Developing Positive Behaviors
In Our Youth
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This is Part 1 of a 2 Part Series.
Part 2 will be in the October Issue of Health Unlimited

Young people are challenged by many factors that threaten their wellbeing. These include drug use and high-risk sexual behaviors. With the emergence of the Internet and the possibility of viewing pornography, participating in Internet gambling, or making sexual liaisons, our youth may be snared into addictions or behaviors with life-long consequences.

Community agencies and governmental organizations scramble to find resources for prevention efforts yet the problems persist. Financial resources are always difficult to locate, but those who work in the area of prevention often state that the most difficult resources to locate are people, individuals.

Faith groups are in an ideal position to foster healthy communities by encouraging positive behaviors. This paper details several concepts that are components of effective prevention strategies. The science of prevention must be based upon empirically verifiable evidence. Despite advances in this area, many communities continue to invest in prevention strategies that have shown little effectiveness.

Component 1: Information

Faith organizations rely on message or information dissemination (i.e., preaching) to spread the truth as a principle method of indoctrinating church attendees into a particular belief system. The assumption is that once individuals are armed with the information from sermons or the study of doctrine they will be transformed by and move into

References

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a closer and more spiritual relationship with God and be less likely to engage in health-damaging behaviors.

The belief that preaching is an effective strategy influences how churches or faith organizations design community efforts targeted at the prevention of high-risk behaviors among youth. Such information-based prevention efforts are driven by the assumption that once young people know specific information about drugs or sex, this knowledge will result in less drug use, less sex or less risky sexual behaviors. There is little research to suggest that information alone is a successful strategy in preventing high-risk behaviors among adolescents. ¹, ²

While knowledge is an essential basis for risk behavior prevention programs to correct misconceptions and inaccurate beliefs, other components are critical to effective prevention programs.

Component 2: Self-esteem
One of the most significant developmental tasks facing youth, particularly adolescents, revolves around their identity and self-worth. Research has demonstrated the protective effect of self-esteem with regard to prevention or reduction of high-risk behavior.³

How do we give our children and those around us genuine positive self-esteem? One way is to provide unconditional acceptance, while encouraging an accurate appreciation of their special abilities and worth.⁴ To do this we need to focus on showing our love and regard for them, reflecting God’s love, rather than judging them based on their behaviors. We need to spend quality time with loved ones fairly often -- not to smother them with undeserved adulation, but to take a few minutes a day, several times each week to talk, listen and enjoy their company. Young people should not see us as sacrificing our time in order to mechanically pay attention to them. Showering kids with gifts in no way communicates to them that they are valued; rather, it shows them that “things” are a replacement for our time and attention. What is important is the quality, as well as the quantity, of time we spend with them. It is important for young people to know with certainty that we care about what they are doing.

Genuine self-esteem can be an asset in preventing high-risk behaviors. An effective strategy for preventing risky behaviors should not be limited, however, to self-esteem enhancing activities.

Component 3: Resilience
Resilience is the capacity to maintain competent functioning in spite of adversity or life stressors. Resiliency appears to develop over time as a result of environmental support. Resilient individuals are those who, despite severe hardships and the presence of factors that place them at risk for a variety of ills, develop coping skills that enable them to succeed in life.⁵

Researchers explain resilience in terms of hardiness, and suggest that resilient individuals have a strong commitment to self and others, and are willing to take action to deal with problems. They also have a positive attitude toward their social environment, hold a strong sense of purpose, and develop the internal strength that enables them to see life’s obstacles as challenges that can be overcome.⁶

Component 4: Caring Others
In research designed to identify what fosters resilience among young people, one important factor emerges: the presence of valuable, sincere, and enduring relationships in resilient individuals. Supportive older adults, or mentors, ranging from teachers to clergy, contribute to resilience among youth.⁷ In studies conducted in many parts of the world, researchers identify a number of factors enabling children of misfortune to beat the heavy odds against them. A central factor is the presence in their lives of a charismatic adult – a person with whom they identify and from whom they gather strength. Brooks states that “… resilient youngsters all had at least one person in their lives that accepted them unconditionally, regardless of temperamental idiosyncrasies, physical attractiveness, or intelligence”.⁷

While it is clear that parents hold the most potential to influence the trajectories of their children, research shows that grandparents can also have a powerful positive influence on the lives of their grandchildren.⁸ Others described as key resources are teachers, elder mentors, friends and parents of friends. People who cared were cited as very important to traumatized daughters of alcoholics.

(This article will continue in next month’s Health Unlimited so be sure to watch for it!)