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1996

### G97-1322 High Risk Youth

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## High Risk Youth

**This NebGuide defines the relationship between adolescence and high risk behaviors, helps parent and adolescent identify external and internal assets and suggests parent strategies for promoting and increasing those assets.**

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### Introduction

American youth today are often considered to be in a state of crisis. Approximately half of all adolescents are at moderate to high risk of engaging in one or more self-destructive behaviors, including unsafe sex, teenage pregnancy and childbearing; drug and alcohol abuse; under achievement, failure, or dropping out of school; and delinquent or criminal behaviors. Many of these problem behaviors are interrelated. Some of these behaviors are related to the multitude of physical, social, and emotional changes adolescents are experiencing. Some are related to dysfunction in families; violence in the streets and at home; and media which portrays alcohol and drug use, extramarital sex, and violence as often-occurring, normal behaviors.

### Adolescents at Risk

#### High risk behaviors

A recent risk survey by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that nearly 10 percent of high school students had attempted suicide, 20 percent had carried a weapon, one fourth had smoked marijuana, more than one third had smoked cigarettes, and half had consumed alcohol in the

previous month. The youth survey also found that 40 percent of the students said they were sexually active and nearly half of them did not use a condom.

### **Crime and violence**

According to a recent U.S. Justice Department report, 17 percent of all serious crimes were committed by a juvenile offender, and one fourth of all serious violent crimes involved an adolescent. Fourteen percent of murders, 16 percent of forcible rapes, and 14 percent of aggravated assaults were committed by youth. Homicide ranks as the second leading cause of death among adolescents. Surveys indicate that adolescents are victimized by nonfatal assault more than twice as often as those above 20; approximately one third of the victims of these episodes sustain physical injuries; and rates of these assaults are climbing.

### **Family violence**

Adolescents are very likely to be victims of family violence. Recent family violence research revealed that more than half of preteen and early teenage children (10 to 14) were struck by a parent, while one third of teens aged 15-17 were also hit during a one year period. Adolescents represent about a quarter of all officially reported victims of maltreatment.

### **Teen pregnancy**

More than 1 million U.S. teenagers become pregnant each year and nearly half of these result in live births. Teen pregnancy is related to several factors: low educational achievement, unemployment, welfare dependence, repeat pregnancy, parenting problems, and marital discord and divorce if teens marry.

### **Adolescent depression and suicide**

Suicide in adolescence has increased dramatically in the last 40 years. It is estimated that there are 14 suicides per 100,000 adolescents. Currently it is the third leading cause of death, killing 5,000 youths per year. By the time children become teenagers, nearly 20 percent have already experienced depression at some time in their lives.

## **Relationship between Adolescence and High Risk Behavior**

Three fundamental human needs are crucial to survival and to healthy development. First is the need to be a valued member of a group that provides mutual support and caring relationships. Second is the need to become a socially competent individual who has the skills to cope successfully with life. Third is the need to believe in a promising future with real opportunities. The purpose here is to examine how high risk behavior interferes with the developmental tasks required to meet these needs during adolescence.

### **Developmental changes**

Young adolescents experience biological, cognitive, and psychological changes that lead them to reappraise themselves and their relationships. The need to be a valued member of a group demands their attention and peers become increasingly important in meeting this developmental need. They are vulnerable to the influence of others, and seek out approval and recognition. Often it seems that young adolescents are so absorbed by the physical changes and emotional turmoil of puberty that they are unteachable. Educators and parents may simply make the best of a difficult situation by reducing their

interaction with them. They attribute many of the problems children face to their being at "that age." Consequently, parents and other caring adults fail to take advantage of the vulnerability of adolescents in a positive manner.

### **School changes**

As these children enter middle and junior high school they go through many changes simultaneously. Suddenly they must go from having a stable relationship with one adult teacher and one set of classmates to having as many as six or seven teachers and as many as six sets of classmates--all in one day! This can make it difficult to establish stable peer groups and to form close, supportive relationships with adults. The feelings of uncertainty and the stress of these changes are often accompanied by disengagement from school and the onset of experimentation with drugs.

### **Risk factors**

Factors such as rebelliousness, indifference to school, tolerance for social deviance, family disruption, and parental tolerance of drug use are frequently blamed for initiation into high risk behaviors. Young people are often overwhelmed, feel controlled by their emotions, and use drugs to avoid these feelings, or to hide their feelings of inadequacy. Many adolescents use drugs to relax and to feel more comfortable with themselves. This is a critical time when they need positive, supportive relationships with caring adults. They need guidance and encouragement so that they can develop the skills necessary to cope successfully with life.

### **Developmental tasks of adolescents**

Several developmental tasks essential for moving into adulthood and forming a philosophy of life begin at this time. The young adolescent begins to develop the ability to relate intimately to others. The rate of physiological development usually surpasses the rate of development of social skills and emotional maturity. This phenomenon is a source of considerable frustration and anxiety. Gradually, adolescents develop coping skills to handle stress, and they begin to decide who they are and develop their own identity. Drug abuse, however, forces the individual to become isolated and to withdraw into the self. Risky behavior at this stage of life interferes with the developmental task of becoming socially competent.

### **Mixed messages**

Compounding the confusion that accompanies change and normal development during this stage, young people enter a society that simultaneously denounces and glorifies the use of high risk behaviors such as violence, alcohol, and extramarital sex. Such mixed messages create confusion and uncertainty in choosing a life course at a time when they are developing habits for life. These early adolescent years represent a critical time when poorly informed decisions have lifelong consequences.

### **Thrill-seeking behavior**

Young adolescents may see high risk behaviors as experimental, thrill-seeking, and a way to impress their peers. They are incapable of realizing the consequences of their actions. Those who experience the results they desire may learn to rely more and more on such behaviors to avoid reality at this inherently difficult time, thus setting a pattern for life. Young adolescents make decisions that affect their entire life course, even though they are immature in cognitive development, knowledge, and social experience.

## Understanding of risk-taking

A better understanding of the meaning of risk-taking behavior from the adolescent's perspective could provide valuable insight into this behavior. Engaging in potentially life-threatening activities such as substance abuse may appear casual, recreational, and tension-relieving to adolescents. They are often unaware that these activities carry very high risks, and the adverse effects may be near-term (such as accidents related to drug use), or long-term (such as cardiovascular disease). Long-term effects often entail a narrowing of options available to the young adult, such as with a school-age mother who drops out of high school and diminishes her employment prospects for life.

## Helping Strategies for Parents

Teenagers have never been easy on their parents. On the road to becoming adults, teens are naturally inclined to take risks, experiment, and discover for themselves what life is all about. This process of separation creates a great deal of frustration and anxiety for parents. They know that teenagers must have room to develop the skills needed to function as independent adults--such as assertiveness, responsibility, and decision-making. But as caring parents, they can't help worrying about the safety and well-being of their children. How much control and discipline is appropriate without alienating teenagers? Here are parenting strategies that you may find helpful:

1. **Listen to your teen.** The most important things parents can do for their adolescents is to **listen** to them. Parents must recognize and respect the value of what they say. Too often they dismiss or underestimate the significance of the pressure they feel and the problems they face. Listening and valuing adolescent ideas is what promotes the ability of parents to effectively communicate with them. Most parents do not listen well because they are too busy--with work, community, church, and home responsibilities. Listening to a teen does not mean giving advice and attempting to correct the situation.
2. **Act on teachable moments.** These are the best times during the day to talk. Issues such as death, sexual behavior, or substance abuse can come up anytime. Take advantage of these windows of opportunity, even if they're only 30 seconds long. Parents who are aware and sense that youth need communication will look toward these teachable moments. They are more important over the long run than giving a long lecture.
3. **Talk about values and ethical behavior.** Passing along a strong sense of values is one of the fundamental tasks of being a parent. No matter how uncomfortable it may be, parents need to talk to their children about what's right and wrong--about appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Timing is important. Teenagers are likely to be more receptive if, instead of sitting them down and saying We need to have a talk, you bring up these issues casually. For example a good time for these discussions is while you are driving with your teen in the car. Not only do you have a captive audience, you also avoid the need for eye contact. This can help teens feel more comfortable. Another part of transmitting values is to let teens know that they can turn to you as a resource if they ever need help. **Example:** If you're ever at a party and something happens that you're uncomfortable with, call us and we'll come pick you up--no questions asked.
4. **Focus on what is important.** Most teens feel compelled to try out different roles. This can be irritating and bewildering to parents. But as painful as it may be to watch, it's one way that teens learn to function on their own without having to consult their parents about every decision. **Rule of thumb:** Don't make a fuss about issues that are reversible or don't directly threaten your child's or another person's safety. These issues include unwashed hair, a messy room, torn jeans, etc. Save your thunder for more important concerns. Safety is a non-negotiable issue. Safety rules need to be stated clearly and enforced consistently. **Examples:** Drinking is not acceptable. If you have a party here, no beer or hard liquor is allowed. . .and an adult must be present at any party you attend.

5. **Be willing to be unpopular.** Try to accept that there will be times when adolescents won't like what you say--or will act as though they don't like you. Being your teen's friend should not be your primary role during this time of their lives. It's important to resist the urge to win their favor--or try too hard to please them. Teens will often make inflammatory statements such as, You don't understand, I'm the only one who has to. . . or I'll die if you don't let me. They're trying to get you to relent and say yes when you want to say no. Hold your ground--and try not to take it personally. Make sure they understand how strongly you feel about a given situation and that you have the information you need to make a decision.
6. **Avoid arguing.** Arguing only fuels hostility--and it doesn't get you heard. Here are some principles to follow:
  - a. Don't feel obliged to judge everything your teen says. Retain the mutual right to disagree.
  - b. Never try to reason with someone who is upset--it is futile. Wait until tempers have cooled off before trying to sort out a disagreement.
  - c. Don't try to talk teens out of their feelings. They have the right to be hurt, angry, and disappointed--just as you do. You can acknowledge someone's reaction without condoning it. This type of response often defuses anger.
7. **Be respectful.** Parents get offended when children treat them discourteously. But they often fail to recognize when they're doing the same to them. **Example:** A parent who enters a teenager's room without first being invited is showing disrespect. We would be angry if they went into our rooms and went through our possessions. Children should have the same right to privacy. Of course, respect works both ways. Teens owe us the courtesy of letting us know where they are and how we can reach them--especially when their plans change on the spur of the moment.
8. **Help teens learn from experience.** No matter how hard parents try to teach good judgment and supervise their important decisions, teens may still act in ways that frighten them. Sometimes dealing with the consequences of their own actions inspires sensible behavior more effectively than any lecture or discussion. **Example:** A mother went away for the weekend and without permission, her daughter invited a few friends in for a party--no adults present. Some other teens crashed the party, drank heavily and threatened to get violent. The girl felt she had lost control in her own house. She realized her mother was right in insisting that adults be there. Although we would rather our kids not learn life's lessons the hard way, the fact is that experience can be the best and most persuasive teacher.
9. **Encourage participation in activities** in which teens can develop competence and which they enjoy as well. If the adolescent can develop a sense of competency in acceptable activities, he will feel worthy and accepted. In feeling competent, the teen will have fun and reduce stress. Parents need to assist youth in developing an acceptable and supportive social network. This network, or "peer group," along with family and friends, can be a buffer and effective means of preventing the adolescent from becoming a high risk person.

### Identifying Assets in the Adolescent Environment

The worksheet below was developed by the Search Institute. It is designed so the adolescent and parent can identify and discuss the **assets** or **strengths**, available or lacking, in the adolescent environment. Complete the checklist separately, then talk about how each responded. Do not get into an argument about whether the asset is available. What's important is to discuss how to create or enhance an asset in the teen's life if parent/teen thinks it is lacking.

### Promoting Youth Assets

Parents can do several things to promote asset development in youth. Some of these are (Benson, 1993):

1. Give frequent, tangible expressions of love, care, and support to kids at all ages/stages.
2. Use discipline and control strategies which set clear rules and limits and negotiate reasonable consequences for rule-breaking and rewards for positive behavior.
3. Encourage involvement in structured youth activities (music, sports, clubs, church, etc.).
4. Minimize attendance at drinking parties; band together with other parents to prevent their occurrence.
5. Model responsible chemical use and vehicle safety behaviors.
6. Make family helping projects, in which parents and children together give help to others in need, a priority.
7. Encourage and reward achievement motivation, post-high school educational aspirations, and homework.
8. Minimize overexposure to TV and other mass media forms.
9. Emphasize development of positive values, including positive values and values of behavioral restraint.
10. Advocate for effective schools and community youth-serving organizations.

## **Conclusion**

Adolescence is a transitional period between childhood and adulthood, and its most significant characteristic is rapid change. For many youth, this is a time of painful struggle, with mixed messages and conflicting demands. Through the media, in communities, in the streets, in peer groups and at home, teens are invited to participate in self-destructive and illegal behaviors. Children may be unable to "Just Say No" to high risk behaviors without some alternatives. These may include determining youth assets and expanding on them; learning assertiveness skills, conflict management, negotiation skills, and other competencies; and by having positive interaction experiences in peer groups.

Risk-behavior prevention must cover a wide range of issues that adolescents face in order to be most effective. Parents and community organizations must address issues such as family violence, poverty, psychiatric illness, poor interpersonal skills, learning deficits, and the dysfunctional development often associated with such behaviors. Parents must teach values and model appropriate, ethical behavior. Parents, churches, schools, and community organizations must become more involved in a positive, constructive way. Recovery from the plague of family and community violence, alcohol and drug abuse begins not when our problems disappear, but when we learn how to deal with them.

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EXTERNAL ASSETS	Teen's View	Parent's View
<b>Support</b>		
1. Teen receives lots of love and support from his/her family.	_____	_____
2. Teen sees parent(s) as accessible resources for advice and support.	_____	_____
3. Teen has frequent in-depth conversations with parent(s).	_____	_____
4. Teen has access to nonparent adults for advice and support.	_____	_____
5. Teen has frequent in-depth conversations with nonparent adults.	_____	_____
6. Parent(s) are involved in helping teen succeed in school.	_____	_____
7. School provides a caring, encouraging environment.	_____	_____
<b>Boundaries</b>		
8. Parent(s) have set standards for appropriate conduct.	_____	_____
9. Parent(s) discipline teen when rules are violated.	_____	_____
10. Parent(s) keep track of where teen is and who teen is with.	_____	_____
11. Teen goes out for fun and recreation three or less nights each week.	_____	_____
12. Teen's best friends model responsible behavior.	_____	_____
<b>Structured Time Use</b>		
13. Teen spends at least three hours each week in music or drama.	_____	_____
14. Teen spends at least one hour each week in school sports, clubs, or organizations.	_____	_____
15. Teen spends at least one hour each week in organizations and clubs outside of school.	_____	_____
16. Teen spends at least one hour each week attending religious activities.	_____	_____
<b>INTERNAL ASSETS</b>		
<b>Educational Commitment</b>		
17. Teen is motivated to do well in school.	_____	_____
18. Teen aspires to continue schooling after high school.	_____	_____
19. Teen's school performance is above average.	_____	_____
20. Teen does at least six hours of homework each week.	_____	_____
<b>Positive Values</b>		
21. Teen places a high value on helping other people.	_____	_____

- |   |       |       |
|---|-------|-------|
| 22. Teen is interested in reducing world suffering.       | _____ | _____ |
| 23. Teen cares about other people's feelings.             | _____ | _____ |
| 24. Teen thinks it's important not to be sexually active. | _____ | _____ |

**Social Competence**

- |   |       |       |
|---|-------|-------|
| 25. Teen can stand up for what he/she believes in.    | _____ | _____ |
| 26. Teen is good at making appropriate decisions.     | _____ | _____ |
| 27. Teen is good at making friends.                   | _____ | _____ |
| 28. Teen is good at planning ahead.                   | _____ | _____ |
| 29. Teen has high self-esteem.                        | _____ | _____ |
| 30. Teen is optimistic about his/her personal future. | _____ | _____ |

<sup>1</sup>Thanks to Cynthia Strasheim, Connie Frances, Leanne Manning, LaDean Jha and Janet Hanna for their editorial assistance.

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***File G1322 under: FAMILY LIFE***

***D-4, Adolescence and Youth***

*Issued April 1997; 3,000 printed.*

*Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Elbert C. Dickey, Director of Cooperative Extension, University of Nebraska, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.*

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