

# Talking about risky behaviors can support program children, youth

## Staff members seek training to be key resources for adolescents on paths to healthy adulthoods

By Georgia Hall and Andi Genser

- At an overnight retreat, you walk into a room and find two youth in bed engaged in sexual activity.
- You notice that a youth in your program has become violent lately on the playing field.
- A youth discloses that a family member was inappropriately physical with him, but won't say it was abuse.

Is there a correct way to handle these situations? Would you or your staff members be comfortable doing so? These real-life scenarios highlight the complexity of all that youth face today — developmentally, emotionally and environmentally. Out-of-school-time programs can be supportive and help guide youth toward healthier choices but it is not always clear how, especially in the face of difficult or unexpected situations.

Youth today face numerous, complicated challenges to achieving a healthy adulthood. Out-of-school-time programs, schools and community centers are faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges as youth arrive on their doorsteps engaged in — or at-risk for — multiple-risk behaviors that threaten not only their immediate health but also their ability to achieve healthy adulthood. Engagement in risky behaviors is associated with academic underachievement, including higher high school dropout rates and a barrier to social well-being. Although many studies have focused on a single risk behavior facing youth populations, a number of recent studies have revealed that the majority of adolescents participating in one health risk behavior were found to be engaging in other risk behaviors.

Unfortunately, a large number of youth are not engaging in meaningful health-risk discussions with their parents or health-care providers. Because of this, the role of the youth worker becomes even more critical. Recognizing that youth face numerous barriers to health care, “including limited access to transportation, lack of confidentiality and youth-friendly service delivery environments, fear about seeking care and lack of information about services available,”<sup>1,2</sup> it makes sense for after-school program leadership to provide the training and resources to program staff members to help them respond appropriately to youth's needs around risk-behavior/health-related issues such as sexual and mental health, alcohol and substance use, sexual violence and healthy relationships.

Youth organizations, in school and out of school, provide environments where positive youth-adult relationships are known to develop and thrive.<sup>3</sup> It is widely acknowledged that these relationships with caring adults are essential for youth to reach their fullest potential.<sup>3-5</sup> Specifically, in regard to healthy behavior, strong youth-adult relationships in these settings can have a positive influence on the health-risk behavior of youth.<sup>3</sup>

BE SAFE is a Boston-based multiyear collaboration that focuses on youth and the interconnected issues of sexual and mental health; substance use; healthy relationships and sexual violence. As part of focus groups, site visits and training conducted by the BE SAFE initiative, many staff members who work with youth report feeling unprepared and isolated in dealing with issues of sexual and mental health, substance use, sexual violence and healthy relationships.

They report lacking adequate training, organizational support and knowledge of external resources to fully engage the youth. Furthermore, as programs seek to provide services to youth, they have often not fully developed the types of policies or procedures needed to keep youth safe, including safe Internet and other emerging technology-use guidelines, GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender youth) welcoming/safety policies, “locker-room” rules and guidelines for staff members about youth dating.



As programs seek to provide services to youth, there often are not fully developed policies in place needed to keep youth safe, such as guidelines for staff members about youth dating.

When asked about what challenges they face in providing assistance to youth in their programs related to at-risk and healthy development issues, staff members report:

- Having the right language to talk about the issues;
- Feeling intimidated by the responsibility to respond to crisis around risky behavior; and
- Creating a safe environment to talk.

The BE SAFE initiative has begun to articulate the types of staff member support, training and resources needed to help program staff members establish a more supportive and knowledgeable connection to youth around at-risk behaviors and to create a climate of safety for all youth, staff members and families. Central to all of these suggestions is to engage youth in these discussions and to provide opportunities for meaningful and authentic input. Suggestions based on early evaluation findings include:

- It's important to work with local content experts in accessing training and resources around healthy development and at-risk behaviors (for example, rape crisis centers, domestic violence programs, sexual/mental health experts and substance use).
- Staff member training that includes opportunity for self-assessment, role-play, small-group discussion and experience sharing is key (within and across programs).
- Staff members and program directors need to think through together issues such as appropriate discussion boundaries, referral procedures, confidentiality requirements and family communication, all of which need to be developed in sync with the program's values and philosophy.
- It is helpful to map out individual staff member and program assets and strengths related to addressing healthy youth development to target training

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tive Web sites that will be most beneficial to them by considering the curricular goals as evidenced by the homework or grade-level curriculum. Using the objectives of the curriculum to guide students to “practice” Web sites, you will be engaging them in meaningful learning. There are many excellent Web sites that can be recommended for student practice as a part of your program.

**AplusMath** — <http://www.aplusmath.com/>

This site contains a comprehensive collection of games, homework helpers and flashcard drills for all levels and strands of mathematics.

**Arcademic Skill Builders** —  
<http://www.arcademicskillbuilders.com/>

These research-based educational games incorporate features of arcade games and educational practices into fun online games that will engage, motivate and teach.

**That Quiz** — <http://www.thatquiz.org/>

This is a wonderful Web site, where the level, amount of problems and the time allotted to finish can be set.

**BBC Bitsize Maths** — <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/ks2bitesize/maths/>

This Web site from the British Broadcasting Corp. provides exercises, tests and review activities for number operations, shapes and data analysis.

**Spelling City** — <http://www.spellingcity.com/>

Children can each have their own login to this site. Their spelling words can be entered and saved. A teaching mode, a testing mode and practice games using their own spelling words have children mastering their spelling words each week.

**Game Goo** — <http://www.earobics.com/gamegoo/goeoy.html>

This Web site offers three levels of games that help children develop reading and language skills.

**Developing a Love For Reading With Online Stories**

Using computer-generated stories for children is in no way a replacement for actually reading stories to them. However, watching these animated stories while listening to them being read allows



There are many computer activities that will connect children to their in-school learning and also allow them to develop competency with skills and concepts that are important to the curricular goals for their grade level.

children one more way to develop their love for a good story.

A few favorites that all children will enjoy can be found at:

**Book Pals** — <http://www.storylineonline.net/>

The Screen Actors Guild presents this wonderful site.

**Speakaboos** — <http://www.speakaboos.com/>

**StoryPlace** — <http://www.storyplace.org/>

### New ways to show what they know

Providing children with new ways to design using technology will not only get their creative juices flowing but also will give them new ways to display their knowledge or document a learning experience, such as a science experiment or a field trip. Using digital pictures taken by the children, found online or obtained by scanning, children can create really cool projects featuring animated slide shows with music, text or with their recorded voice. Web sites that provide these tools free are:

**Animoto** — <http://animoto.com/>

This tool turns digital pictures into videos.

**Scrapblog** — <http://www.scrapblog.com/>

Make an online scrapbook with your own pictures, stickers and other graphic designs.

The availability of computers and users ready to spend their time online does not necessarily make for time well spent. However, by combining children's learning goals with age-appropriate and well-designed Web sites, time spent online can be very productive.

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and resource needs.

- The creation of new program policy and safe, trusting and comfortable environments that challenge youth to think critically and self-reflect about their lives must be informed by youth voice.

Staff members who can create an atmosphere of trust and openness; respond appropriately to youth's needs and establish a climate of safety for ALL youth and staff related to healthy development issues such as sexual health, alcohol and substance use, and interpersonal relations help foster resilience and support youth on a positive development trajectory.

### References

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- <sup>3</sup> Paisley J.E., Ferrari, T.M. (April 2005). Extent of positive youth-adult relationships in a 4-H after-school program. *Journal of Extension*. Vol 43 (2) .
- <sup>4</sup> Blum R.W. Rinehart P.M. Reducing the risk: Connections that make a difference in the lives of youth. Minneapolis, MN: Division of General Pediatrics and Adolescent Health, Department of Pediatrics, University of Minnesota. 1998.
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