
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 pregnancy, depression and suicide are among the issues often associated with the teen years.

Sometimes these issues affect our children or our neighbor's children. These issues are the focus of attention in the newspaper, weekly news magazine or nightly news on television. As parents, teachers, and members of the community, these issues concern us and we wonder how prevalent the problem is in our particular community.

With these societal issues, communities become concerned and want to do something about the problems faced by youth. Our desire is for our communities to become better places for all of its peoples. Unfortunately, communities sometimes try to develop solutions before the problems 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 solicits youth answers about these key questions:

- What are the most serious issues teens face in our community?
- How widespread are the problems?
- Are there any clues as to the causes of these issues?
- What can we do to help?

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

Data from this important study can be used in a multitude of ways to:

- facilitate communication between children and parents
- increase parents' awareness and involvement in the issues and concerns of their adolescent children
- provide a portrait of local alcohol, other drug, and sexual activity patterns
- illustrate the relationship between youth risk behaviors and parents sharing their values, monitoring youth behavior, and establishing consequences for actions
- provide data on youth depression and suicide
- reveal how these patterns of 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 locally relevant information to administrators and community policy-makers to determine if changes are needed
- provide educators and other professionals with insight into local teen problems and concerns
- provide parents, school and 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.