

“Everybody needs one person in their life who thinks they’re great, no matter what.”

– Alice, 16

A Guide to Creating Teen-Adult Conversations in Your Community



Prepared by
WHAT KIDS CAN DO, INC
with support from
MetLife Foundation

Fall 2005

Nearly one in four American teenagers say they do not have enough caring adults in their lives and nearly one-half wish they had more adults they could turn to for help.

- *America's Promise Voices Study*, June 2005

Contents

1 INTRODUCTION

Why we need to create community conversations between young people and the adults in their lives. The power of public forums that bring adults and teenagers together around issues that matter to them.

4 SAMPLE TEEN-ADULT FORUMS

Sample agendas, panel topics and questions, interactive exercises, and handouts for three forums:

5 What We Can't Tell You

9 Spreading Our Wings

14 The "Parent Next Door"

20 LOGISTICS

21 Planning checklist

21 Making the forums your own

22 How to get the media's attention

23 Sample media coverage

25 Sample publicity poster

26 Order form for *What We Can't Tell You: Teenagers Talk to the Adults in Their Lives* (Next Generation Press, 2005), and what youth and parent advocates say about the book

29 APPENDIX

30 Active Listening: A Communication Tool

33 Changing The Way We See Teenagers

36 Online resources that support youth voice and action

A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation

Introduction

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ADULTS AND ADOLESCENTS ARE ALWAYS POWERFUL. Precisely for that reason, they can either erode teenagers' development into strong and confident people or create small and large occasions for growth and connection. Miscommunication and silence can tilt the balance of these relationships. Parents and other adults longing to connect with a teenager often find themselves groping in the dark. Most adolescents don't talk much to adults, even when they think about them a lot.

So what's on their minds when teens shrug off parents' questions with one-word responses? To what adults do they think they matter, and why? Who matters to them? What in their relationships with adults encourages them to thrive and strive—to embrace learning, take positive risks, work hard, and put their skepticism, idealism, and curiosity to good use? What shuts them down? How, then, can adults best reach out to kids, understand them, and offer the help they need?

In 2005, What Kids Can Do—a national nonprofit organization bringing youth voices and insight to bear on problems facing schools, communities, and families—set out to answer these and other questions about teenagers' relationships with close-in adults. With support from MetLife Foundation, we turned for advice to teenagers themselves.

Over a period of six months, WKCD writer Kathleen Cushman met with sixty teenagers nationwide, gathering their views, experiences, stories, and tips. From these intensive discussions and interviews came a book, *What We Can't Tell You: Teenagers Talk to the Adults in Their Lives* (Next Generation Press, 2005).

Since the book's publication, WKCD has traveled the country, co-hosting with local organizations public forums that promote honest conversations between teenagers and adults. Along the way, we have been struck by the absence of public occasions where adults and young people can find common ground across the divide that separates them. We have noticed the extent to which adult concerns for teenagers focus on keeping them from negative behaviors, rather than supporting them as positive contributors to their families, schools, and communities. We have heard teens say, again and again, how they wished they had more caring adults they could turn to for support and inspiration. We have concluded that we owe our teenagers more.

The power of public dialogue

"We will never understand each other without talking, we're not mind readers," one teen said of his relationships with adults. "And it may sound strange, but sometimes the best way to get the conversation going is sideways. Not in your own living room with your own parents, but in a public space with adults who aren't your parents, and vice versa. It relieves the tension."

This has been our experience, too. Dialogue, we know, helps promote change. When individuals share their opinions and have their opinions tested by others, long-held assumptions can lose some of their force. Small insights can shift old attitudes and behaviors. Between groups that view each other with suspicion, or for whom talk is often difficult, open dialogue can help forge common ground.

"Somewhere we took a wrong turn. We stopped putting young people and adults together, doing things that are important to both."

— Kathleen Cushman, author, *What We Can't Tell You: Teenagers Talk to the Adults in Their Lives*

A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation

And when the conversation is public, when it brings together a diverse group, participants can gain perspective from learning about experiences different than their own, as well as draw comfort from those facing similar struggles. “Hearing what other teenagers have to say helps me understand my own teen,” one parent wrote at the end of a teen-adult forum WKCD co-hosted in Houston, Texas. “I see better how things she does that seem disrespectful, to me, are about self-expression, to her. It takes the edge off my feelings.” Providing a setting where teens and parents can talk without having to address each other directly can also be freeing and, in the case of teens, validating. At the end of the Houston forum, one of the teenage panelists told the audience, “I can’t tell you how much it means to us when adults we don’t know take our voices seriously, when we are treated with respect and not condescension. “

Adult or teenager, we owe each other the same thing: to share what is hard for us, to listen carefully to what we hear, and to put ourselves in the other’s shoes.

What you will find here

In this guide, we outline three possible public forums that can spark teen-adult conversations in your own community or school, similar to those WKCD has helped arrange in Houston, St. Louis, and other cities across the country.

The **first** forum focuses on promoting mutual understanding and respect between teenagers and the adults closest to them.

The **second** explores positive risk-taking by adolescents.

The **third** challenges adults to take more responsibility for teens in their community who are not their own.

Let us say more about the second and third forums.

Why a forum devoted to positive risk-taking by teens?

Healthy risk-taking is integral to the life of adolescents. It helps them discover, shape, and consolidate their identities. Teen risk-taking only becomes negative when the risks are dangerous. “Healthy risks—often understood as ‘challenges’—can turn unhealthy risks in a more positive direction,” psychologist Lynn Ponton writes, “or prevent them from ever taking place to begin with.” We are right to worry about teen safety and to press restraint in the face of alcohol, drugs, and sex. However, we must also do all we can to help teenagers spread their wings.

And why a forum that challenges adults to step in with “other people’s” children?

The national organization America’s Promise recently asked ten- to seventeen-year-olds across the country about the fundamental resources they need in their lives. The teen respondents overwhelmingly said that supportive adults are vital to their journey as they navigate the waters of growing up. Over nine in ten in the America’s Promise survey agreed that, “people my age need adults who don’t judge them when they have problems.” Nearly half said that they wished “I had more adults I feel I could turn to when I need help,” and one in four agreed that “besides my parents or guardians, I don’t have enough adults in my life who look out for me.” [America’s Promise Voices Study: Research Findings, Alexandria, VA, spring 2005]

“If you wanted adults to know one thing about you as teenagers, what would you tell them?” asked one facilitator, a professor at St. Louis University.

One student replied, “That we’re human. We’re going to make mistakes.”

As students spoke Tuesday night, they often did so reluctantly. But the adults were slightly more forthcoming. They expressed their frustration that they couldn’t communicate with their children without their getting defensive.

“If they could just understand that we’re trying to help them,” said one parent. “They’re the most important things—they’re it.”

“Family Matters: Schools Promote Talks between Adults, Teens,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 21, 2005

A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation

For each forum, we provide a detailed, annotated agenda that begins with a teen-adult panel, moves to interactive exercises, and ends with open discussion. We also include handouts for the audience. At the end of this guide are complementary resources:

- A summary of the findings on the role of caring adults from the *America's Promise Voices Study*
- Ten recommendations for how a school or a community might tackle the tough business of changing how the public sees teens
- A collection of online resources
- A sample poster that can be adapted to advertise your community's or school's forum
- A form for ordering, at a deep discount, multiple copies of *What We Can't Tell You: Teenagers Talk to the Adults in Their Lives* (Next Generation Press, 2005), plus a sample of what youth and parent advocates say about the book.

What we hope for

We hope this guide spurs you to organize one or more public forums of your own, conversations that bring adults and teenagers together around issues that matter to both. While we have put a lot of thought into the three sample forums we present here, we urge you to customize them to fit your own priorities and circumstances.

If you can manage just one forum, that's a good start; at stage two or three, you have created a dialogue—and built a team—that may continue and stick.

In the process, we hope **parents and other adult participants** will learn

- How to talk with teens about difficult topics
- What young people appreciate and admire about them, even though they might not say so directly
- The lasting positive effects their small interactions with teens can have on young people's behaviors and their futures
- How to help teens embrace learning and take positive risks
- What it feels like to be a teenager these days (feedback that adults hear better without the control issues that interfere when it's their own child talking)

We hope **organizations, including schools**, that take on the convening role will

- Deepen their commitment to strengthening relationships between adolescents and adults
- Develop innovative strategies for putting this commitment into practice

We hope **teenagers** will

- Believe that their voices matter
- Contribute to an ongoing conversation with adults that benefits families, communities, and schools alike

"Here's the bottom line: As a community, it's time to break the silence and miscommunication between adolescents and adults. We must stop fearing our teenagers. There is so much we need to learn from each other."

- [Parent panelist,] Houston, Texas

A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation



Three sample teen-adult forums

A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation

Sample Forum Agenda: What We Can't Tell You Houston, Texas

I. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION (10 MIN.)

Opening remarks by Houston's First Lady. Welcome by Director of Communications for the Houston A+ Challenge, who then introduces the forum's moderators and turns the program over to them.

II. QUICK CENSUS OF AUDIENCE (2 MIN.)

- Please stand up if at any time in the past, up through today, you have ever been a teenager.
- Please remain standing if you are currently a teenager. (*The rest can sit.*)
- Please stand up if you interact regularly with teenagers as part of the work you do.
- Please stand up if you live with a teenager.

III. PANEL DISCUSSION (60 MIN.)

The panel discussion includes four teens and four adults. The teenage panelists represent a spectrum of ages, backgrounds, and schools. The four adult panelists include a child development expert, a school guidance counselor, a parent who does volunteer work with teens after school, and a parent of teenagers. The teens sit at one table, adults at another; the tables are angled so that they face each other, along with the audience.

PROCESS: Moderators describe the format for the panel discussion—a back-and-forth between teens and adults who have volunteered to offer their experiences and views. The discussion will take the form of “rounds”: The moderators will throw out an issue, briefly frame it (drawing upon relevant quotes from the teenage co-authors of *What We Can't Tell You*), and then present the panelists with a question that goes to the heart of the issue. Teen panelists will be invited to react first, then the adults, and finally the audience. There will be three rounds, each lasting 20 minutes.

The moderators ask the panelists to introduce themselves, and then the first round begins. A time keeper makes sure the discussion stays on track, allowing sufficient time for each round.

Round One: The “interrogation point”

Frame: When adults want to know more about matters teenagers consider private, they often have only the best of intentions. They might want to open up a dialogue about the important things in a young person's life, whether those are happy or troubling. Or maybe they have some reason to worry about the teenager's health, safety, or state of mind. But adults risk a lot when they don't respect the line that teenagers draw around their private lives. If they make a habit of probing for too much information, they may find the door locked when their teen most needs it open.

Quotes:

- “When I'm talking to my parents, sometimes I have to censor what I'm saying, just not tell them a lot about it, because then they get too inquisitive. I feel if I talk to them too much, then they'll think, ‘Oh, my son loves me and loves to talk to me,’ and then they'll try to start more conversations. Give them an inch and they'll walk all over you!” —Greg
- “I think they should trust me enough for me to just say, ‘You know what, I'm going out to see people,’ and that can be the end of it. But that's never the end of it.” —Aurelia

Question: When does caring feel like intrusiveness?

A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation

Round Two: Respect

Frame: Adults often say that young people today aren't respectful enough. But respect goes both ways. Showing respect for teenagers means more than simply not invading their privacy—it involves a daily give-and-take. Not only in conflicts but also in the most ordinary interactions, adults can either grant teenagers a certain dignity or take it away.

Quotes:

- “What might not be a large issue to you could be a very large issue to your child. So don't say, ‘Don't worry about it,’ or ‘That's not important, that's nothing.’ Don't act like it's nothing.”
—Michael
- “If my mom is listening, her face shows it all—that she's interested and she's actually paying attention to what I'm saying.” —Blake

Question: *What are some of the small ways in which adults and teens communicate respect or disrespect for one another?*

Round Three: Watching and worrying

Frame: Even as adolescents grow more independent of their parents, they also stay tuned to everything that the adults around them are doing. They might act like they don't care, but little that you do escapes them—how you handle job stress, the health risks you take, the affection or kindness you show them and other family members, as well as friends, work colleagues, even strangers.

Quotes:

- “I don't want to be the way my dad is with his job, how he works all the time and doesn't see people that he would claim are important to him.” —September
- “If you see one of your parents being always yelled at by the other one, how are you supposed to learn self-esteem? They are your examples, and if they're together and can't get along, you just don't want to be anywhere near them.” —Sarah
- “When they try to hide things from me, it really bothers me. Because they're not in the best of health, and to be honest, we're not financially the best. But when they sit there and they're like, ‘Oh yeah, everything's great,’ it really makes me feel bad. I'd rather them be straightforward with me. —Shannon

Questions:

To the adults: ***What do you hope your teenager notices—or doesn't notice—about you?***

To the teenagers: ***What do you notice that worries you about your parent(s) or other adults you are close to?***

IV. EXERCISE FOR THE AUDIENCE (20 MIN.)

Ask the audience to spend five minutes silently reading through and filling out the exercise “Who Do You Trust, and Why?” Then ask them to share their responses with the people at their table or sitting nearby (if they aren't seated at tables). (10 min.) Finally, invite reflections on the exercise from the audience as a whole. (5 min.) **[See page 7 for the exercise]**

V. DISCUSSION AND CLOSING REFLECTIONS (10 MIN.)

HANDOUT: “What Parents Need to Know About Raising Teens” **[See page 8]**

EXERCISE



Who do you trust, and why?

Think about a person in your life whom you really feel you can trust. The person can be someone who you're close with now, or someone you were close with sometime in the past.

Check off all the statements that apply to your relationship with this person.

- I wouldn't be afraid to tell this person about a big mistake I'd made.
- I know this person wouldn't discuss something I had asked them to keep private.
- This person likes me for who I am, not what I do.
- I could call this person in the middle of the night if I needed help in an emergency.
- I spend a lot of time with this person.
- I don't have to act "nice" around this person if I don't feel up to it.
- I don't see this person that often, but our times together are special to both of us.
- This person has seen me at my worst
- When this person offers advice, it doesn't feel like criticism.

Now ask yourself:

When you were a teenager, did you feel this way about your parents? Why or why not? Do you think your teenager feels this way about you? Why or why not? You can jot down your answers in the space below.

HANDOUT



What parents need to know about raising teens

Parenting adolescents demands information and skills that parents may not previously have acquired. Areas that are likely to be new to parents, where additional knowledge and stronger skills may be needed, include the following:

- What to expect from teens, what is normal and why
- What to expect within oneself, what typically changes at midlife, how these developments resonate with changes in teens, and why.
- What *not* to expect: warning signs that parents and teens may be having difficulties requiring special assistance.
- How to access and evaluate community resources.
- How to get help in filling gaps in parenting skills.
- How to meet appropriately one's own needs for love and support.
- How to adapt to a child's emerging sexuality.
- How to accommodate powerful and sometimes sudden changes in a teen's mood, level of conflict, distance, desire for privacy, and dependence on friends.
- How to negotiate conflicts and differences of opinion in ways that meet the needs of both parent and teen.
- How to adapt one's style of listening and talking to accommodate and facilitate a teen's new way of thinking, search for identity, and need for respectful problem-solving.
- How to maintain a set of supportive family activities, rituals, and cultural traditions.
- How to enjoy some of the unique characteristics of adolescence in general and in each teen in particular.
- How to design a home environment that is welcoming to the family's teens and, where appropriate, their activities, interests, and peers.
- How to plan consciously and proactively a family environment that offers a healthy level of challenge, expectations, stimulation, and risk, neither too much nor too little for a teen's growth and development.
- How to give teens roles in the family and community that are genuinely useful and important to the family's well-being.
- How to distinguish among areas of teen behavior where it remains important to be involved directly, where it is enough to monitor indirectly, and where it is time to let go.
- How to identify, express, and explore with teens one's parental values around issues such as sex, religion, morality, responsibility, gender roles, diversity and risk-taking.
- How to monitor behavior, including networking with other adults.
- How and when to interact with middle- and high-school teachers and staff and other adults in a teen's life, both to gather information and to advocate on behalf of the teen.
- How to offer information and guidance to teens in effective ways.

[From "Raising Teens: A Synthesis of Research and Foundation for Action," A. Rae Simpson, Ph.D., Project on the Parenting of Adolescents, Center for Health Communications, Harvard School of Public Health, 2003]

A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation

Sample Forum Agenda: Spreading Our Wings Long Island City, New York

I. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION (5 min.)

Welcome by the Dean of Students at LaGuardia Community College and the director of Middle College High School, who then introduces the forum's moderators and turns the program over to them.

II. QUICK CENSUS OF AUDIENCE (5 min.)

- Please stand up if at any time in the past, up through today, you have taken a significant risk.
- Please remain standing if you have taken significant risks that, by and large, had positive consequences. *(The rest can sit.)*
- Please remain standing if you have taken significant risks that, in hindsight, you deeply regret. *(The rest can sit. Then everyone sit.)*
- Please stand up if you worry a lot about your own teen or other teens taking negative risks—and what you can do to protect them. *[Now sit.]*
- Please stand up if you worry a lot about helping your own teen or other teens take healthy risks—and what you can do to support them *[Now sit.]*

Moderator to audience: **What do you make of this?**

III. PANEL DISCUSSION (40 min.)

The panel discussion includes four teens and four adults. The teenage panelists represent a spectrum of ages, backgrounds, and schools. The four adult panelists include a child development expert, a teacher known for his/her exciting approach to instruction, a parent who does volunteer work with teens after school, and a parent of teenagers. The teens sit at one table, adults at another; the tables are angled so that they face each other, along with the audience.

PROCESS: Moderators describe the format for the panel discussion—a back-and-forth between teens and adults who have volunteered to offer their experiences and views. Explain that the discussion will take the form of “rounds”: the moderators will throw out an issue, briefly frame it (drawing upon relevant quotes from the teenage co-authors of *What We Can't Tell You*), and then present the panelists with a question that goes to the heart of the issue. Teen panelists will be invited to react first, then the adults, and finally the audience. There will be two rounds, each lasting 20 minutes.

The moderators ask the panelists to introduce themselves, and then the first round begins. A time keeper makes sure the discussion stays on track, allowing sufficient time for each round.

Round One: Healthy risk-taking

Frame: Much of adolescent parenting and parenting advice revolves around keeping teens from taking risks that put them in harm's way or have the potential to lead them astray. However, adolescents *must* take risks as a way of developing the skills they will need in making decisions as adults. So, rather than clamping down on the risks teenagers take, adults can help them by supporting risk-taking in more positive settings, to spread their wings.

A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation

Quotes:

- “A lot of parents hold their children so tight they lose them. I use this metaphor: I walk to the beach and I have sand in my hand. I see that as parents holding you in their hand—if you squeeze the sand too tight, it comes out of the hand, and you lose it.” —Moses
- “There was never a question of me taking a year off before I went to college. If their question was ‘What do you want to do next year?’ as compared to ‘Where do you want to go to college?’ I think the conversation would have been completely different.” —Aurelia

Questions: *How can parents and other adults loosen their grip where it is too tight and help teens take positive risks? What positive risks should we encourage teens to take?*

Round Two: “I’m Not You,” “I’m Not Them”

Frame: In the midst of developing their own identities, adolescents often resent being compared to anyone else—especially their parents or friends. They hate being labeled, at the same time that they want encouragement for their interests or talents. They tell adults: Share what it was like for you growing up, but don’t expect us to follow in your footsteps, to make the same mistakes or duplicate your successes. Don’t expect us to see the world the way you do, just like we don’t expect you to see the world like us. Let us experiment.

Quotes:

- “I hate it when my parents or adults compare me to other kids—like, ‘So-and-so did blah, blah, blah, and you should be doing that’—or compare me to themselves: ‘When I was your age...’” —Liliana
- “My mom makes me feel like I have to learn from her mistakes—she doesn’t even give me a chance to make my own. She just flat out says no.” —Tabitha
- “I used to have a huge red mohawk, and like, spikes and everything. My mom hated it, it made her so upset, and she thought it was because I was mad at her, or mad at myself, or something. I just thought I was expressing myself.” —Tommy

Question: *How can parents and other adults communicate their expectations (and not their fears) for a teenager, and at the same time give them room to be themselves?*

IV. EXERCISES FOR THE AUDIENCE (40 min.)

Ask the audience to spend five minutes silently reading through and jotting down their answers to the first exercise, “Let’s Make A Deal.” Then ask them to share their responses with the people at their table or sitting nearby (if they aren’t seated at tables). (10 min.) Finally, invite participants to share their reflections on the exercise with the audience as a whole. (5 min.) **[See page 11 for both exercises]**

Now invite the audience to try their hand at a second exercise, “So Much to Build Upon.” Ask them to follow the same process: Write down their own thoughts, then share them with others at their table, and finally share, if they want, with the full audience. With this exercise, ask them also to appoint a recorder who can take down the individual responses and turn them into a group list.

V. DISCUSSION AND CLOSING REFLECTIONS (10 min.)

HANDOUT: “The Romance of Risk” **[See page 12]**

EXERCISES



Let's Make a Deal

Teenagers know that they need your support, and in order to get it they are willing to give up some of the freedoms they want. Below they describe the bargain they might strike with you. As you read it, think about which parts of the deal are hardest for you as a parent or as a teenager. Which parts do you think are the hardest for your teenager or your parent? You can write your responses below and on the reverse side.

IF YOU (PARENTS) WILL...	THEN WE (TEENS) WILL...
Give us a chance to explain our thinking	Think through our choices more carefully
Help us take risks by trying exciting new things	Stay away from risks that would get us in trouble
Hear us out respectfully when we have trouble with your rules	Accept your right to set limits on our behavior
Respect our choices when they only involve our personal taste	Respect your rules when they involve our health or safety
Give us a second chance when we mess up	Try again to live up to your trust
Look for common ground when we disagree	Look for a compromise we can both live with
Focus on the positive, not what we do wrong	Appreciate how much you care about us

NOTES:

So Much to Build Upon

Perhaps one reason we put so much emphasis on keeping teenagers safe and “in line” is the lens through which we see them. We see their vulnerabilities and trouble spots—and feel grateful for what they *don't* do. In the process, we often overlook those aspects of their adolescence that make them uniquely capable and strong in some areas. And then we fail to give them the chance to spread their wings.

In the space below (and on the reverse side of this sheet), write down as many positive traits as you can about the adolescents you know. These are the strengths we owe it to our teens to draw out and build upon.

NOTES:

<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>

HANDOUT



The Romance of Risk

By Lynn Ponton, M.D.

[Reprinted with permission from *The Romance of Risk: Why Teenagers Do the Things They Do*, by Lynn E. Ponton, M.D., Basic Books, 1997]

Two things are absolutely clear about adolescents: They are going to take risks; and most of their parents are terrified about this. In 1995, when the Carnegie Institute published its findings on youth and risk, its reports suggested that American youths today are at greater danger because they take more risks and are exposed to even more opportunities for dangerous risks than at any other time in American history. The report called attention to an important and neglected issue, but it also sent a message to the culture that there is something inherently dangerous about being an adolescent. If the dangers to adolescents are inevitable, then there is nothing any of us can do but hold our collective breathe and pray as the children we love and care for approach this treacherous time. But how much of this fear is justified? How dangerous is adolescence? What are the appropriate areas for concern, and what are the commonly held myths and misconceptions?

Moving Away from Myth: Adolescence Is Not Dangerous

Current thinking is beginning to acknowledge that adolescence is a time of risk-taking that is not solely harmful, and, in fact, that frequent risk-taking is a normative, healthy developmental behavior for adolescents. It is during adolescence that young people experiment with many aspects of life, taking on new challenges, testing out how things fit together, and using this process to define and shape both their identities and their knowledge of the world. Adolescence is a time when, quite literally, young people are learning how to think and how to act. Their increasing cognitive skills play a significant role as they take risks and learn to understand and appreciate the consequences of their behavior. In turn, experimenting with new behaviors and feelings can promote more complex thinking, increase confidence, and help to develop a young person's ability to assess and undertake risks in the future. This experimentation greatly affects adolescents' relationships with parents and other important adults in their lives. As they struggle to define themselves as separate individuals, they want to be recognized by adults for the unique people they are and will become. Their struggle is not all adolescent rebellion, then, but a much more complicated and fascinating process.

Armed with a number of clinical and epidemiological studies, Dr. Daniel Offer and his colleagues at Northwestern University have undertaken the task of dispelling some of the myths about adolescence, including the myths that normal adolescence is a stormy time; that puberty is a uniformly negative event for adolescents; and that adolescents are more likely to commit suicide than are children or adults. In contrast, Offer's studies indicate that 80 percent of all adolescents, including urban youth, do not experience turmoil but manage to succeed negotiating the developmental period of adolescence without significant difficulty.

"Adolescence is a time when, quite literally, young people are learning how to think and how to act."

Dr. Charles Irwin, my friend and respected colleague at the University of California's San Francisco Adolescent Medicine Clinic and also a pediatrician who has specialized in adolescent risk-taking, underscores that it's important for both adolescents and adults to distinguish between behaviors that are enhancing to the adolescent and those that represent a significant danger. He notes that the outcome of adolescent risk-taking is always uncertain, and that the consequences may or may not be harmful. Sexual activity provides a perfect example: It can yield genuine pleasure and intimacy, but it may also result in unplanned pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted diseases.

Irwin defines risk-taking among adolescents as: young people who have limited experience engaging in potentially destructive behaviors with or without understanding the consequences of their actions. Recognizing that most risk-taking is a normal, developmentally appropriate part of adolescence has not been easy for professionals or parents, at least in part because the more negative and dangerous risk behaviors and behavior patterns overshadow normal adolescent risk-taking, frightening everyone. And there is a difference, after all, between turbulence and danger.



Getting It Straight: Positive Risk Is a Positive Step

In truth most teens are not at high risk for getting locked into patterns of unhealthy behavior. And when we assume that all risk-taking is dangerous, we betray our teenagers. Teens need risks in order to grow; they need parental support in order to take those risks. If the risk-taking becomes dangerous, then, of course, parents must act. But when we assume that all adolescent risk-taking is bad, we fail to recognize both the very real dangers some risks pose and the tremendous benefits that others can yield. This understanding requires nothing less than a radical shift in attitude about risk, about adolescents, and about parenting.

Certainly American youth today have more access to more dangerous activities than did earlier generations. But it is because today's parents have many legitimate reasons to be frightened for their children that it is especially important that they work not to be frightened by their children. Rather, parents must work to understand what teens are grappling with.

Risk-taking behavior among adolescents is not random, uncontrollable, or inevitable. And many of the contributing factors to an adolescent's propensity to engage in high-risk behavior are modifiable. Parents need to be aware of how and where they can intervene. Adults and teenagers alike in fact need to be well informed about the risks and about how young people look at these risks. Parents, teachers, and other adults need to develop a comfort level for talking with teenagers about these matters. It's not an easy process, and many shy away from it, but it is an absolutely imperative step in helping young people to develop in healthy ways.

More than any other age group, adolescents are attempting new things for the first time, no longer protected or limited by parents. It's important for adults to remember the positive aspects of risk-taking. Adults also need to be willing to examine their own risk-taking behaviors.

Another part of the story lies in this country's attitude and response to its teenagers. A simple comparison between the number of books addressing the development and behavior of young children and the number focused on adolescent behavior and development tells us that energy and money are not yet invested in teens, who make up 20 percent of the population. Not only have problems in adolescence been neglected because they are viewed as normal, but overall commitment to the age group has been lacking.

"More than any other age group, adolescents are attempting new things for the first time."

Teenagers are not little, they're not cute, and they fight back. Parents routinely tell me that not only do they feel less gratified raising their teenagers than their younger children, but also often they feel attacked by their adolescents. This is only natural. Yet parents need to know that they cannot simply throw in the towel when the conflict starts. The fighting is not meant as a personal attack on parents. It signals a desire for greater independence, yes, but not for total autonomy. Adolescents want to be treated with respect, they want their new maturity to be recognized, and they want to be seen as separate people. But they also don't want to be abandoned by their parents. They need to know they are still cared for and that they can make mistakes. They need to be left alone to make certain choices for themselves, and they need to know that their parents are available to offer opinions when asked. They need to know that they can try new experiences and that there are limits, that they are not allowed to do anything and everything they want.

In other words, different parenting skills are required to care for adolescents than for younger children. Being able to change those skills is a special task for parents of adolescents, and it's not easy. After all, learning new skills when you feel like you're under attack is, at best, difficult. But just as we take care of and protect our children when they're small, holding them close and keeping them safe, we must learn how to guide them in adolescence, loosening our hold in order to let them explore the world and themselves in it. This is the challenge that parents face when their children become adolescents.

In learning how to assess risks and make reasonable choices, young people begin to realize just how powerful they can be, how much control over their own lives they do have, and what promise their futures hold. Risk-taking becomes more than romance then; it becomes a vital tool that adolescents can use to shape their lives.

A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation

Sample Forum Agenda: The “Parent Next Door” St. Louis, Missouri

I. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION (5 min.)

Welcome by the President of St. Louis Council on Youth and the Director of Character*plus*, who then introduces the forum’s moderators and turns the program over to them.

II. POP QUIZ (5 min.)

- Percentage of teenagers who say supportive adults are vital to their journey growing up (raise your hand): a quarter, a half, three-quarters, over three-quarters (*Answer: 90%*)
- Percentage of teenagers who say “I wish I had more adults I could turn to”: a quarter, a half, three-quarters, over three-quarters (*Answer: 75%*)
- Percentage of teenagers who prefer mom over dad as a source of help: a quarter, a half, three-quarters, over three-quarters (*Answer: 70%*)
- Percentage of teenagers who turn most often to an older friend for help or advice: a quarter, a half, three-quarters, over three-quarters (*Answer: 51%*)
- Percentage of teenagers who turn to a guidance counselor for help or advice: A quarter, a half, three-quarters, over three-quarters (*Answer: 13%*)

[From *America’s Promise Voices Study: Research Findings*, Alexandria, VA, spring 2005]

III. PANEL DISCUSSION (40 min.)

The panel discussion includes four teens and four adults. The teenage panelists represent a spectrum of ages, backgrounds, and schools. The four adult panelists include a local business leader, a coach, a parent who does volunteer work with teens after school, and a parent of teenagers. The teens sit at one table, adults at another; the tables are angled so that they face each other, along with the audience.

PROCESS: Moderators describe the format for the panel discussion—a back-and-forth between teens and adults who have volunteered to offer their experiences and views. Explain that the discussion will take the form of “rounds”: the moderators will throw out an issue, briefly frame it, and then present the panelists with a question that goes to the heart of the issue. Teen panelists will be invited to react first, then the adults, and finally the audience. There will be two rounds, each lasting 20 minutes.

The moderators ask the panelists to introduce themselves, and then the first round begins. A time keeper makes sure the discussion stays on track, allowing sufficient time for each round.

Round One: Connecting with other people’s kids

Frame: If you’re an adult, stop for a moment and count up the teenagers you know who aren’t actually your own kids. When is the last time you spoke with one of them, and what did you talk about? To a teenager, the answer to that question matters a lot. Adults who aren’t their parents, they say, often influence them just as strongly as their mother or father—or even more.

A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation

Quotes:

- “When I go to church, there’s always a couple of elderly people who are looking out for me. They always ask, ‘What’s going on? How’s school? How are the grades?’ They have faith in me, they see something in me, so they want to help me out.” —D.J.
- “Other people’s parents, it’s like they can share their experiences with me, without having the power over me or the difficulties that parent-child relationships have.” —Erin

Questions:

To the adults: **What opportunities do you have in your daily life to connect with other people’s kids? What might you do to expand or deepen these connections?**

To the teenagers: **What advice would you give adults who want to reach out more to teenagers in their community?**

Round Two: Changing the way the public views teens

Frame: Perhaps one of the reasons adults shy away from more connections to teens is the prevailing public view of adolescents as disrespectful, spoiled, poorly behaved, disaffected, and, sometimes, violent. Research shows that even when adults are provided with examples that counteract these stereotypes—of young people contributing to their communities, showing maturity, and behaving well—they reject them as exceptions to the rule and cling to their negative perceptions. Teenagers, not surprisingly, feel they always get a bad rap.

Quotes:

- “When you analyze the content of the stories in the news that involve teens, they are most likely to appear as monsters or heroes, victims or perpetrators.” — *Reframing Youth Issues for Public Consideration and Support*, FrameWorks Institute, 1998
- “When newspapers like the New York Times focus only on the crimes young people are accused of committing, we are viewed as robbers, cheaters, and killers, which leads adults to treat us as though we all fit this profile. Our lives are sensationalized in the newspaper when we do something wrong. When we take positive action, there’s rarely a story to applaud our actions.” — *Between the Lines: A Youth Conducted Study of the New York Times*, We Interrupt This Message, 2000

Question: **What strategies might help turn around the public’s negative views of teenagers?**

IV. EXERCISES FOR THE AUDIENCE (40 min.)

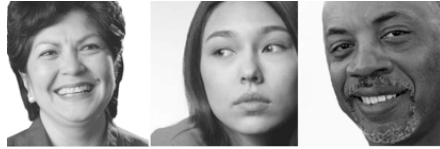
Ask the audience to spend five minutes silently reading through and filling out the first exercise “You and Your ‘Parent Next Door.’” Then ask them to share their responses with the people at their table or sitting nearby (if they aren’t seated at tables). (10 min.) Finally, invite participants to share their reflections on the exercise with the audience as a whole. (5 min.) **[See page 16 for both exercises]**

Now invite the audience to try their hand at a second exercise, “Working with Teens.” Ask them to follow the same process: Write down their own thoughts, then share them with others at their table, and finally share, if they want, with the full audience. With this exercise, ask them also to appoint a recorder who can take down the individual responses and turn them into a group list.

V. DISCUSSION AND CLOSING REFLECTIONS (10 min.)

HANDOUT: “What Youth Have To Say About Caring Adults” **[See page 17]**

EXERCISES



You and Your “Parent Next Door”

Teenagers often get important support from adults who are not their parents. Think about your own past. Other than your parents, was there any adult who played an important role in your life when you were a teenager? If so:

How did your relationship with that person differ from your family relationships?

Did you learn anything from that person? If so, describe it:

If you have a teenage son or daughter, do you know other adults who take a somewhat parental interest in him or her? If so, how do you feel about it?

Aside from your own son or daughter, do you currently keep an eye out for any teenager that you know? If so, describe your relationship:

What could you do to foster or strengthen that relationship?

Working with teens

Adults have varying degrees of success in working with teenagers, as anyone can attest who has chaperoned a group of teenagers at a conference, advised a club or youth organization, or perhaps worked with a teen board. Some adults are naturals: The teens they are with seem to have a good time, arrive early and stay late, get along with each other, pay attention, encourage their friends to get involved, and express appreciation to adults for their leadership and assistance. For other adults, it’s not quite so sweet.

So what’s the difference between adults who seem successful in working with teens and those who don’t? What are the secrets for working effectively with teens and keeping them involved? Make a list of what you think helps. (Use the reverse side of the paper if you need to.)

NOTES:

HANDOUT



What youth have to say about caring adults

[From *America's Promise Voices Study: Research Findings*, Alexandria, VA, spring 2005]

WHEN ASKED, TEENAGERS HAVE A LOT TO SAY ABOUT CARING ADULTS. The national organization America's Promise recently asked ten- to seventeen-year-olds across the country about the fundamental resources they need in their lives. Here is what they found.

Teenagers overwhelmingly believe that supportive adults are vital to their journey as they navigate the waters of growing up. Over nine in ten in the America's Promise survey agree that "people my age need adults who don't judge them when they have problems."

On a personal level, roughly three in four of the young people polled feel they have caring adults in their own lives. Seventy-five percent say "there are adults in my community who really look out for me," and 72 percent say "there are lots of adults I know to whom I can easily turn to for help with the tough things in my life."

Nevertheless, a substantial number wish they had even more caring adults: nearly half agree that "I wish I had more adults I feel I could turn to when I need help," and one in four agrees that "besides my parents or guardians, I don't have enough adults in my life who look out for me."

Surprisingly, although many Americans perceive high school-age students to be rebellious, independent, and resistant to adult involvement, older teens are more likely than younger children to say they need more caring adults. On a range of measures, older students were less likely than younger students to report that they receive support from adults. High school students are also nearly twice as likely to say they don't have enough adults looking out for them, and they are nearly 40 percent more likely to say they wish they had more adults they could turn to.

In focus groups, participants spoke of their comfort level turning to parents, especially mothers, when they need guidance and support for certain issues. One middle-school girl said, "I can tell my mom anything—it doesn't matter, she will give me advice, and she doesn't get mad." The survey data reinforced these sentiments. When asked to whom they go for advice or help, nearly 7 in 10 youngsters respond "mom." Only half indicate that they turn to "dad" for help.

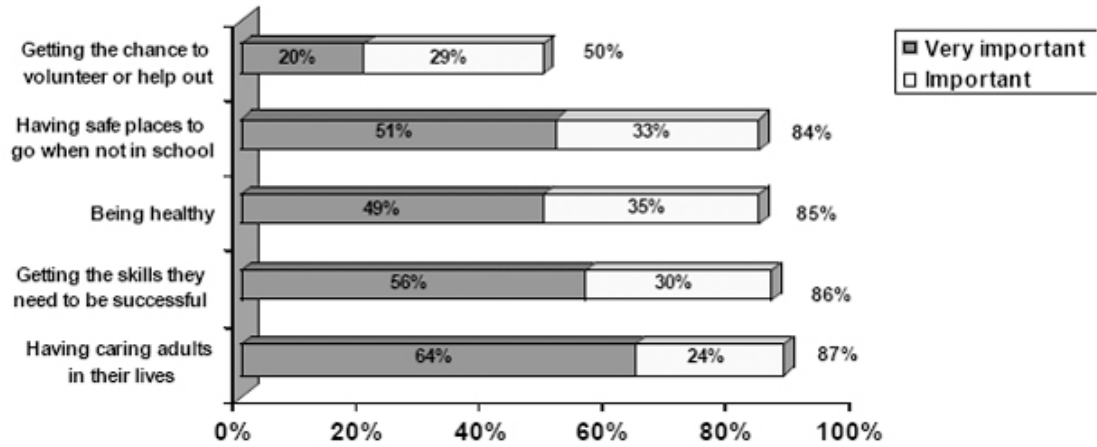
Youngsters are much less likely to say they turn to other adults, with fewer than one in three indicating they turn to a teacher, grandparent, or family friend. Approximately one in ten turns to a religious leader, coach, or doctor or health professional.

High school students are much less likely than younger students to say they turn to adults (other than religious leaders and coaches) for advice or help. Instead, high schoolers more frequently seek out the support of friends. The potential for non-parents such as mentors, coaches and teachers to play a far more active role in the lives of America's teens is great.

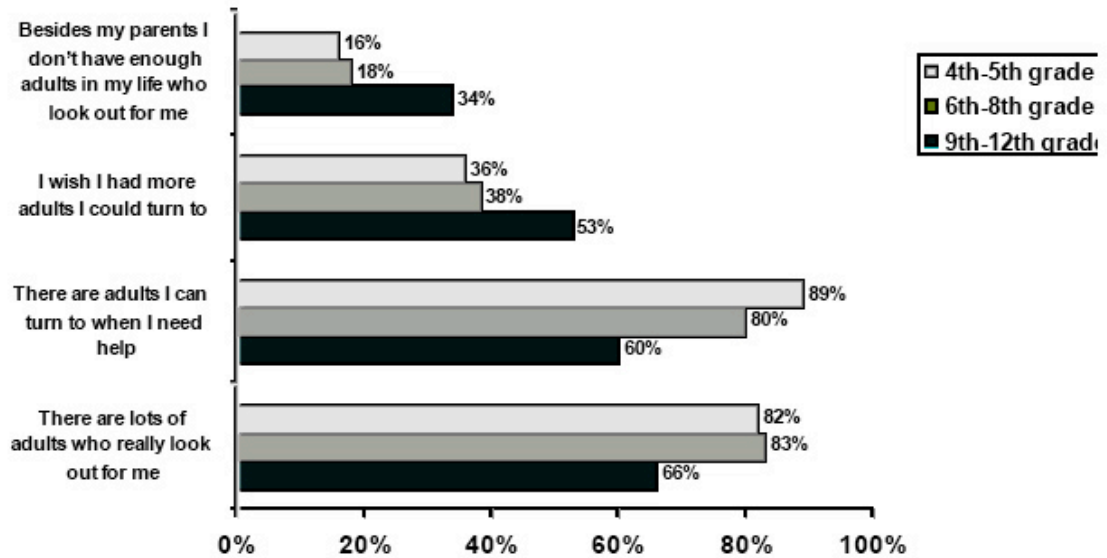
HANDOUT (CONT'D)



For kids/teens today, how important is each of the following?
 Top two boxes: Important/Very important



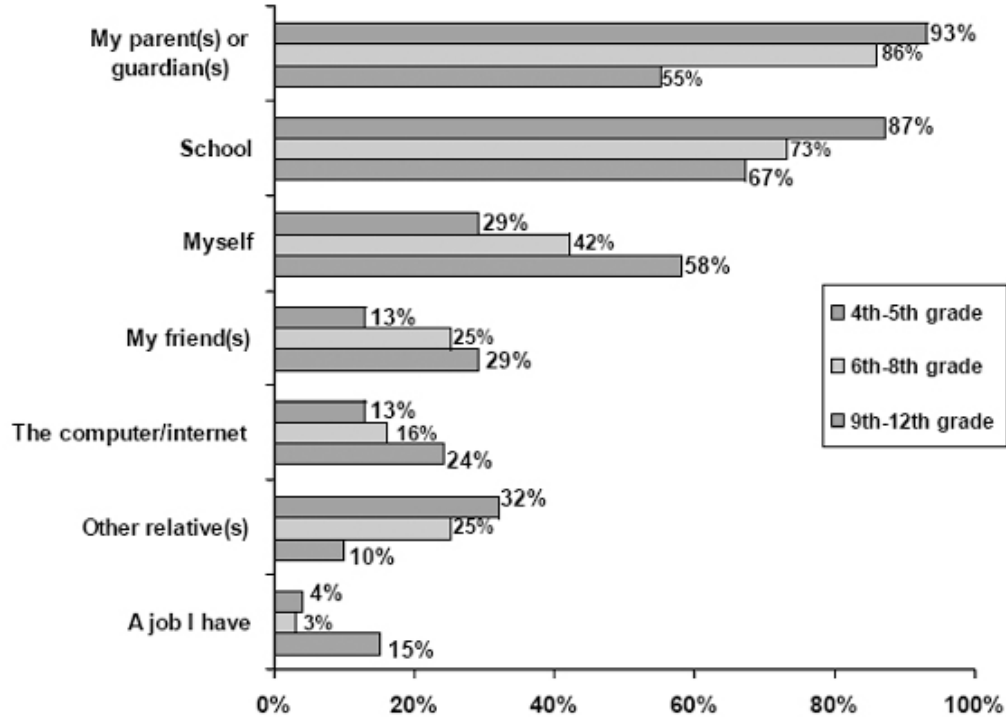
On caring adults...
 Top two boxes: Strongly/Somewhat agree



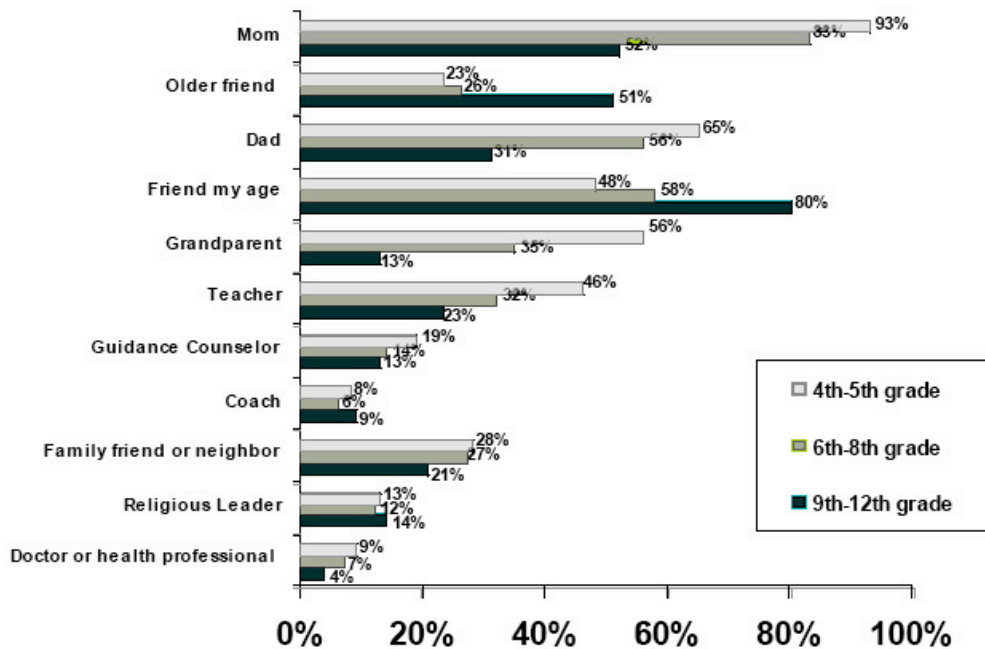
HANDOUT (CONT'D)



Which 3 of the following are doing the best job teaching you the skills you will need to be successful in life?



When you need some help or advice, whom do you go to?



A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation



Logistics

A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation

Logistics

PLANNING CHECKLIST: KEY INGREDIENTS IN CREATING A SUCCESSFUL TEEN-ADULT FORUM

- ❑ One or more sponsoring organizations with experience engaging a diverse group of parents and other adults who work with teenagers.
- ❑ An easily accessible meeting place, equipped with movable chairs for the audience and tables and microphones for the panelists and moderator.
- ❑ Advance publicity: Posters or flyers, printed/emailed/phoned invitations, and notices in local papers and other media. Outreach to get media coverage of the actual event [see next page].
- ❑ A detailed agenda that ideally includes a panel discussion with adults and teens, time for Q & A, one or more reflective exercises for audience members to complete and share in small groups, and open discussion.
- ❑ One or more moderators: People comfortable with both teens and parents, knowledgeable about the issues, quick on their feet, and good at drawing out others. If there are two moderators, one could be an adult, the other a teen.
- ❑ Teen and adult panelists (3 to 4 of each): The teens should represent a range of ages and backgrounds. The adults might include an adolescent psychologist, a high school teacher known for her/his strong relationship with students and who may also be a parent of teens, an articulate parent of teens, and an adult who works with teens outside school. The moderator(s) should meet with panelists in advance of the forum, to review the evening's format.
- ❑ Handouts: Copies of the agenda, of the exercise(s) the audience will complete during the forum, and of any short articles or resource lists that would interest the audience.
- ❑ Refreshments.
- ❑ A brief questionnaire for participants to give feedback after the forum, e.g.: What did they learn? What did they hear that surprised them? Do they have suggestions for continuing the teen-parent dialogue?
- ❑ Thank-you notes to the moderator, panelists, and others who helped make the forum a success.

MAKING THE FORUMS YOUR OWN

In this guide, we offer three sample teen-adult forums. We say “sample” because we encourage you to adapt them to meet your *own* priorities and circumstances. Here are brief descriptions of how others have done that.

St. Louis: Parents, students, and faculty at two high schools decided that they would each create their own year-long program of forums focused on teen-adult relationships. Both schools assembled intergenerational planning teams that met during the summer to design a series of seven or eight evening forums, coupled with in-class follow-up discussions and lesson plans. The teams picked the topics each forum would address, created their own questions, and selected interactive exercises (like the “fishbowl”) that would spur conversations among audience members. Team members learned facilitation skills and practiced open dialogue among themselves. They also approached the St. Louis Post-Dispatch newspaper, and convinced it to cover the year-long forum series. To this coverage, the paper added a blog space on its website, where teens, parents, and other adults respond to a weekly question posted by the two teams.

A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation

Denver: The convening institutions in Denver were the Community College of Denver and several of the city's new "middle college" high schools, whose students take classes on the community college campus. They focused their first public forum on two tensions: (1) between high school students for whom studying on a college campus makes them feel grown up and their instructors who perceive them as immature, and (2) between Latino parents and other adults who expected teens to take on adult responsibilities and teens who felt that they were not ready to take on adult roles that interfered with school or other priorities.

HOW TO GET THE MEDIA'S ATTENTION

Create and submit a press release

- Keep it short (no more than a page and a half). Make every word count.
- Be clear about your plans and be sure to include the important details like the time, date, and location of your forum. If you know who your panelists will be, say something about them.
- Explain the context: Why a teen-adult forum? What issues will the forum address? What local forces make the forum timely and important?
- Provide a national perspective: What are teens nationwide saying that they need from their parents and adults close to them?
- Weave quotes—ideally from a local teen, parent, and community leader—into the text. This brings the release to life.
- Always include contact information for a person who can supply more information.
- Send your press release to newspapers and TV and radio stations in your area. Submit it a week or two before the event, allowing time for the release to be read by a reporter and a photographer to be assigned. Two months before is too soon, and the day before is too late.

Follow up with a phone call

- Do your homework. Find out as much as you can about the newsroom you're dealing with. Know exactly who covers what, and ask for reporters by name. If one person is not available, ask for another.
- Call once—not more, unless invited by the reporter to call again. Offer practical ways you can help them cover the forum (directions, background information, other experts they could contact, etc.).
- Provide details. Let the reporter know how many parents, teenagers, teachers, and other adults in the community are likely to attend the forum.
- Offer to supply visuals, or facilitate the media's taking of them. Let the reporter know in what ways the forum could be an opportunity for photos (for print) or video (for television).

Look for other opportunities

- Try to meet with your local newspaper's editorial board. This can stimulate interest in your efforts, underscore your seriousness, and perhaps even win an editorial.
- Identify a columnist who has shown interest in youth, parenting, community, and education issues.
- Write a letter to the editor.
- Send an email through the websites of your local TV and radio stations.

Use your contacts

- If any members of your forum planning team have relationships with members of the media, ask them to get in touch with their contacts.
- Even if a reporter does not write a story about the forum, let them know what you accomplished and what ongoing efforts you have planned. Keeping them informed develops a relationship that might benefit your activities in the future—especially if you intend to offer additional forums.

SAMPLE NEWS COVERAGE

Family Matters: Schools promote talks between adults, teens

By Dennis O'Brien
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
Wednesday, Sep. 21 2005



Forty-five student leaders recently met with 32 adults for a daylong planning session on the campus of the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

The students attend Hazelwood West and Belleville West high schools and Belleville Central and Belleville West junior high schools.

Adult participants included teachers, school principals, police officers, parents, interested observers like myself, Belleville School District 118 Superintendent Matt Klosterman and Belleville Mayor Mark W. Eckert.

The group's objective was to design ways to promote more meaningful conversations between adults and teens in school communities.

The planning session was sponsored by CHARACTERplus, a division of the Cooperating School Districts that promotes the integration of character education into school life.

"We want to increase student connections to adults," said Diane Stirling of CHARACTERplus. "We hope to create meaningful conversations and improve the quality of connection and investment parents and community members feel toward the school and its students."

Students and adults began the planning session by engaging in exercises designed to get them talking about such things as "what they watch and worry about in each other, when questions cross the line into interrogation, and how adults can grant teenagers a certain dignity or take it away, and vice versa," Stirling said.

Next they brainstormed about ways to improve communications and made specific plans for each school. The book, "What We Can't Tell You," by Kathleen Cushman, inspired the initiative by CHARACTERplus. The book was based on interviews with 55 teens, including eight from St. Louis.

"Relationships between adults and adolescents are always powerful," Cushman said. "Most adolescents don't talk much to adults, even when they think about them a lot."

The book encourages other adults to behave in ways that encourage more communication between the generations.

"Even though teens say they aren't interested in what their parents say, they really are," said Lindsey Adams, a senior at Hazelwood West.

The four school communities planned forums to bring adults and teens into conversations about a variety of issues. Specific programs at each school will involve others in the discussions that follow the forums.

Participants in the planning session believe the effort is important.

"For a variety of reasons, some adults and teens currently seem to have a disconnect with communication," said Liesl McDowell, a teacher at Hazelwood West. "Learning how to bridge this gap is vital, especially because teens really need the presence of loving adults in their lives."

"I hope these forums help create a deeper sense of community that isn't just related to sports or 'school spirit,'" McDowell said.

Hazelwood West will videotape a forum and broadcast it into every classroom Sept. 27. Students will organize brief discussions in the classrooms following the broadcast.

Throughout the rest of the year, student leaders will facilitate eight 30-minute "dialogue sessions" based on questions formulated by students.

In selected classes at the three Belleville schools, teachers and adult community leaders will join students as panelists in responding to the dialogue topics. They will return to the same classrooms four to six times during the year.

“Adults and teenagers have so much they can learn from each other. Open communication is the key,” said Doug Jameson, a teacher at Hazelwood West. “Adults and teens who better understand each other’s thoughts, dreams, motives and questions will have a better chance of relating to, and learning from, each other. The ‘character forums’ will help open these lines of communication and will, hopefully, have lasting positive effects for all members of the community.”

Kudos to the leaders of the four schools for making

Adults, teens get chance to air views

By Georgina Gustin
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
Wednesday, Sep. 28 2005

At some mysterious point in the past, the lines of communication between teenagers and adults broke down, making teenagers and adults strangers to each other.

But on Tuesday night at Belleville West High School, a group of students and adults made a fledgling attempt to rebuild those lines.

At a forum held by CHARACTERplus, a division of the Cooperating School Districts organization, students in ninth through twelfth grades sat in circles as facilitators asked them questions, most of them about the power adults have over them.

As adults stood around those circles, many of them teachers and members of the community, they heard what the teenagers had to say. Then they switched positions and sat in circles while the teenagers looked on.

“If you wanted adults to know one thing about you as teenagers, what would you tell them?” asked one facilitator, Marvin Berkowitz, a professor at St. Louis University.

One student replied: “That we’re human. We’re going to make mistakes.”

Prompted by a book called “What We Can’t Tell You,” by Kathleen Cushman, the forum was intended to allow both groups to say what they really think—without the pressure of parent-child

such serious efforts to improve adult-teen communications. Hopefully, this is something to which all of us can be more sensitive.

For more information, e-mail Stirling at dstirling@csd.org.

Dennis O’Brien is a licensed clinical social worker, experienced educator and therapist who writes educational materials for the Washington University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry.



relationships getting in the way.

“We segregate young people from adults,” said Cushman, who was one of the forum’s facilitators. “The negative outcome of that is that you don’t have someone to show you how a mature person might do something. Somewhere we took a wrong turn. We stopped putting young people and adults together, doing things that are important to them both.”

The session, one of several planned for Belleville West this year, is part of the school’s effort to teach students not just about academic subjects, but about building character and becoming well-rounded people.

“Our goal is to start an intergenerational dialogue, and that’s acutely important,” Principal Robert Dahm said. “Our goal is to open lines of communication that got cut.”

As students spoke Tuesday night, they often did so reluctantly. But the adults were slightly more forthcoming. They expressed their frustration that they couldn’t communicate with their children without their getting defensive.

“If they could just understand that we’re trying to help them,” said one parent. “They’re the most important things—they’re it.”

Thursday
June 9, 2005
7:30 P.M.

Public Forum

What Your Teen Can't Tell You

Special
Event!

Most teenagers don't talk much to adults—but they think about us a lot. So what's on their minds when they shrug off parents' questions with those one-word responses? How can we best reach out to kids, understand them, and offer them the help they need?

Come to a one-of-a-kind public forum and you may leave with some surprising new answers.

Teen panelists will talk about...

- When teenagers want us to butt out—and when they want more of us
- The risks parents actually should help their teenagers take!
- How teenagers watch and worry about adults, just like we do with them

Parents and adolescent development experts on the panel will offer their views, too. And you'll be invited to add your own wisdom, as someone who cares about young people.



You'll meet the author
Kathleen Cushman and the teenagers from Houston ISD who worked with her on the new book *What We Can't Tell You: Teenagers Talk to the Adults in Their Lives* (Next Generation Press, May 2005). In it, 60 diverse teenagers from around the country discuss risk-taking, rules and expectations, privacy, parental breakups, planning for the future, and more. Their straight-up advice challenges us to think again about what parents and other close adults have to offer kids—and what they need from us.

FREE, autographed copies for the first 50 participants to arrive!

United Way of the Texas Gulf Coast
50 Waugh Drive, Houston, TX 77007

Welcome by First Lady Andrea White
Board of Trustees
Houston A+ Challenge

It's a little worse than you think.
And much better.

"Every parent wants their kid to be a big famous doctor that discovers cures and all. But it's a lot of pressure, even if you don't realize it. If your mom says, 'You're going to be great, you're going to do wondrous things,' you're like, 'Well, what if I don't? Do you not want me anymore?'" — DAN

"My mom makes me feel like I have to learn from her mistakes—she doesn't even give me a chance to make any of my own. She just flat out says no." — TABITHA

"My mama yells the whole time, no matter what race I'm doing. And I can hear her, and only her. I'm so serious. It really helps out." — CAMILLIA

"Everybody needs one person in their life that thinks they're great, no matter what." — ALICE

To reserve your seat, call: 713-658-1881
or e-mail rsvp@houstonaplus.org
and refer to event #22.

Hosted by The Houston A+ Challenge
and What Kids Can Do, Inc., with the
generous support of MetLife Foundation.

THE HOUSTON **A+** CHALLENGE
(formerly The Houston Anenberg Challenge)

WHAT **Kids** CAN DO

MetLife Foundation





NEXT GENERATION PRESS

Single and Bulk Order Form

What We Can't Tell You: Teenagers Talk to the Adults in Their Lives by Kathleen Cushman and the youth of What Kids Can Do (Next Generation Press, 2005).

"This book is a rare gift to those who genuinely care about the well-being of our children, all of our children. Parents, teachers, and just plain adults would do well to listen to these young men and women, if the creation of a truly humane society is still our goal." – Thomas J. Cottle, Psychologist and Professor of Education, Boston University

RAISE MONEY FOR YOUR SCHOOL OR ORGANIZATION:
Buy books for as little as \$8 and sell them for up to the list price of \$19.95

What We Can't Tell You	Quantity	Unit Price	Total Amount
For quantities of 1–9, take 40% off the list price of \$19.95 (FREE shipping and handling)		\$12.50	
For quantities of 10–50, take 50% off the list price of \$19.95 (FREE shipping and handling)		\$10.50	
For quantities of 50–100 take 60% off the list price of \$19.95 (FREE shipping and handling)		\$8.00	
For quantities over 100, please contact Next Generation Press (see below).			

FREE SHIPPING & HANDLING: All orders will be sent via U.S. Postal Service Media Mail, which normally takes 7–10 days. Other arrangements and costs must be arranged directly with Next Generation Press. (Contact info is below.)

METHOD OF PAYMENT: Bulk orders can be prepaid by check or money order in U.S. \$ only. We can invoice your organization with a Purchase Order. A copy of the P.O. must be included with the order form along with contact information of the person placing the order.

I have enclosed a Purchase Order. Please send an invoice for the total amount. My contact information follows, for any questions about the P.O.:

Name _____ Telephone: _____
Email: _____

I have enclosed a check made payable to **Next Generation Press** for the total amount.

SHIP TO: (Please print)

Name	Organization:	
Address:		
City:	State:	Zip Code:

Return this form with payment or P.O. to:
Next Generation Press
PO Box 603252
Providence, RI 02906

Questions about this order?
Phone: 401.247.7665
Email: info@nextgenerationpress.org
Fax: 401.245.0241

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT *WHAT WE CAN'T TELL YOU*

ENCOURAGING YOUTH TO TELL

Cathi Dunn MacRae

Voice of Youth Advocates,

Vol. 28, 4, October 2005



One skill that many YA librarians share is the art of listening to teens nonjudgmentally while validating them as independent beings. In doing so, we become the valuable “other adults” or “non-parent” who are addressed, along with parents, in the remarkable book, *What We Can't Tell You: Teenagers Talk to the Adults in Their Lives*. Author Kathleen Cushman interviewed a diverse group of sixty teens from across the country to discover what adults need to hear from teens and why we don't. Corroborating research on adolescent development, these teens' responses reveal the tension between their competing needs for guidance and increasing autonomy. Among the book's many revelations is the fact that teens “worry about parents at least as much as parents worry about them.”

The themed chapters, such as “Respect Goes Both Ways,” are loaded with pithy and often poignant quotes from teens identified by first names. Bullet points summarize the contents of these quotes at the beginning of each chapter; points range from “It's hard to figure out what we want for ourselves when we're so busy trying to please you” to “Instead of criticizing us, try helping us out.” With relentless accuracy, the teens' words skewer adult attitudes. When adults overprotect and pressure their children, says Luke: “They're saying, ‘Be comfortable in your innocence and stay innocent, but you need to grow up!’ It's a double standard.”

At the end of each chapter, a “Homework for Adults” section encourages reflection on the teens' observations, often by urging adults to look back on their own experiences as a teen. One collaborative exercise, “Let's Make a Deal,” suggests bargains that teens might strike with their parents, such as, “If you will help us take risks by trying exciting new things, then we will stay away from risks that would get us in trouble.”

Young adult libraries will mine many riches from this book's mini-course in asking that tricky question, “How can we help?” Childless adults are encouraged to mentor teens because “the power that parents hold over their child can sometimes complicate their ability to effectively help out in a teenager's life.” Young Dan agrees: “If you can go to someone who isn't required to talk about stuff with you, but who just likes you and your company, then you're going to feel better about yourself.” That “someone” fits our job description. Supported by teens' own testaments, Cushman declares: “You will never do a more important thing than stand by in [teens'] support as they sort out the lessons their mistakes bring.” Read every word of this book, as I did, and you'll get to know these articulate teens by name. Consult it often, and you'll become an accomplished and empathetic mentor.

July 17, 2005

ON FAMILY

What teens want adults to recognize

ERIC FRAZIER

If you've ever wondered what your kids, especially teenagers, might say about you when you're not around, get to a computer and go to this Web site: www.whatkidscando.org/NGP/whatwecantellyou.html.

It's devoted to a recently published book called "What We Can't Tell You: Teenagers Talk to the Adults in Their Lives." In it, more than 60 teenagers from across the country talk with journalist Kathleen Cushman in startlingly candid ways about what they need—and what they don't want—from their parents and other grownups around them.

Go to the bottom of the page, and you'll find a link to some of the things the kids said. It makes for fascinating, often funny, and occasionally unnerving reading. The kids hit all the teen issues. They talk about their need to "make my own mistakes." They discuss their seemingly conflicting desires for "private space" and close, unconditional support. And perhaps most disturbing for parents, they focus with merciless intensity on every flaw and scrap of hypocrisy they find in the lives of their mothers and fathers.

Listen up

Here's Blake, talking about an offense that busy parents commit far too often without realizing they've been busted: "When my mother's not listening to me, she nods her head, gives a little smirk. And I'm like, Yeah, you're not listening, so I'm not listening to you. If my mom were listening, her face would show it all. Her face would

show that she's interested and she's actually paying attention to what I'm saying."

Parents like to think they're role models. But sometimes, as a girl named Stephanie suggests, careless parents can puncture their children's positive image of them.

"My friend's mom was at school and saw this special needs kid having a hard time," Stephanie says. "She talked to him about it, and helped him out. I was thinking that was really cool.

"And then a few minutes later, she was talking to a teacher about what a big hassle it was. That really made me feel like when people help me, they think it's a really big hassle."

Privacy, please

And what parent doesn't just love those testy standoffs about what's private teen-only information and what's not?

"I hate it when my parents assume that anything I don't want them to know is negative. Like if I'm opening my e-mail, my mom will come over and stare at me, so I won't type in my password yet, and she'll be like, 'Well, why aren't you checking it yet?' And I'm like, 'Cause you're watching me!' And she's like, 'Oh, well now I really want to know what you have for e-mail.' As if, yeah."

The organizers of the What Kids Can Do project found that good parenting isn't about setting rules or winning power struggles.

"It has more to do with sticking around," they write, "with paying attention, with relaxing and letting them have things they 'can't tell you.' Sooner or later ... they will get around to saying them."

A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation



Appendix

A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation

Active Listening: A Communication Tool

By Daniel F. Perkins, Ph.D.

[This document is one of a series of the Family, Youth, and Community Sciences department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, December 1999.]

Overview

For teens and their parents, adolescence is a time of happiness and troubles. It is a time when an adolescent breaks from the past and, yet, retains some childhood behavior. As a parent of a teenager you may often feel as though your son or daughter is speaking a completely different language than you are. Still, listening to your children during their teen years is important because this is the crucial time when they are forming their identities and taking ownership of their own values and beliefs.

Active listening is vital part of parenting teens. Active listening is a communication tool that can help parents and teens speak with each other clearly and be understood. This document defines active listening skills and demonstrates how to use these skills to strengthen communications between you and your adolescent.

Three types of responses in active listening

Active listening is about focusing and concentrating on the person who is speaking. The way parents can show they are actively listening is to do the following:

- Ask good questions,
- Paraphrase, and
- Empathize with their teen.

First, as a parent, you train yourself to ask questions in a way that allows your teen to feel comfortable about answering truthfully—and about using his or her own terms. Second, you restate what you heard to make sure that you understood what your teen was saying. Finally, you need to take the time to see things through your teen's eyes and get some understanding of how your adult-in-process is experiencing a given situation.

a. Asking questions

Often questions can seem accusing or blaming to the person asked. A question may make the person feel backed into a corner. For example, if a parent asks his or her teenage son, "You didn't like the movie, did you?" it is clear that the parent does not approve of the movie and, if the teen *did* like the movie, he ends up feeling the need to defend his position. Consider how much easier it would have been to respond to the question "What did you think of the movie?"

Active listening requires the speaker to look at the hidden meaning behind the question. People often ask questions that might make others feel pressured into coming up with the correct response. For example, you might feel pressured when someone close to you asks, "Do you think I have gained weight?" These types of questions tend to put the person being asked on the defensive. Often the person may shut off communication in order to protect him or herself.

In order to be a good active listener, you need to make sure that you ask questions honestly and sincerely. And that the intent behind questioning is to understand rather than advise, criticize, or pry (the district attorney approach). Active-listening questions intend to:

- *Clarify meanings:* "I hear you saying you are frustrated with Johnny, is that right?"
- *Learn about other's thoughts, feelings, and wants:* "Tell me more about your ideas for the project."
- *Encourage elaboration:* "What happened next?" or "How did that make you feel?"
- *Encourage discovery:* "What do you feel your options are at this point?"
- *Gather more facts and details:* "What happened before this fight took place?"



Active Listening (cont'd)

You can be fairly sure you are asking questions correctly if you:

- *Do not assume you know what your teen means*; don't try complete the teen's statements or say, "I know just how you feel."
- *Ask for clarification with questions such as*: "What did you mean when you said I have been 'unfair to you?'" or "You said she's 'crazy'—what do you mean by crazy? What does she do that is crazy?"
- *Check your tone for sincerity*. As you are talking to your teen, check that your tone of voice matches your feelings and body language. For example, a parent may sound angry when in reality he or she is concerned for his or her child. However, because the child hears anger he or she becomes more defensive and shuts the parent out.
- *Ask open-ended questions* that allow for a variety of responses. If you ask closed-ended questions, you limit the range of responses and suggest that you already know what is going to be said.
- *Show interest in the speaker and the conversation* by saying, "Tell me more about that" or "Keep going, I'm following you."
- *Don't give advice until after you have asked* for the person's opinions on the situation, as in "What are some possible solutions to this problem?" or "What do you think should happen?"

b. Paraphrasing (re-stating)

Paraphrasing is a tool you can use to make sure that you understand the message that you think your teen is sending. It is restating the information you just received to make sure you understand it. For example, your son says, "I hate math and the teacher because she never lets us do anything cool!" You might say, "It sounds like you're having a hard time with math and that makes you feel frustrated and bored."

This technique helps parents and teen communicate in several ways:

- By restating or paraphrasing, parents draw further information from their teenage son or daughter,
- Paraphrasing lets parents' son or daughter know that his or her parents have heard them and are interested in what he or she has to say, and
- It allows the teen an opportunity to correct any misunderstanding immediately.

The following are examples of paraphrasing dialogues (*paraphrased responses are italicized*):

EXAMPLE 1: A MOTHER AND SON ARE DISCUSSING HOW MUCH TV HE SHOULD WATCH DURING THE WEEK.

Mom: "Mike, I'm concerned about how much television you have been watching lately. I think we need to set up some kind of schedule to make sure you are doing your homework and other things besides watching television."

Son: "Maaahhhhhmmm, I need to watch TV. All my friends watch this much television."

Mom: "*You'll feel like you're missing out on something if you don't watch all the shows your friends watch.*"

Son: "Yes!! Then I'll be the big loser who doesn't know what everyone else is talking about!"

Mom: "*If you don't know what your friends are talking about, you're afraid you'll look dumb and they'll make fun of you.*"

Son: "Exactly, Mom! You see this is why I just HAVE to watch all this TV."

Mom: "*Hmm, I can see that TV is important to you, why don't we talk more about what specific program you feel you need to watch and see if we can't come up with a compromise.*"

EXAMPLE 2: A FATHER AND DAUGHTER DISCUSS CURFEW.

Dad: "Dawn, I'd like for you to come home at 1 a.m. from this party tomorrow night."

Dawn: "Dad, there is just no way. The party is until 2 a.m. and I have to be there until the end."

Dad: "*It sounds like this party is a big deal for you.*"

Dawn: "Yeah! Jason will be there ... and there's going to be a live band ... and all my friends will be there! Dad, you just have to let me stay until 2."

Dad: "*You're excited about the party and want to make sure you have every opportunity to hang out with your friends and Jason.*"

Dawn: "Yes, I can't come home before 2."

Dad: "*I get that this party means a lot to you, **and** I am concerned about your safety. Let's get more details about this party—and your ride there and back—and see if we can work something out we're both comfortable with.*"



Active Listening (cont'd)

c. Empathizing

Empathizing means that, as a parent, you are able to put yourself in your teen's shoes. To empathize you must ignore your own adult perception of the situation for the moment and accept your teen's feelings, thoughts, and ideas of the situation as yours. See it with a teen's eyes—during your discussion.

- Empathizing does not mean you need to agree with your teen.
- Empathizing does not mean you need to give in to your teen or allow her or her to set his or her own rules—to avoid confrontation.
- Empathizing means you do not dismiss what your teen says as ridiculous or silly.

Your acceptance of your teenager's thoughts, ideas, and feelings increases the chance that your teen will talk to you about the problems and issues that he or she is facing. It is easy to know you are being empathic because:

- Your body language and tone match
- Your tone and your feelings match
- You are focused on what your teen is saying and meaning

You are trying to see things from your teen's point of view:

- You do not impose your feelings, thoughts, and ideas throughout the conversation
- You refrain from immediately giving advice
- You are tired after listening because it takes a great deal of energy
- You ask yourself if you would make that same statement to an adult. If not, then think twice about making it.

REMEMBER

Active listening takes time and practice and does not produce results overnight.

Usually, each time you and your teen talk, your conversation will get easier and will include more active listening—not just from you, but also from your child.

You, as the adult, have to lead the way.

A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation

Changing the way we see teenagers

THE PUBLIC'S PERCEPTIONS OF ADOLESCENTS are as negative as opportunities for intergenerational dialogue are rare. Experts who study how perceptions line up with facts report a huge disconnect between the way American adults view teenagers and what teens actually think and do. These views are largely negative and resist countervailing evidence. We cannot see teens as they are, because who we *think* they are gets in the way, the experts say.

An important report by the FrameWorks Institute provides detailed suggestions for how we can balance the public's unusually negative view of adolescents. We have adapted the report's recommendations and offer them here with two aims. We hope you keep them in mind when you are advocating for teens, either your own or other people's. Even more, we hope they inspire you to be an activist in helping your community appreciate all that is good with today's youth.

[The following is adapted, with permission, from "Reframing Youth Issues for Public Consideration and Support" by Susan Nall Bales, FrameWorks Institute, Washington, D.C., 1999.]

"Remind people that teenagers are still in a developmental stage, rather than some special, bad category of person....What they do today is not what they will be tomorrow."

—Reframing Youth Issues for Public Consideration and Support, FrameWorks Institute, 1999

1. Remind people that teenagers are still in a developmental stage.

Advocates should be proactive in talking about adolescence as a stage we all go through with its common challenges of learning responsibility, commitment, and teamwork. "Remind people that teenagers are still in a developmental stage, rather than some special, bad category of person," says one adolescent specialist. "What they are today is not what they will be tomorrow."

Experts should address the challenges of adolescence and attempt to explain the need for youth to be accepted in and by the community, to be given roles of responsibility, and to be mentored. This advice should be given not as parental advice solely but as advice to the community in how to guide young people toward healthy development, community leadership and citizenship. While many people understand basic tenets of young child development (or think they do), few talk about adolescent development with any confidence. This is an opportunity for experts to shape a vision of healthy youth development that connects to adults' longing for greater responsibility and deeper values among today's youth.

2. Show youth involved in sports, volunteer, and other extra-curricular activities like performance arts.

Assessments of youth shown involved in these activities were universally positive. "When I see a girl in sports, I immediately think she has a chance to succeed in life," explained a father of a teen. Reacting to a picture of a young boy volunteering at what appeared to be a soup kitchen, one mother commented, "He is going to be an asset to his community just because he is already at a young age involved in community."

Recognizing that it is going to take a critical mass of positive images to reverse the negative stereotypes, we urge advocates to be aggressive in spotlighting adolescents involved in these kinds of activities. Showcase them on websites, involve them in news conferences, and put them before civic bodies. When composing photos meant to illustrate "children's issues," expand the age base to include adolescents by using teens in sports dress or clearly identified in volunteer affiliations.

3. Explain what youth are doing in terms that link to the values associated with work, like responsibility, teamwork, commitment, leadership.

Emphasize "teens as learners." This aspect of adolescence strikes a positive chord of self-improvement, and

Changing the way we see teenagers (cont'd)



suggests that the job of people around teens is to be good ‘teachers.’” And what they are learning must be made explicit again and again. Adolescents are learning to strive and to struggle against forces that would pull them in the wrong direction. We can help them learn how to stay on track.

Another suggestion is that “teens are searchers.” This allows us to stress that they are looking for ways to contribute to their communities, to find their place, to make their mark, and to shape their world. They are idealistic, and it is important that the community find ways to use their idealism, not to shut them out and reinforce their cynicism.

If teens are searchers, then we are all guides. In advocating for work-specific programs, like summer jobs for youth, stress the values they will acquire and the importance of giving young people responsibility and mentors from whom to learn commitment, goals, and responsibility.

“Stress that [teens] are looking for ways to contribute to their communities, to find their place, to make their mark, and to shape their world.”

—Reframing Youth Issues for Public Consideration and Support, FrameWorks Institute, 1999

4. Use coaches and volunteer leaders to attest to the hard work of today’s youth.

We need to sanction positive information about youth. One way to do that is to lodge the information in messengers whom the community trusts on these issues. Coaches and volunteer leaders not only fulfill this requirement but, to the degree they are not acting in their role as parents (a parent of a teen on the team, for example), they can help to underscore community and not just parent responsibility.

Moreover, because coaches and volunteer leaders see hundreds of kids, they can make group pronouncements with some authority, “The kids I see coming through these programs are on track for achievement, focused, responsible, and learning what it means to work as a team, as a member of society.” This kind of statement—describing many kids, not merely the exceptional—helps balance the equation for the public. Special technical assistance and training should be given to coaches and volunteer leaders so that they can comfortably make these assessments. Without this kind of training, they are likely to revert to individualized, human-interest accounts that will only reinforce the notion that it is one good teen in a hundred that is performing well.

5. Use older Americans to attest to the values of today’s youth.

When a book about today’s seniors entitled *The Greatest Generation* is on the bestseller list and older Americans are courted on both side of the political aisle, their pronouncements on just about anything are newsworthy. But older Americans are important to changing public views on youth in a very singular sense: They convey values. Their endorsement of youth contests the view of “valueless youth.”

This means inviting seniors to bear witness to the values that they see youth exhibiting in their places of worship, volunteer activities, and in the community. It means engaging them in sanctioning the good talk about today’s youth, and connecting what they see to their own generation’s commitment, sacrifice and teamwork. It means sending a message that today’s youth are not “different” from those of previous generations. Their call to action can be that elders need to “weigh in” on the side of youth. “We have the power to help youth stay on track for achievement” is a great message coming from a senior.

6. Avoid the “hero youth” model that makes an exception of the example and casts suspicion on the less accomplished majority.

Content analysis suggests that teens are most likely to appear in news as “monsters or heroes,” or as victims or perpetrators. Indeed, it is the “exceptional” teen that makes the news in the first place.

There are two problems with using the “hero youth model” approach. First, the public cannot connect vivid case studies to broader social solutions. Second, the presentation of heroic deeds by young people or minority youth does not reverse people’s negative stereotypes associated with these groups. Exceptions often reinforce the notion that the group can and should do more to succeed. So avoid the irresistible youth who has organized the entire city’s park clean-up and, instead, focus on the group activity: ordinary kids getting together to solve a problem, working together, while doing chores and homework. Try to instill the idea that there are thousands of kids like these in every city and state.

7. Show youth in situations where their work and volunteer support is altruistic and solves a social problem.

Changing the way we see teenagers (cont'd)



To the extent possible, show youth involved in solving community problems, especially alongside people of other age groups. At the same time, be careful not to suggest that youth should solve their own problems, a common adult frame that merely passes the responsibility on to those most affected by the problem. By showing youth involved in environmental issues, with elderly people, with younger children, the idea of youth “learning to be adults” will be conveyed, and their “difference” from previous generations undermined. We need to move youth from the problem side of the equation to the problem-solver side.

8. Given the invisibility of normal youth in the media, work with local faith and nonprofit groups to include the voices and profiles of youth in as many ways as possible.

Expose as many adults as possible to normal, un-newsworthy adolescents. Invite youth in, and draw attention to the fact that these are the norm, not the exception that the media would have us believe. Include teens, not just in sports, but also in civic activities.

The more direct contact adults have with youth who are not their own, the better. Invite religious leaders to help solve the problem of Americans’ distorted image of today’s youth by promoting more age-integrated activities—mentoring, group outings, volunteer days, etc. Do the same with business, professional and civic clubs; invite them into the solution and suggest ways they can support youth on an ongoing basis.

Do not allow this activity to be portrayed as only involving “good” youth or the “cream of the crop,” but rather about educating communities about the everyday lives of ordinary young people in their community. Avoid awards programs and other “exceptional” activities, and substitute the idea of a community assessment of how well we are doing to nurture youth and keep them on track for achievement.

9. Train youth advocates to talk about today’s youth as good kids, on track for achievement; create social acceptance for these observations.

There are many programs, like essay contests and award programs, that bring youth before adults. It is important that speech and debate coaches, teachers, and other mentors enlist these young people in becoming advocates for others. They can do this by talking about the kids they know, the overall trends in their schools, and by deemphasizing their special ness. They can do this by talking about how they strived to succeed, how hard the competition was, and how many kids deserve credit for hard work.

For parents and other adults, it is important that we make it okay to talk about teens as good people. We need to inform our social networks that they should question the media stereotypes more and their own eyes less. We need to stand up for kids in conversations with other adults, to reinforce their own positive impressions.

10. Challenge your local news media to do a better job of describing the world of adolescence today.

Brainstorm a series of stories that begin to portray the normal lives of everyday kids—the kids “behind the headlines.” If you have a local newspaper or station interested in civic journalism, meet with editors and publishers to discuss how local media can take on this problem of reframing youth for public support. Provide lists of local experts on youth, and train these experts in advance to talk about teens in ways that open up the conversation to programs and policies, not merely to parent involvement.

Teens are hot just now, making headlines and cover stories with topics ranging from downloading music from the Internet to obesity. The trick for advocates is to come up with ideas for stories that go beyond the hot topics—group stories, trend reports, and examples of kids doing civic and team work. Remember, the stories invent us.

“The more direct contact adults have with youth who are not their own, the better.”

—Reframing Youth Issues for Public Consideration and Support, FrameWorks Institute, 1999

“We need to stand up for kids in our conversations with other adults, to reinforce their own positive impressions.”

—Reframing Youth Issues for Public Consideration and Support, FrameWorks Institute, 1999

A GUIDE TO CREATING TEEN-ADULT CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

prepared by What Kids Can Do, Inc. with support from MetLife Foundation

Online resources

The following online resources are good starting points for teens looking for “positive risks” to explore. They are illustrative of what is available nationally as well as locally.

4-H USA

www.4husa.org

4-H is the youth education branch of the U.S. Cooperative Extension Service. (Each state and county has access to a County Extension office for both youth and adult programs.) Stressing experiential projects and service, 4-H helps young people learn by doing. The 4-H website offers youth a chance to express themselves through listservs, chat rooms, and the posting of personal writings. The site includes links to other youth development organizations and to over 150 curriculum samples and project ideas for experiential learning in various areas (such as Environmental Education and Earth Science, Personal Development and Leadership).

Do something

www.dosomething.org

Do Something is a nationwide network of young people taking action to change their own communities. It sponsors the Kindness & Justice Challenge, a Community Connections Campaign, and the Brick Awards. Its website offers program descriptions and wide-ranging opportunities for expressing student voice—from contests, polls, and discussions groups to the posting of young people’s stories, essays, poetry, and artwork.

Idealist.org

www.idealist.org

A project of Action without Borders, Idealist.org aims to build a world where all people can live free and in a healthy environment. The site is a clearinghouse for information, job openings, volunteer opportunities, internships, events, and resources posted by nonprofits in 153 countries. A special teen section offers information and extensive links regarding volunteer opportunities and starting and funding projects. Particularly impressive is the directory (with links) of organizations started by youth.

In the Mix

www.pbs.org/inthemix

In the Mix, a weekly PBS television series produced by teens for teens, gives young people a voice on topics that matter most to them—from money management, media literacy, and politics to body image, dating violence, and school reform. The website posts an online program catalogue for ordering videotapes, with selected titles available with Spanish subtitles. Home pages for show topics include video clips, transcripts, resources, and advice from experts and other teens. Also available for teachers and parents are lesson plans and discussion guides on a variety of topics.

Listen Up!

www.pbs.org/merrow/trt/indextext.html

A project of Learning Matters, Inc., Listen Up! is a network of more than 2,000 youth from diverse backgrounds who research, write, produce, edit, and distribute their own media messages. Listen Up! helps its producers submit work to national and international film festivals and offers opportunities for youth media producers to exchange and critique each other’s work. Its website features hundreds of youth-produced video and audio messages, along with current information on festivals, media events, and news from Listen Up! sites.

Online resources (cont'd)



Servenet.org

www.servenet.org

SERVEnet.org is the premier website on service and volunteering. Through SERVENet, users can enter their zip code, city, state, skills, interests, and availability and be matched with organizations needing help. SERVENet has over 6,000 registered non-profit organizations, 35,000+ service projects and over 52 million volunteer opportunities available. It is a program of Youth Service America (YSA), a resource center that partners with thousands of organizations committed to increasing the quality and quantity of volunteer opportunities for young people 5 to 25 to serve locally, nationally, and globally.

Teen Ink

www.teenink.org

Teen Ink is a monthly print magazine, book series, and website, all written by teens for teens. The website posts over 15,000 pages of student writing, which ranks among the best on the Internet. The youth writing spans every genre: fiction and poetry; reviews of books, music, movies, and colleges; interviews with the likes of Maya Angelou, George Lucas, and Colin Powell; personal essays and commentaries. The site posts the current issue of the magazine Teen Ink, plus various contests, weekly polls, “Top 5” lists, and a gallery of art and photography.

Tolerance.org

www.tolerance.org/teens

A web project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, tolerance.org sponsors a nationwide program called Mix It Up, which believes in the power of youth to create and sustain real change. It provides ideas and tools to help teens break the walls of division in their school and community. Its Mix It Up Grant program has supported more than 100 youth-led projects. Each year, more than 3 million teens nationwide participate in its Mix It Up Lunch Day. In Mix It Up Dialogues, teens discover the power and art of crossing social boundaries.

YouthActionNet

www.youthactionnet.org

Looking for a way to build a website or publish work from a youth web page? Look no further. This dynamic website, created by and for young people, spotlights the vital role that youth play in leading positive change throughout the world, and also creates a space for youth web-publishing. One can also find information here on volunteer, educational, scholarship, grant, and job opportunities.

YouthNOISE

www.youthnoise.com

An initiative of Save the Children, YouthNOISE empowers young people to improve their own and others' lives through philanthropy, service, and policy. The website provides articles, “Top 10” lists, and factoids to inform young people about issues ranging from youth violence and teen pregnancy to homelessness and body image. Toolkits and other tips offer practical advice on how to work with Congress or get involved at home, and a database (searchable by zip code) details local volunteer opportunities. The site identifies grant, scholarship, and giving opportunities. (YouthNOISE raised \$10,000 for an Afghan girls' education effort.) Contests, quizzes, polls, and discussion boards, plus space for essays, poetry, and reflections, offer multiple forms for youth expression.

SEE ALSO:

What Kids Can Do, Inc.

www.whatkidscando.org

The WKCD website, this includes over one hundred stories of young people making a difference in their schools and communities, collections of student work and youth voices on a wide range of topics, and an extensive resource directory. A special feature called “Kids on the Wire” gives daily news from around the country involving adolescents. It covers teen activities in the areas of citizenship and voice, community action and service, environment, historic preservation, media and art, science and health, technology, and tolerance and understanding. WKCD posts new content every six weeks.

What Kids Can Do, Inc. (WKCD) is a national not-for-profit organization founded in 2001 for the purpose of making public the voices and views of adolescents. On its website, WKCD documents young people's lives, learning, and work, and their partnerships with adults both in and outside school. WKCD also collaborates with students around the country on books, curricula, and research to expand current views on what constitutes challenging learning and achievement. Next Generation Press is the nonprofit book-publishing arm of What Kids Can Do, Inc. With a particular focus on youth without privilege, it brings youth voices to bear on issues facing families, schools, and communities.

What Kids Can Do, Inc.
P.O. Box 603252
Providence, RI 02906
401.247.7665
info@whatkidscando.org
www.whatkidscando.org

MetLife Foundation, established in 1976 by MetLife, supports programs that increase opportunities for young people to succeed, give students and teachers a voice in improving education, develop partnerships between schools and communities, and strengthen relationships among parents, teachers and students.

MetLife Foundation
27-01 Queens Plaza North
Long Island City, NY 11101
www.metlife.com