Developing Positive Behaviors
In Our Youth

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Component 5: After School Activities

After school hours, when youngsters are out of school while parents are still at their work, is the time of day when youth are at highest risk for engaging in risky behaviors. Studies show that often the largest proportion of drug use, sexual activity, and delinquency among youth occurs between the hours of 3:00 PM and 6:00 PM. (1). Research has demonstrated substance use to be lower among students engaged in after-school activities (2, 3). Students who spent no time in extracurricular activities (e.g., after-school programs such as sports, clubs, music) are 49% more likely to have used illicit drugs and 35% more likely to have smoked cigarettes than students who spent one to four hours per week in non-risky extracurricular activities (4). Thus, finding ways to engage children during the after-school hours should be a key part of any successful prevention effort.

Youth in unsupervised settings are at increased risk. “Hanging out” in such social activities is associated with delinquency (5). Youth who spend time in unsupervised settings are more likely to use alcohol and other drugs (6).

Members of faith communities can be significant resources in providing after-school activities for youth and keeping them engaged in positive, meaningful pursuits during that time. This might include involving youth in existing programs and sponsoring social activities at church and other suitable venues with the supervision and involvement of adults. Young people must be involved in positive activities during these hours to reduce their risk of engaging in risky behaviors.
protected from potentially dangerous adults, however, by the church conducting background checks for sexual crimes or criminal histories on adults considered for interaction with young people in such settings.

**Component 6: Service Activities**

Researchers have identified protective factors relative to sexual risk behaviors. Service learning programs among youth are effective in reducing adolescent pregnancy and childbearing (7). Service learning is defined as voluntary community service such as working as a teachers aide, working in retirement homes or nursing homes, assisting in day care centers or helping fix up parks or recreation areas, with structured time for preparation and reflection before, during and after service.

Kirby states: It is not known for sure why service learning has positive effects on pregnancy, but several explanations have been suggested--participants developed on-going relationships with caring program facilitators, some may have developed greater autonomy and felt more competent in their relationships with peers and adults, some may have been heartened by the realization that they could make a difference in the lives of others--all of which might have increased motivation to avoid pregnancy. The volunteer experiences also encouraged youths to think more about their futures. It may also be that both supervision and alternative activities simply reduced the opportunity for participants to engage in problem behaviors, including . . . sex. (7).

Faith community members should consider collaborating to identify places and activities to involve youth in service activities. Physicians and business owners might consider inviting youth to their offices or clinics to answer phones, to greet patients or clients. Those who work in stores might find ways to influence proprietors to create opportunities for young people to become engaged in activities that allow for supervised customer related activities. Creative thinking, involvement and planning could have a positive impact on youth by getting them involved with helping others in their community.

**Component 7: Parent Communication**

Parent-child communication is an important element in high-risk prevention strategies for youth. Research has demonstrated that when parents talk to their kids about sex and drugs there is a positive impact. When youth rate the relationship between the parents and children as very good, this impact is strengthened. In other words, the quality of the relationship tends to pave the way for effective communication (8).

The existence of a positive parent-child relationship is associated with lower incidences of risky behaviors including those related to HIV infection (9) and positive family communication is associated with lower rates of sexual intercourse among young people (10). Sexually inactive adolescents have reported a feeling of closeness with their parents while sexually active adolescents believed their parents would be upset to learn of their risky behaviors (11).

Parent-child communication matters and is an element of effective prevention of high-risk behaviors among youth. While research on the effectiveness of non-family adult-youth communication is lacking, we can imply from the research on resilience that non-family adult communication has the potential for effectiveness.

**Discussion:**

After reviewing research in the area of prevention of high-risk behaviors among adolescents, it is clear that we can have a very positive effect on these behaviors. In other words, the technology of prevention has developed to the point where we can say with confidence that we can impact the lives of youth and assist them in being at much less risk for involvement in dangerous behaviors.

It is clear that prevention can be done with little cost if members of each community, hopefully the faith community, will work to provide each component. There is no one component which will solve this problem. The solution is to provide each component in an effective way.

Research on the consequences of the media, particularly the Internet, is in its infancy. These are new challenges that must be clearly understood and then approached in a systematically fashion.

When you examine each of the components, you may notice that our responsibilities in providing these components matches our need to reflect the character of Jesus Christ. He was a helper, a healer, and engaged with people in a very positive way. When he entered towns there were many who were sick. When he left town, they were healed. By reflecting His character we can provide youth with a sense that they have value (self-esteem), engage them in after-school activities, communicate with them in a loving way, involve them in activities to help others in the community, thus helping them to avoid high-risk behaviors.