

It's Time to Take Up Your Weapon and Fight!

Why You Should Become Familiar With the Youth Risk Behavior Survey

Dr. Thompson's Mentoring Tip for the Week

April 16, 2013

Dear Colleague:

On April 2, 2013, I conducted one of the most rewarding workshops that I've given in a long time. Most of my workshops and presentations are for parents and educators. However, this one allowed me to share "Your Roadmap to Success: How You Can Become the Woman That You Desire to Become" with teen mothers, expectant mothers, and other "at-risk" females at an Illinois high school. Although I wanted to motivate and empower these teens by sharing my personal story and numerous life-enhancing strategies with them, they ended up inspiring me!

At the beginning of the workshop, I asked the students to write the three main goals that they'd like to accomplish during their lifetime. When it was time to share their responses, a student said that one of her goals was to become a math teacher. Another stated that she wanted to become a chef. I smiled when a third girl informed us that she wanted to write a book. As the young ladies shared their aspirations with the group, I heard many heartwarming plans. However, the goals that moved me the most came from the teen mothers who explained that creating a good life for their babies was their top priority. These young ladies were children themselves, yet they were already focusing on their infants' long-term wellbeing.

In spite of the challenging circumstances that had placed the workshop participants in the “at risk” category, all of the students--even those who already had children and those who would soon become mothers--had big dreams. However, as the old saying goes, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” In other words, having positive goals and big dreams aren’t enough. The “Roadmap to Success” that I shared with the teens was a starting point, but no guarantee that they’d apply the information to their lives. I realize that for these youth, shedding the “at risk” label and becoming good mothers and productive members of society, requires ongoing mentoring, support, and advice from adults. In fact, decades of resiliency research indicates that in order for “at risk” youth to have a good future, they need adults to intervene. In *Resiliency: What We Have Learned* (2004), author Bonnie Benard offers a compelling reason why more adults should choose to help, rather than sit on the sidelines criticizing youth. According to Benard, most children from difficult backgrounds can turn out well if they have at least one “turnaround” person in their lives. These powerful, influential role models are crucial to helping youth become productive members of society.

Choosing to help youth is important for several reasons. The most obvious is that our nation’s future depends on the quality of our youth. Today’s youth will eventually become America’s parents (if they aren’t parents already), educators, judges, attorneys, physicians, political leaders, and businessmen/women, etc. With this in mind, it’s fitting for me to ask you to complete a simple quiz.

Quiz

Please answer each question as honestly as you can.

1. What do you know about our nation's youth?
2. What do you know about the youth in the state in which you reside?
3. In what ways, if any, are you attempting to improve the lives of youth through your research agenda or other methods?

By now I'm sure you've realized that the purposes of my mentoring essay this week are to encourage you (1) to learn more about the nation's youth, and (2) to learn more about the youth in the state in which you reside. But my overall objective is (3) to urge you to figure out how to use your research agenda as a "weapon" that will allow you to fight for our youth. That's why I want to share another valuable resource with you: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) "Youth Risk Behavior Survey."

What is the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website (www.cdc.gov) contains research about many issues and numerous health-related topics. For example, I've often used the CDC's "Child Maltreatment Fact Sheet," its child health statistics, and its child abuse reports in my writing projects, including grant proposals. The best way to stay current is to sign up for regular emailed updates from the CDC. The website also offers interactive tools that'll enable you to locate statistics about topics of interest to you.

In addition to providing many statistics about young children, the CDC also offers extensive information about adolescents. When I clicked on the link for "Teen Pregnancy," for instance, I learned that in 2011, more than 300,000 babies were born to

teen mothers in the U.S., yet this astronomical number was *actually* “a record low” for teens ages 15-19 years old. Furthermore, “the CDC’s Division of Adolescent and School Health . . . collects data on youth and school health policies and practices”(<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/surveillance.htm>). These data include the “School Health Policies and Practices Study,” “School Health Profiles,” and the “Youth Risk Behavior Survey” (YRBS). The YRBS is distributed to adolescents and the results are used to provide researchers, educators, the general public, health-care providers, and policymakers with statistics about youth behaviors pertaining to the following topics:

- alcohol use
- suicide
- tobacco use
- marijuana and other drug use
- sexual activity
- exercise and eating habits
- carrying weapons on and off school property
- seatbelt use
- helmet use
- school safety

- fighting at school

What can the YRBS teach me about the nation's youth?

When you visit the CDC's website, you'll notice that the letters of the alphabet appear at the top of the page. You can click on the particular letter with which your topic begins. For example, if your topic is "Teen Suicide," you could click on the letter "t" for "teen." If your topic isn't listed under that letter, then, you could click on the letter "s," and next, click on the link for "Suicide." In order to access the YRBS, you would simply click on the letter "y," for "youth," and then, click on the link for the YRBS.

From that point on, you'll have the following options:

- You can read the 2011 National Results.
- You can read the 1991-2011 National Trends.
- You can read the portion of the survey that only pertains to specific youth behaviors of interest to you, such as "Sexual Behavior and HIV Testing," "Obesity, Dietary Behaviors, and Weight Control Practices," "Behaviors That Contribute to Violence on School Property," or "Marijuana, Cocaine, and Other Illegal Drug Use."
- You can read survey results that are disaggregated by gender.
- You can read results that are disaggregated by race or ethnicity.
- You can read results that are disaggregated by grade level.
- You can read results that are disaggregated by state.

How can I learn more about the youth in my state from the YRBS?

To learn more about youth in the state in which you reside, click on the name of the state. For example, when I clicked on “North Carolina,” which is where I currently live, the 2011 YRBS results appeared, and I learned the following:

- North Carolina youth (21.0 percent) were less likely than youth in the national average (24.1 percent) to ride in a car “with a driver who had been drinking alcohol one or more times during the 30 days before they completed the survey.”
- Although there wasn’t a statistically significant difference between the percentage of North Carolina teens and the percentage of youth in the national average (20.8) who “carried a weapon on school property on at least one day during the 30 days before they completed the survey,” the percentage of North Carolina youth (16.6) was lower.
- There wasn’t a statistically significant difference between the percentage of youth in the national average (7.4) and the percentage of North Carolina youth who were “threatened or injured with a weapon on school property one or more times during the 12 months before they completed the survey” but the percentage of North Carolina teens (9.1) was higher.
- The percentage of North Carolina youth (20.5) who said they were “bullied on school property during the 12 months before the survey,” was almost identical to the percentage of youth nationwide who admitted this (20.1).

- Although there wasn't a statistically significant difference between youth in the national average (5.9) who "did not go to school because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to or from school on at least one day during the 30 days before the survey," a higher percentage of North Carolina teens (6.8) felt unsafe.
- The percentage of North Carolina youth (28.3) who "felt sad or hopeless almost everyday for two or more weeks in a row so that they stopped doing some usual activities during the 12 months before the survey" was almost identical to the percentage of youth in the national sample (28.5) who felt this way.
- North Carolina teens (14.3) were slightly less likely than youth in the national average (15.8) to seriously consider "attempting suicide during the 12 months before the survey."
- Although there wasn't a statistically significant difference between the percentage of North Carolina teens and the percentage of youth nationwide (8.0) who said they had "ever been physically forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to," the percentage of North Carolina teens (9.5) was higher.
- North Carolina teens (7.1) were slightly more likely to admit they had "ever used any form of cocaine one or more times" than youth in the national average (6.8) who admitted this.
- Although there wasn't a statistically significant difference, North Carolina teens (29.8) were more likely than youth in the national average (25.6) to say they were "offered, sold, or given an illegal drug by someone on school property during the 12 months before the survey."

- Although there wasn't a statistically significant difference, North Carolina teens (49.3) were more likely than youth in the national average (47.4) to admit "they ever had sexual intercourse," and more likely to say they "had sexual intercourse for the first time before age 13 (8.6) in comparison to (6.2).
- There *was* a statistically significant difference between the percentage of North Carolina youth (14.1) and the percentage of youth in the national average (9.4) who said they were "hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend."

Conclusion

Becoming familiar with the YRBS is a great way to learn more about the nation's youth and teens in the state in which you reside. The survey results underscore the messages that "Many youth are indulging in dangerous behaviors that may make it difficult for them to have a good future," and "Many youth need guidance, support, and assistance from adults." These messages and the YRBS results should spur us to action, especially in light of recent media reports about teens who recorded the sexual assaults of intoxicated minors, the teens who were accused of shooting a toddler, teens who have committed suicide as a result of bullying, and the fact that although teen birth rates have declined, in 2011 more than 300,000 babies were born to teen mothers: individuals with limited parenting skills.

Therefore, I challenge you to not only become familiar with the YRBS, but to figure out how to use it as the springboard for a research agenda that will include ways to improve the lives of our nation's youth. In other words, I urge you to start using your

“weapon” (a pen, pencil, word processor, computer, etc.) today, and begin to address this pressing issue through solution-oriented research projects. In other words, this week’s mentoring essay isn’t a request; it’s a call to action. In my opinion, each of us has a moral and a professional obligation to use our research agendas to expose problems that the YRBS revealed, identify the needs of our youth, and offer solutions. So, take up your weapon and fight, fight, fight, because our youth need your help!