
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In recent years, much has been written and discussed about the difficulties and challenges facing young people. Alcohol and other drugs, teen sexuality, depression and suicide and violence are among the issues often associated with the teen years, as well as teen out-of-school activities, parental roles, school issues, spiritual influences and social responsibility.

These issues affect our children or our neighbors' children. They are the focus of attention in the newspapers, weekly news magazines or nightly news on television. As parents, school personnel, youth workers and members of the community, we are concerned about some of these issues. We wonder what we can do to reduce negative behaviors and promote the positive development of our youth.

With these societal issues, communities become concerned and want to do something about the challenges youth face. Our desire is for communities to become better places for all people. Unfortunately, communities sometimes try to develop solutions before the issues have been clearly defined. Because some issues are not clear and others tend to be very complex, it is difficult to focus efforts, get organized and ultimately implement effective solutions. Before the needs of our youth are addressed, it is important to have good, reliable information. The Teen Assessment Project survey and program process are designed to solicit responses about key youth centered issues.

- What are the most serious issues teens face in our community?
- How widespread are the challenges?
- Are there any clues as to the causes of these issues?
- What are the positive aspects of youth, families, schools and our communities?
- What community assets and programs can we enhance?
- What new strategies and programs would be helpful to put into place?
- How can youth, adults, school personnel and the larger community work together to make things better?

The Teen Assessment Project (TAP) was undertaken with these questions in mind. Before tackling the issues teens face in our communities, a better, more accurate understanding of our youth and their perceptions of the issues in their lives is needed. Adults can sometimes make incorrect assumptions about what young people are doing, how they are feeling and their perception of the world. As a result, the opinions of youth were sought by asking them for their honest responses so their voices could be heard throughout our communities.

The Teen Assessment Project recognizes that youth grow up in families that are part of communities. The positive development of youth is not influenced by just one factor, but by many factors in their lives. Youth are nurtured and influenced first and foremost by their family. As they grow and develop, their peers, their school and the community in which they live also have an influence. These factors all work together to shape the development of youth.

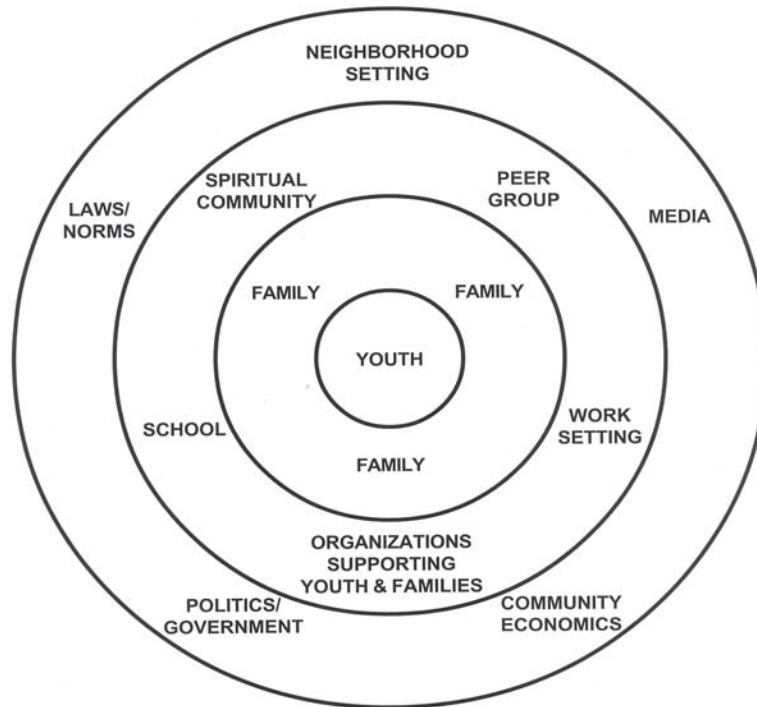


Figure 1-1: Ecological Model of Youth Development

As can be seen from Figure 1-1, there are many levels of the individual and their environment that make up the ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Children do not grow up in isolation. They develop in ever-widening environments. The innermost circle represents the youth himself/herself, his/her temperament, physical health, skills and abilities. The next circle consists of a very strong influence in a youth’s life: the family. A positive family climate is important to the successful development of children. The next ring of the circle contains the school, peer group, spiritual community, youth and family serving agencies/organizations as well as the work setting. These are all important for the connections they provide between the different people and groups in a child’s life. The outermost ring of the circle represents community norms, community economics, the media and the neighborhood setting. These factors influence development indirectly through systems that have impact on the lives of children. All levels of influence affect youth throughout their growth and development.

Protective and Risk Factors in the Lives of Youth

The ecology of youth development refers to the interrelationships of youth and their environment. By looking at youth development in this manner we can examine the factors that contribute to youth reaching their full potential to become caring, contributing members of our society. Risk and protective factors exist at all levels of the ecological model. Some of these risk and protective factors involve the biological, cognitive or psychosocial changes experienced by the young person during the adolescent years. Other factors are directly related to the adolescent's changing social relationships, particularly those with family members and peers that can make involvement in problem behaviors more or less likely. At another level, transitions in adolescents' relationships with school, work and society-at-large can influence their decisions and behaviors. Understanding the transitions that occur during adolescence can help to minimize the risk factors and enhance the protective factors to help support the healthy development of our young people.

Protective factors are those aspects that can increase a child's ability to resist negative influences and develop healthy life skills. Good problem solving skills, family support and caring, healthy peer influences, positive school environments and supportive neighborhoods and communities all serve as protective factors for youth.

Risk factors can create barriers to the development of healthy life skills and can increase the likelihood of youth being influenced in a negative way. Some examples of risk factors are negative attitudes toward self and others, a difficult temperament, poor parental monitoring, friends who engage in risky behaviors, a low commitment to school and communities that lack organized youth activities. All these factors play a role in adding to the risk that youth will engage in problem behaviors.

These factors influence whether young people will develop to their full potential. Our goal as parents and community members is to reduce the number of risk factors while at the same time increasing the number of protective factors for the most successful positive development of youth. This must be done at the youth, family, school and community level. There are no quick solutions to complex youth issues because youth grow up and interact in multiple environments. Youth development is not influenced by one factor but by a whole mosaic of factors.

The Teen Assessment Project survey helps us understand teen attitudes, behaviors and perceptions. However, it is important to remember that TAP is a process, not just a survey. The collaboration around the development and implementation of the survey is an important feature of TAP. Having a project to work on can provide groups of like-minded individuals with a good reason to get and remain together.

The collaborative groups directing the Teen Assessment Project encourage everyone to work together to address issues of concern as identified by the results of the youth survey. It is important for members of the communities to look at strengths and to determine where additional youth and family supports are needed. Data from this report can be used to:

- facilitate communication between children and parents
 - increase parents' awareness and involvement in the issues and concerns of their adolescent children
 - illustrate the relationship between youth risk behaviors and parents sharing their values, monitoring youth behavior and establishing consequences for actions
 - provide a portrait across many communities of teen alcohol use, other substance use and sexual activity patterns
 - provide data on youth depression and suicide
 - reveal how patterns of youth activity and mental health vary by such factors as grade, gender and school level
 - provide an awareness of the struggles faced by our youth as well as areas of strength in our communities
 - assist schools, agencies and youth organizations in program planning
 - provide relevant information to administrators and community policy-makers to determine if changes are needed
 - provide educators and other professionals with insight into teen problems and concerns
 - provide parents, school and the community with a vehicle for education, communication, collaboration and action
 - strengthen community linkages (partnerships, networks, collaborations, coalitions, etc.)
 - help youth, parents, schools and communities strive to build protective factors/assets which enable youth to develop to their fullest potential
 - set a baseline from which to evaluate the impact of youth-at-risk prevention programs
 - provide empirical evidence increasingly necessary for obtaining private and public funding
- Together we truly can support youth, strengthen families and build strong communities.