

# THE *Current*

June 28, 2016

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## The Living Messages

Adolescence is one of life's trickier phases. It's fraught with new and changing perceptions, peer pressure and uncertainty about identity.

For children of immigrant families, these experiences can be more difficult to manage. They might face ethnic discrimination, fear of deportation for themselves or their family members and periods of separation from loved ones due to migration. Such experiences can make immigrant adolescents especially vulnerable to depression and risky behaviors, such as substance use.

This is the world [Jennifer Kam](#) studies. The assistant professor of communication at UC Santa Barbara investigates the messages these young people receive about substance use and how these messages may affect the likelihood of their abusing drugs and alcohol.

"My research indicates that cultural and relational factors matter when it comes to preventing substance use, and they can be a source of strength for many adolescents," Kam said. "For example, I found in one of my studies that the more often Latino and Latina adolescents are discriminated against, the more likely they are to use substances." On the other hand, she added, certain types of messages from family and friends can counteract that tendency. The key in this swirling world of melding cultures is to pinpoint the variables that can predict the types of messages these middle to high school students receive, and to determine how different types of messages uniquely affect their substance use.

In recognition of her in-depth work, which includes collaborations with middle schools and high schools in Santa Barbara County, Kam has been selected to receive the 2016 Early Career Award from the Interpersonal Communication Division of the National Communication Association (NCA). The award honors a scholar who is still in the early part of his or her career yet has already played an important role in shaping interpersonal communication research.

“The young faculty in the division of social sciences continue to impress me, and I am so proud that Jennifer Kam’s research has been recognized by the National Communication Association at this early stage in her career,” said Leila Rupp, associate dean of social sciences at UCSB. “Her work on diverse adolescent populations and their shifting identities has the potential to change the way we communicate with young people about issues of behavioral health and substance use. I have no doubt that she will continue to receive accolades for her innovative contributions to the field of interpersonal communication research.”

“I am extremely honored to receive the 2016 Early Career Award from the Interpersonal Communication Division of the National Communication Association,” Kam said. “NCA is one of the premier associations in my discipline, so it feels special to be recognized in this way. Also, to be in the company of past awardees who have gone on to make enormous contributions to the study of interpersonal communication is exciting.”

A member of the UCSB Department of Communication since 2014, Kam studies how middle and high school students, particularly students from immigrant families, manage their experiences with the more stressful aspects of adapting to a new country and culture. Her work involves surveying and interviewing students to identify interactions and conditions that put these students at risk of developing depression, performing poorly in school or engaging in substance use.

“I am also interested in determining how certain types of communication with parents, teachers, school counselors and peers can contribute to these students’ resiliency,” said Kam, whose work in Santa Barbara County has led her to help identify resources that can be promoted to enhance the lives of these students.

“The award motivates me to continuously strengthen my research to make the most positive impact possible on the lives of immigrant students and their families,” she said.

Kam received her doctorate from the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at Pennsylvania State University in 2009, and was assistant professor at Ohio State University and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign before coming to UCSB. She has published a number of peer reviewed journal articles, most of which can be found in top communication, prevention and adolescent journals. In addition, she has presented more than 30 papers at national and international conferences and has received several top paper awards.

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