

A Preventive Approach to Adolescent Problems

To resolve the serious social problems of youth, we must look beyond the symptoms and provide guidance and support to help them develop self-respect and take responsibility for their choices.

When I set out to design and develop *The Dynamics of Relationships*, my intent was to create a curriculum with a preventive approach to adolescent problems. Existing programs approached substance abuse, teen pregnancy, suicide, violence, and dropping out as if they were the real issues. I saw them as only symptoms.

In my prior work as a divorce coun-

selor, I had discovered five major conditions to be the roots of the problems: (1) lack of self-esteem and self-respect; (2) inability to communicate thoughts and feelings on an intimate and genuine level; (3) few, if any, conflict resolution or decision-making skills; (4) unrealistic expectations about how life was supposed to be; and (5) a complete misunderstanding between men and women who, as a

result of quite different upbringings, had different ideas about how to approach life and how to live it.

At first I had thought these were adult problems. But the more I learned about the social dilemmas of youth, the more I recognized that the real issues were the same and that they start when we are very young. It became clear that the only way to prevent the symptoms is to help youth in

the crucial areas of self-esteem, communication, conflict resolution, and sex roles and expectations.

Program Design

The Dynamics of Relationships offers young people an arena to talk openly about sensitive personal issues. A year-long, five-days-a-week, one-credit elective, the course seeks to develop in students:

- a strong and secure sense of self-worth to help them say "no" to drugs, alcohol, irresponsible sex, and other harmful or self-destructive behaviors;
- communication skills to help them interact better with others and handle anger and conflict safely;
- ability to cope with disappointment, rejection, and loss;
- the understanding that violence is never acceptable and that it never solves problems, it simply makes them worse;
- clear and realistic expectations about their roles in all relationships—friendship, love, marriage, parenting, and the career world.

In *The Dynamics of Relationships* classes, the "dynamics" are different from class to class depending on the teacher's approach and personality; but most teachers use at least one of the following strategies and methods daily:

- modeling cognitive skills such as ways to handle anger, rejection, and conflict;
- facilitating in-depth group discussions on topics chosen by students;
- conducting exercises and activities to help students explore new ways of relating and conducting themselves;
- supervising experiential activities such as role playing to allow students to "try on" new behaviors as alternatives to their old destructive behaviors;
- assigning readings to help students explore their beliefs and their understanding of human behavior;
- helping students become peer facilitators;
- listening to guest speakers such as ex-addicts, recovered alcoholics, and disabled veterans tell about their experiences, and to experts on such topics as suicide and teen pregnancy;

- taking field trips to visit sites such as drug rehabilitation centers or homes for pregnant teens to see the consequences of choices others have made.

Staff Development

Probably the most important part of the program is the intensive teacher training, which can take up to 45 hours. Teachers are selected because of certain personal qualities and not because of any specific discipline. They find the training beneficial even when they do not teach the formal course. In the training they are prepared to help adolescents better understand their own attitudes and behavior and make healthier decisions about themselves and others with whom they relate. They learn to facilitate in-depth discussions in which students share viewpoints and reactions; and they practice conducting activities to help students clarify their own feelings and responsibilities.

They learn to help students use decision-making skills without making the decisions for them. They also learn to help students build and maintain a strong sense of pride and self-esteem. Finally, they are sensitized to the behavior changes associated with abuse, suicide plans, or other indications of students' inability to cope.

Initial Implementations

In 1985 *The Dynamics of Relationships* was piloted in four Washington, D.C., secondary schools. In the 86-87 school year, 18 classes were offered in 12 schools, including junior high and elementary schools. The Washington, D.C., program has continued to expand and to be the most active program.

In 1986-87, a number of school districts around the country offered the course, including a very affluent school district, Barrington, Illinois; small rural districts such as Woodstown, New Jersey; Lincoln Hills, Indiana; Allendale, New Jersey; Kent, Washington; large rural districts like Manassas, Virginia; and schools for specific populations like the Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon. The course was attached to different disci-

plines and adapted to fit different schedules and school requirements. Other school districts, such as Charles County, Maryland; Vancouver, British Columbia; and Yonkers, New York, incorporated it into their counseling, human relations, or home economics departments, or used it as a resource.

Testimony to Success

Teachers have reported quite positive results and dramatic impact on students' self-esteem. They noticed a high rate of attendance and a level of involvement and participation not commonly found in their classrooms.

Students reported that the text helped them solve day-to-day problems while helping them become more aware of their own and others' feelings. For example, Felicia Heath, a senior at Ballou High School, wrote, "I think this course should be offered to kids all across America, not just high school, but elementary students, too. If they start understanding young, then maybe they won't have as many problems as teens today."

One young man was asked by a visitor what he was getting out of the class. He said rather proudly, "I'm learning how to handle my anger better." Another young man said, "I feel like I'm getting to know and understand myself better than I ever have and for the first time I'm really beginning to like myself."

Reaching Adulthood with Hope and Optimism

One of my favorite slogans is "if you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always gotten." We cannot afford to continue to get what we've always gotten. Too many children are dying figuratively from drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, and dropping out. Others are dying literally from overdoses, drunk driving, and suicide. We must take a new approach so that our children can reach adulthood with hope and optimism and look forward to a life of success and happiness. □

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