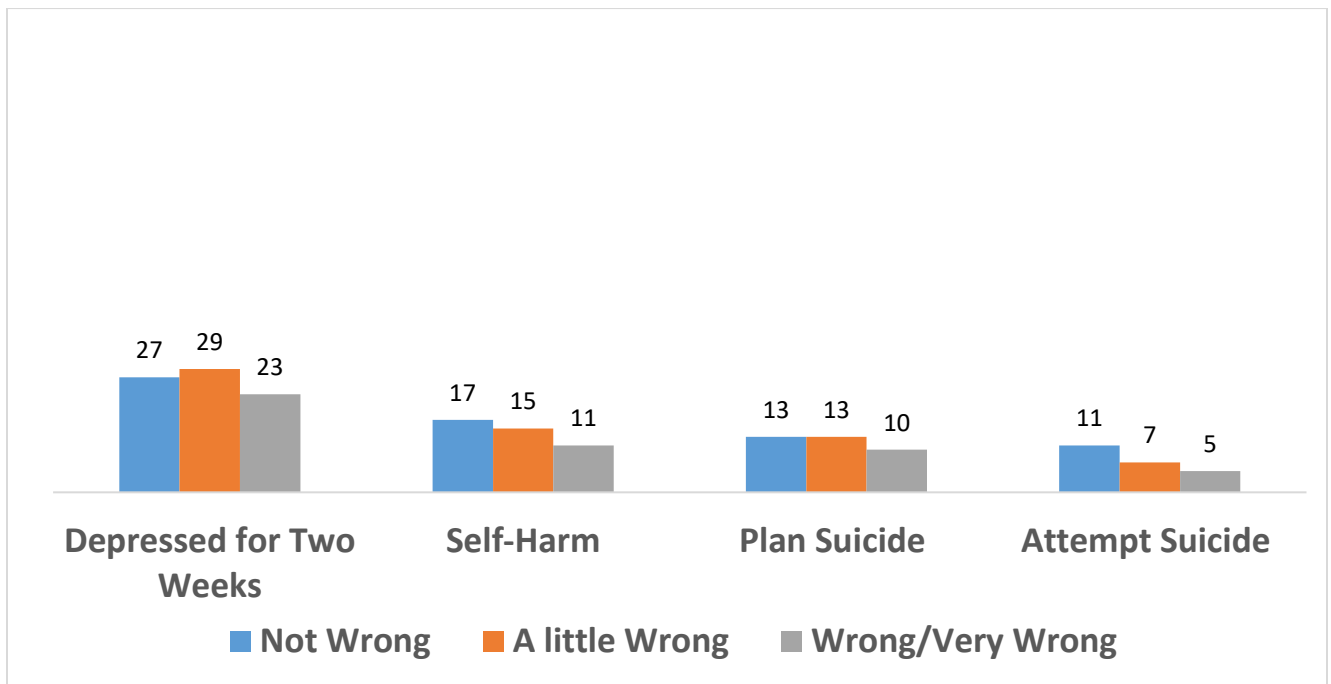


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Note:

Unweighted Data

Source:

["2015 Delaware Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(Administered by the Center for Drug and Health Studies, University of Delaware\).](#)

2015 YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY

Peer protective factors and past year mental health (in percentages)

How wrong do your friends feel it would be to take an Rx without a prescription?

	Not Wrong	A little Wrong	Wrong/ Very Wrong
Depressed for two weeks at a time	29	34	23
Males	24	27	12
Females	39	41	32
Self-Harm	19	19	11
Males	16	12	5
Females	24	25	16
Attempt Suicide	11	9	6
Males	9	7	4
Females	15	11	8

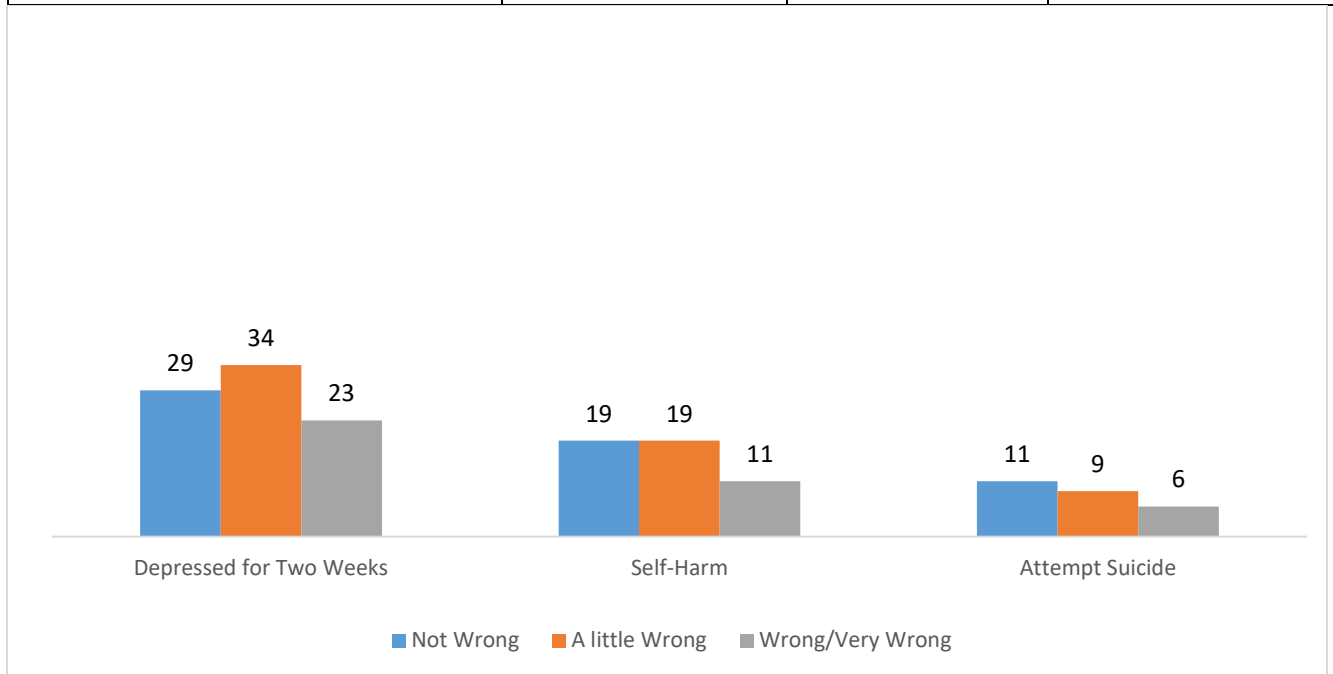


Figure 123 Peer protective factors and past year mental health

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Note: Unweighted Data

Source: ["2015 Delaware Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(Administered by the Center for Drug and Health Studies, University of Delaware\).](#)

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