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Helping Young People Resist At-risk Behaviors

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Helping Young People Resist

AT-RISK

*Live life to the full.
Be a risk taker.
Grab for the brass ring.
If it feels good, do it.*

Throughout history, these phrases have just about summed up the attitude of adolescents and youth toward life. Variations of the philosophy exist in every culture, but unfortunately, risk taking is often confused with indulging in at-risk behaviors. The former is a legitimate step in life's journey toward reaching a particular goal. Without risking possible failure, Henry Ford would not have invented

his car, Neil Armstrong would not have taken that first giant step on the moon, and Winston Churchill would not have led the Allies to victory in World War II. That kind of risk taking is good and positive.

But the kind of at-risk behavior so often characteristic of adolescents and youth is destructive to themselves and to society. Those high-risk behaviors like sexual promiscuity, experimentation with alcohol and other dangerous substances, drag racing, and violence can have adverse effects on one's health and development, and may negatively impact both self and others.

Social, educational, and scientific research has shown how such high-risk behaviors have harmed youth and prevented them from being creative partners in the community in which they live. The December 2013/January 2014 issue of *THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST ED-*

UCATION provides strategies for dealing with problems caused by youthful experimentation with drugs and alcohol. This article will deal with some at-risk behaviors that are new to our times. Its goal is to provide a helpful kit filled with research-based strategies that teachers, parents, church and community leaders, counselors, health-care professionals, and others can use in their work with youth. In addition, the article will provide information that can be shared with young people who need to be aware of lurking dangers, as well as what strategies they can use both now and in the future, when they establish their own families. Because of the urgency of those matters, teachers and administrators should talk about these issues in a variety of courses and forums, not just marriage and family

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BEHAVIORS

classes, or only in parent-teacher meetings or fliers sent home with students.

The new at-risk behaviors discussed below relate to electronic media and its various social incarnations. Unless otherwise stated, all research and statistics in this article refer to work done in the United States, though in many cases they are applicable elsewhere as well.

Electronic Media

Of the new at-risk behaviors faced by youth today, involvement with electronic media is perhaps the most subtle and dangerous. Consider how much time young people spend with such media. According to Johnson, Shapiro, and Tourangeau,¹ 70 percent of U.S. teens spend a significant amount of time daily on social networking sites. In 2010, the percentage of American teens who owned cellular phones reached 66 percent, while 75 percent owned iPods and/or MP3 players. In an average day in 2009, U.S. teens spent 33 minutes talking on cellular phones, 49 minutes listening to music or playing

games, and 1.5 hours texting.² By 2010, social networking and video sites such as Facebook and YouTube accounted for an average of 37 minutes per day in the life of a teen. Teens also spent on average 30 minutes a day watching DVDs and videos, one hour watching TV and movies, 24 minutes on the Internet, 15 minutes on cell phones, 15 minutes on iPods, one hour or more playing computer games, and 2.35 hours watching news and talk shows. Among 15- to 18-year-olds, boys use the computer about two hours per day, girls about 1¼ hours. In 2010, 43 percent of American youth reported multitasking for most of the time each day.³

While much of the research on youth and electronic media has been conducted in the U.S., researchers around the world have expressed concern about the impact of electronic media on their nations' children and youth. Electronic media have power-

fully influenced the social, educational, economic, and political changes that are sweeping the globe, impacting both developing countries and emerging economies. Electronic media have played a major role in linking youth around the world and in opening the minds of young people to the existence and validity of other cultures and ideas.⁴ The pervasive global electronic and social media is a challenge to both families and educational systems.

While there are benefits in exploring Internet resources for academic reasons, using cell phones to stay in touch with friends and family members, watching television to understand global events, etc., the amount of time spent with electronic media is a matter of increasing concern. Research on the association between the use of electronic media and behavioral and health problems are well documented.

Electronic Media and Obesity

Obesity is clearly linked to excessive time spent on electronic media. As far

back as 1985, a U.S. study found a relationship between increased body weight among 12- to 17-year-old adolescents and TV viewing. Dietz and Gortmaker⁵ reported that obesity increased by two percent for each additional hour of television viewed. Similarly, findings from studies in 2001 and 2010 revealed that the prevalence of obesity was lowest among children watching one or fewer hours of television per day and highest among those watching four or more hours of television a day.⁶

Research on video gaming has produced findings consistent with those regarding television and obesity. A study conducted among 2,832 youngsters between 1 and 12 years of age concluded that there was a strong relationship between video gaming and the weight status of those studied. Their findings linking video gaming to obesity were strongest among youngsters aged 8 years and younger.⁷ An international survey by Crawford and Jeffery,⁸ examining countries from Asia to Africa to Latin America, suggests a similar relationship between electronic media and obesity. All these findings reveal that excessive time spent with electronic media reduces children's physical activity and often exposes them to high-calorie junk foods, thus increasing their risk for obesity.

Electronic Media and Sleep Patterns

Another area that is adversely affected by excessive exposure to electronic media is sleep. Several studies have revealed that 50-70 percent of American children have a television set in their bedroom.⁹ Children with a TV in their bedroom spend an average of 1.5 hours more per day watching TV compared to those without a TV in the bedroom.¹⁰ A survey of parents revealed that nearly half (43 percent) of children under the age of 2 watch TV every day, and one-quarter (26 percent) have a TV in their bedroom. Seventy-four percent of all infants and toddlers have watched TV before age 2.¹¹



These statistics should be a matter of deep concern—the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends the removal of televisions from children's bedrooms, zero screen time for those less than 2 years of age, and replacing TV watching with more interactive activities, such as talking, playing, singing, and reading together, in order to promote proper brain development.¹²

Researchers have discovered an alarming connection between electronic media use and young people's sleep patterns. Lack of sleep and nightmares have been linked to television viewing.¹³ Sleep disturbances increase with the presence of a TV set in the child's bedroom¹⁴ and access to computer games.¹⁵

Research has also shown that mobile phones in the bedroom may negatively affect sleep patterns among adolescents, and the threat to sleep from cell phones may be different than that posed by entertainment media. Entertainment delays the time when a youngster falls asleep, while a cell phone in the bedroom actually interrupts sleep.¹⁶

Another researcher found that the television-viewing habits most associ-

ated with sleep disturbance were a large amount of viewing throughout the day, as well as increased viewing at bedtime—particularly if there was a television in the bedroom. Bedtime TV viewing (1) increased children's resistance to going to bed; (2) delayed the onset of sleep; (3) had a connection to feelings of anxiety close to bedtime; and (4) decreased sleep duration.¹⁷

Electronic Media and Violence

A third area of concern is the link between violence in electronic media and young people's attitudes and behavior. For almost 50 years, researchers have examined the relationship between exposure to violence in media (film, TV, electronic games) and violent behavior of youth as well as adults. Early results were often mixed and ambivalent. But this is no longer true, according to an impressive review article by Huesmann,¹⁸ whose research results point "to the conclusion that media violence increases the risk significantly that the viewer or game player will be-

have violently both in the short and long run.” From experimental research to surveys, the conclusions are the same: Watching violent media in any form and playing violent games desensitize youth to violence and provide normative role models on how to behave in real-life situations. Bushman and Huesmann¹⁹ further estimate that exposure to media violence is as great a threat to the wellbeing of young people as any other environmental risk.

Electronic media also provide the means and opportunity for cyberbullying, and facilitate access to children by pedophiles and scam artists. The Internet makes it easy for young people to link to hate groups and imbibe their noxious philosophy. A number of Internet sites even offer step-by-step instructions for bomb making and other criminal activities.²⁰

Possible Parental Responses— Family Meals

In the light of the enormous risks that electronic media pose to the health and wellbeing of youth, how should parents, teachers, and others working with youth respond to these dangers? We shall begin by suggesting appropriate parental responses:

1. Family meals and the resultant togetherness reduce youthful health-risk behaviors. Life today is fast-paced, which results in a decreased sense of connectedness between adolescents and their family, community, and schools.²¹ Families have busy, demanding schedules, which means that both children and adults often snack or eat their meals quickly, alone, and/or in front of the television.²² Over the past two decades, only a slight majority of American families reported having dinner together five or more times per week. While the majority of Americans used to eat meals together each day as a family, this tradition has changed over the past several decades. One study revealed that only 58 percent of children report eating five or more meals with their parents each week.²³

In contrast with this decreasing trend of families eating together, consider the findings of Eisenberg and colleagues,²⁴ which reported a positive association be-

tween family connectedness and how often parents and children had shared mealtimes. Resnick and colleagues²⁵ found a wide variety of positive outcomes associated with family dinners. They reported that parent-child connectedness (e.g., feelings of warmth, love, and caring from parents) has been consistently related to healthy youth development and a reduced risk for emotional distress and suicide, substance abuse, violence involvement, early sexual involvement, and pregnancy.

Thus, sharing meals with family on a regular basis and time spent in family togetherness have the potential to bring family members together, and to develop and maintain strong parent-child bonds and connections.²⁶

2. Family dinners promote healthy dietary choices. Families that intentionally make family meals a priority tend to create an enjoyable mealtime atmosphere, a part of which is planning for healthier food choices, thereby decreasing the risk that adolescents will engage in unhealthy eating and dietary behaviors.²⁷ Research indicates that regular family meals during the transition from early to middle adolescence influence

positively the development of healthful eating patterns and produce lower rates of youthful obesity.²⁸ Neumark-Sztainer and colleagues²⁹ also reported that the frequency of eating family meals was positively associated with an increased intake of fruits, vegetables, grains, and food rich in protein, fiber, calcium, iron, folate, and other vitamins. Research has also found an association between a more frequent schedule of eating meals as a family and lower intake of less-nutritious foods, which may put teens at lower risk for eating disorders.

3. Family meals help to create a better atmosphere for learning. Research has demonstrated that frequent family meals can positively impact children’s vocabulary, and an extensive vocabulary tends to result in increased literacy. After examining 65 family mealtime conversations over a 15-year period, Snow and Beals³⁰ reported that children are encouraged to expand their vocabularies during family meal conversations.

The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University³¹ concurs with this finding, adding that good grades in school are strongly correlated with



family meals. More specifically, “those who have fewer than three family dinners per week are one and a half times likelier to report getting mostly C’s or lower grades in school.”³² Eisenberg et al.³³ also reported that youth who eat more family meals have higher academic performance.

4. Family meals tend to prevent substance use and victimization. The CASA³⁴ research report demonstrated that family meals also play a significant role in the prevention of high-risk behaviors in adolescent youth, such as smoking, drinking, and using drugs. When families ate five to seven meals together each week, teens were less likely to smoke, drink, or use drugs, in contrast with those who shared three or fewer family meals a week. In homes that shared three or fewer family meals per week, adolescent youth were twice as likely to use tobacco or marijuana, more than one and a half times more likely to use alcohol, and twice as likely to try drugs in the future.

Thus, regular and frequent family meals are an effective strategy in preventing high-risk behaviors among young people. These findings occur not only within general society, but also within Adventism: A recent Andrews University survey found that students who had three or more family dinners per week were significantly less likely to use dangerous substances or to be sexually active.³⁵

In addition, an analysis of national (U.S.) data showed a significant inverse relationship between frequency of family dinners and not being bullied or slapped by a boyfriend or girlfriend, as well as lower rates of victimization in sexual assaults.³⁶ Researchers also found that the frequency of family dinners was related to lower rates of considering/attempting suicide.³⁷

Parental Responses: Stated Parental Disapproval of Risk Behaviors

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism³⁸ concluded in 2009 that parental disapproval of alco-

Research has reported that the perception of parental (particularly mother’s) disapproval of teen sex is associated with a delayed age of first sexual intercourse.

hol use is the key reason children choose not to drink. Many studies have reported that in order to foster attitudes against alcohol use among adolescents, parents must ensure that their children are fully aware of their disapproval of such activities. Numerous other investigations have shown that an adolescent’s awareness of his or her parents’ specific opinions on drinking can be effective in preventing or discouraging adolescent alcohol consumption.³⁹

Children’s awareness of parental disapproval of alcohol use has also been shown to discourage them from pursuing interpersonal relationships with individuals who would pressure them into such behavior.⁴⁰ Additionally, adolescents who were aware of their parents’ disapproval of alcohol consumption have been found to hold similar sentiments and to be less susceptible to peer influences, particularly in relation to alcohol consumption.⁴¹

The benefits of parental disapproval extend even further. Research suggests that rates of substance use among youths are lower among those whose parents disapprove of substance use than among those whose parents do not disapprove. The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse⁴² asked youth aged 12 to 17 to report how they

thought their parents would feel about their trying marijuana/hashish once or twice, having one or two drinks of an alcoholic beverage nearly every day, or smoking one or more packs of cigarettes per day. The survey also asked about the adolescents’ use of marijuana/hashish, alcohol, and cigarettes during the month before the survey. The study found that substance use was lower among youths who believed their parents would strongly disapprove compared to those who felt their parents somewhat disapproved or who thought their parents would neither approve nor disapprove.

Benefits of stated parental disapproval of risk behavior also cover the area of sex experimentation. Research has reported that the perception of parental (particularly mother’s) disapproval of teen sex is associated with a delayed age of first sexual intercourse.⁴³

Parental influence also extends to youth access to electronic media. A newsletter from the American Academy of Pediatrics reported that several studies indicate a relationship between exposure by children, from preschoolers through adolescents, to violent media and increased risk for exhibiting aggressive behaviors. Their recommendations are so emphatic that they deserve to be quoted:

“The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time (television, DVDs, and videogames) for children less than two years of age and no more than two hours of screen time per day for children older than two. They also recommend that children should not have TV or videogame screens in their bedrooms. These strategies can be followed more easily if your child is required to choose ahead of time what show he is going to watch or which videogame he is going to play for his allotted media time. If you are consistent with such an arrangement, you will most likely find that your child adapts quickly to your expectations and does not argue with you for more time in front of the television. If you start such a plan when your child is young, you may

not only reduce the chance of aggressive behavior but also will be setting your family up for an easier transition into adolescence when increased media time is a temptation.⁴⁴

The Community's Role in Reducing Risk Behaviors

In addition to parental responses that could positively impact youth development in facing at-risk behaviors, community members and others interested in youth behavior and development have a definite role to play. Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. Through service learning, young people—from elementary through college age—get to use what they learn in the classroom to solve real-life problems. They not only learn the practical applications of their studies,

they also become actively contributing citizens and community members through the service they perform.⁴⁵

Research has demonstrated real benefits to be gained from engaging in community service/service learning. Kirby⁴⁶ reported that service-learning programs are effective in reducing adolescent unprotected sex, pregnancy, and child-bearing. An additional benefit of service programs is enhanced academic performance. Children and teens who engage in service tend to earn better grades.⁴⁷

Service learning may be used as a strategy to prevent other risky behaviors as well, including alcohol consumption and tobacco use. In the United States, despite the fact that it is illegal for them to purchase alcohol, young people age 12 to 20 account for 11 percent of all of the alcohol consumed, and within this group, 90 percent have engaged in binge drinking on multiple occasions.⁴⁸ Furthermore, approximately 1,000 young

people under age 18 (in addition to approximately 1,800 18-year-olds and older adults) begin smoking each day, according to the CDC.⁴⁹ An effective approach to handling these problems is to implement intervention programs for adolescents that focus on education and awareness campaigns, mentoring, and policy change, combined with service learning.⁵⁰

How can you develop a successful service-learning program in your school? Merely sending students into the community to pick up trash is not enough. Instead, follow a four-step procedure: (1) Identify and screen responsible adults to take youngsters into the community and involve them in challenging service situations. (2) Talk to youngsters about what you are going to do. (3) Accompany them to do the activities. (4) Reflect with them about the experience.⁵¹

Summary and Conclusion

Teachers, parents, pastors, counselors, community leaders, and others involved in youth development have a responsibility to help young people face challenges that may tempt them to engage in at-risk behavior. What strategies may these youth leaders, particularly teachers, employ in reference to the use of electronic media?

- Ensure that the parents of your students are aware of the urgent issues related to electronic media. Share with them the scientific evidence concerning how long children should have access to media, where media should be located, and the importance of supervising their children's media use. Most importantly, let parents know about the short-term and long-term consequences of exposure to violent media in any form. The benefits of controlling the extent of exposure to, and the content of, media are significant and broad. Such benefits include reduction in obesity, improved grades, better sleep patterns that relate to better cognitive choices, and a decreased aggressive and violent behavior.

- Be alert to identify opportunities to reinforce the value of family togetherness. Research makes it clear that eating together as a family has specific



Research has demonstrated real benefits to be gained from engaging in community service/service learning.

benefits. Increasing the frequency of family meals is likely to relate to improved learning, reduced risk behaviors (from sexual activity to substance use), and lower rates of victimization. This will not only be of help to parents today, but also to your students as they form their own families later on.

- Encourage parents to clearly communicate their expectations, including disapproval of risk behaviors, ensuring that their children understand the family's moral standards. Research consistently shows that when parents take firm moral stands and communicate them clearly, this reduces the rate of risky behaviors by their children.

- Organize a service-learning program. Schools, churches, and youth organizations can collaborate to organize ongoing service-learning opportunities that channel youthful energy and reinforce the idealism of the younger generation. Well-organized service-learning programs have been shown to result in improved learning, lower rates of risk behaviors, and higher rates of pro-social behaviors. ☞

This article has been peer reviewed.



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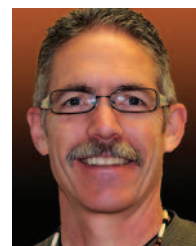


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