

SAFE PASSAGE

Making It Through Adolescence in a Risky Society *What Parents, Schools and Communities Can Do*

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Safe Passage means helping young people make the journey from their early and mid-teen years to adulthood. Many obstacles stand in the way.

Changes in technology, family life, the economy and other aspects of society have created a world where adults aren't always sure how to protect young people or prepare them for the future. Many adults also have trouble dealing with youth problems related to violence, sex and drugs. The result: Lots of young people don't get the help they need to thrive.

While different youth grow up facing various levels of risk, almost all are exposed to dangerous behaviors at some point, such as substance abuse, sex and violence. Currently, youth participation in these behaviors is growing, and starting earlier than ever before.

Studies show that early involvement usually leads to other problems. For example, teenagers who use drugs are also more likely to drink or have unprotected sex.

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE NEED

All young people have similar needs, including:

- Safe places, challenging experiences and caring people in their lives daily
- At least one strong connection with an adult, like a parent, teacher or counselor
- Opportunities to develop critical thinking and reasoning skills
- Social skills to deal with peer and media influences
- Freedom to make their own decisions about their behaviors and values
- Preparation for the world of work, through career training, volunteer community service and job experiences
- Most importantly, all children need safe streets, safe schools and safe communities.

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As for today's families, they need help to guide their children safely to adulthood. Families who are poor or live in dangerous neighborhoods need special help, because their children are already at a high risk for troubled lives.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

To guarantee Safe Passage, we need to address all of the needs above, not just one or two. We need to focus our efforts on young people between the ages of 10 and 18. At these ages, youth are old enough to experiment with risky behavior but young enough so that prevention programs can make a positive difference. Also, this age group is predicted to grow significantly over the next few years.

The good news is there are effective programs in communities across the country that are helping youth make the Safe Passage into adulthood. They involve schools, community agencies and many kinds of youth workers.

But we need to expand on these efforts. We must all work together to put more successful programs in place to meet the needs of today's children, youth and families. And the entire community must help—parents, teachers, youth workers, police, health providers, people in business and government, media, religious congregations and young people themselves. After all, every one of us, not just kids, will benefit if all children develop into good workers, parents and citizens.

PROGRAMS THAT WORK

Existing programs that successfully provide Safe Passage for teenagers promote education, prevent risky behavior and demonstrate high expectations for youth to achieve.

One program that works particularly well is the full-service community school. In this approach, school buildings provide not only education, but also health and social services needed in the community. Teaming with outside community agencies, these schools open their buildings for extended hours every day, on weekends and during the summer to provide a safe haven and one-stop resource for children and parents.

Some full-service schools include a school-based health clinic. There are currently more than 1,000 of these facilities in operation today, mostly in disadvantaged communities. Outside health agencies work in these schools with a medical staff who provide primary health care, emergency care, mental health counseling, health promotion and education.

The school-based youth center is another type of full-service program. Usually operated by outside agencies, these centers provide services such as after-school recreation and mentoring, employment

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services, substance abuse counseling and group counseling. In some communities, schools are used as locations for Boys and Girls Clubs, the Police Athletic League and 4-H after-school programs.

There are many other types of community schools, and they have returned positive results. By getting more young people involved in school activities, we can steer them away from the problems of drugs, sex or violence.

WHAT MAKES PROGRAMS WORK?

Successful Safe Passage programs have many elements in common. For instance, they must have strong leadership, qualified personnel and solid financial backing.

A good program must have the flexibility to adjust to varying community needs. People other than the program designers must be able reproduce the programs elsewhere. And the program must have some effective way to measure its success. That is the only way we can tell whether it's helping the young people in any given situation.

Moreover, successful programs need to include a great deal of skill development and close adult relationships to help youth make a Safe Passage. They have to build on young people's strengths and offer opportunities for positive experiences. Other key factors include the following.

SUCCESS FACTORS AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Early Intervention - Programs need to start early in children's lives and follow them through older ages.

Individual Attention - Without the one-on-one involvement of a mentor, teacher, counselor, child aide, case manager or tutor, most high-risk children will never make it.

Developmentally Appropriate - The most effective programs relate to youth based on where those youth are in their lives, instead of where the staff think they should be.

Youth Empowerment - Successful programs give young people the skills and motivation they need to make it. They have high expectations for young people and often involve youth in planning and developing the programs.

SUCCESS FACTORS AT THE FAMILY LEVEL

Parental Involvement - It's very important to involve parents in a program. Some programs include home visits by a trained counselor to offer parent training and promote parental involvement. Parents

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are also more likely to visit the schools and centers hosting the programs if they offer useful information.

Reaching Across Generations - Many programs encourage grandparents to participate, especially when parents aren't available.

SUCCESS FACTORS AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

Educational Achievement - Achievement in school is a goal of almost all types of prevention programs, often along with others, such as reducing substance abuse. Youth must be fully literate and ready for the work force in order to guarantee Safe Passage.

Effective Principals - School principals are key to the success of comprehensive school-based programs and in getting partners for the program from the community.

School-based but not School-operated - Successful school programs bring in various community agencies for health or mental health clinics and social services.

On-site Facilitators - To make sure programs are reproduced correctly in schools, outside facilitators come in and train school personnel. Having access to skilled advisors helps teachers and youth workers change the way they operate and solve new problems.

Social Skills Training - Because social influences strongly affect youth behaviors, programs must teach skills such as social competency, decision making and how to deal with aggressive feelings. Youth particularly need to learn universal skills and prevention techniques that apply to all risky behaviors. Practicing behavior skills, as in role playing, is important, and booster sessions during subsequent years reinforce the skills.

Group Counseling - For many teens, it's helpful to know that other young people share their troubles—and have found solutions.

Community Service - Some of the most successful programs require youth to spend time working in community agencies, child-care centers and retirement homes. Young people who do so can see that they are responsible for building the communities of the future.

SUCCESS FACTORS AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL

Location in the Community - Almost any program can take place in a community agency. The locations should be easily accessible to young people at all hours.

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Community Outreach - One sure way of reaching high-risk youth is to send workers and trained community aides into the streets to teach prevention.

Cultural Responsiveness - Many programs build their success on cultural or racial identity. They strive to surround youth with positive role models and experiences where they can learn about their own cultural traditions. Parents also trust programs that communicate in their language and respect their culture.

Community Police - Several programs use police as case managers, youth advocates and recreation leaders.

Safe Havens - Young people should feel they are safe and protected from the dangers of street life by the people who operate the program or center.

Incentives and Entrepreneurial Approaches - Many programs use financial incentives. Some award scholarships for completing high school. Others pay older youth to teach younger students. Some programs even teach participants how to set up a small business.

Multi-agency, Multi-component - Good comprehensive programs provide several services at one location and create a consistent, supportive environment.

Food - Along with caring, youngsters also need plenty of calories. Many programs offer after-school snacks, breakfast, lunch and occasionally dinner.

Intensive and Long-term Involvement in a Program - Several programs that have proven successful require almost daily attendance by the clients and students over many years. This level of intensity is important in helping youngsters learn important life skills and change their self-concepts.

VISIONS AND STRATEGIES: WHAT WE MUST DO

Intelligence - To create new programs, we have to find out what programs already exist, whom they serve, what the eligibility is and what the regulations are. This will help in deciding whether to mix programs and making sure work isn't repeated.

Technical Assistance - Programs must have the combined efforts of schools and community agencies. Outside agents—or facilitators—are important in helping everyone work together. One example is the county agent that works to organize 4-H programs for youth and other activities for the people in the community.

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Staffing - To carry out programs in different communities, we need the right people. These people should have experience in other types of good programs, planning skills, a willingness to work hard and many other key leadership traits.

Training - We need to train not only the staff of the programs, but also teachers, principals, counselors and several other youth workers.

Evaluation and Research - There must be a way to examine the elements of the program, and how well the program works. Then we can change what needs changed or concentrate on elements that aren't working as well as others.

Leadership - Another main goal is to gain recognition of the importance of successful program models. This requires strong political support, visibility and funding.

LOOKING AHEAD

To sumup, our task is to unite all caring people from the public and private sectors at the local, state and national levels to build a Safe Passage movement, so that all of our children have a chance for Safe Passage to a bright future. Universities, youth development agencies, religious congregations, businesses, senior citizens, parents, schools and the media can each be helpful in their own way.

Of course, the most important element is young people themselves. Whatever we do in the future, young people must have a strong voice in it.

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APPENDIX 1: Effective Components of Safe Passage Programs

Individual Level - *Early intervention: preschool and home visits*

- One-on-one attention: attachment to a parent or other adult
- Youth empowerment: listening to their voices

Family Level - *Training in parenting*

- Parental involvement and support, responding to family needs
- Intergenerational involvement

School Level - *Educational achievement: acquisition of cognitive skills*

- Effective principals as innovators and gatekeepers
- Teachers with high expectations for all students
- Teachers trained to manage classrooms
- School-based but not necessarily school-operated
- Social skills/competency training
- Group counseling on psychosocial issues
- Community service experience

Community Level - *Community location as alternative to school*

- Community outreach
- Cultural responsiveness
- Community police
- Safe havens
- Incentives and entrepreneurial approaches
- Work force experience

Comprehensive Interventions - *Multi-component; multi-agency*

- One-stop health and social services
- Intense and sustained media backup
- Changing/enforcing policies

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APPENDIX 2: What Works Best in Prevention of Substance Abuse?

Individual Level

- Help children bond to family and school through parent and teacher training
- Involve parents in prevention activities
- Train and supervise mentors to provide continuous attention
- Enhance training in social skills by:
 - adding sessions on coping and problem-solving skills
 - having more sessions in each year and booster sessions for years to follow
- Evaluate classroom curricula and replicate the good ones, with a loyalty to the original models, backed by teacher training
- Pay attention to risk factors, and shift the emphasis away from substance use toward general competency and determinants of high-risk behaviors

Community/Neighborhood Level

- Broaden the range of programs by adding community interventions to school programs
- Change the school and community climate regarding the acceptability of substance use.
- Reduce youth access to cigarettes and alcohol

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