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How Does the Research on Risk and Resiliency of Youth Contribute to School Nurse Practice?

By Cheryl Carotenuti, RN, MSN, Connecticut

According to Dr. Lisa Price in *The Biology of Risk Taking* (Educational Leadership, 2005), "Adolescence is a time of excitement, growth, and change. Sometimes adolescents direct this passion toward a positive goal, such as a creative essay, an art project, after-school sports, or a healthy romance. At other times they divert their passions to problematic activities, such as drug experimentation, reckless driving, shoplifting, fights or school truancy."

So what do we know about the behaviors among adolescents? For example, from a Connecticut sample of 1,759 youth in grades 9–12 who participated in the Connecticut School Health Survey (2003), we know that 45.9% have had sexual intercourse, 10.3% of youth attempted suicide in the past 12 months, 47.9% drank alcohol in the past 30 days, and 26.2% used marijuana in the past 30 days. We also know that many students are choosing not to engage in higher risk behaviors. So what influences these adolescents to make healthy, responsible decisions?

School nurses are in a pivotal position to providing guidance and promoting healthy development in adolescents.

A growing body of research indicates that youth can develop into confident, competent, and caring adults if families, communities, and schools identify and support assets to promote resiliency. Resilient youth are said to have "assets" that act as protective factors to support and to encourage healthy development and to help teens avoid higher risk behaviors that can lead to dropping out of school, using alcohol or other drugs, teen pregnancy, and incarceration.

The Search Institute has identified 40 developmental assets that help young people grow up healthy, caring, and responsible. These assets include both external and internal influences such as family support, a caring school climate, safety, motivation to achieve, honesty, integrity, and self-esteem.

According to the Search Institute, youth with 30–40 assets have a much lower risk (3–6%) of engaging in unsafe behaviors, including alcohol use, drug use, sexual activity, and violence, whereas youth with 0–10 assets have a much higher risk (33–61%) of engaging in those same behaviors. More information on the 40 *Developmental Assets* may be found at www.search-institute.org.

Promoting resiliency in youth is most effective in the early grades, before students are pressured to engage in risky behaviors. These efforts should be ongoing through adolescence. Schools, families, and communities that support resilient youth tend to have three common characteristics: caring and supportive relationships, positive and high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation. As a school nurse, you can:

- Examine your state/school data on higher risk behaviors and protective factors in adolescents.
- Assess your school climate.
- Promote a supportive and respectful environment within the school.
- Encourage opportunities for before and after school activities.
- Create an inviting atmosphere for students, families, and communities.
- Establish a climate of connectedness.
- View youth as a viable resource.
- Promote opportunities for young people to make positive contributions to the school and community.

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Do you have a question for the state school nurse consultants? If so, send it to the Newsletter Committee Chair at www.nassnc.org.