

PULSE: Social Bonds Among Cincinnati-Area Girls

Background

Objective:

Investigate how to grow strong girls in the Cincinnati community.

Key Questions:

- How do the bonds girls make with family, schools, peers, etc., affect distress level and engagement in 'deviant' behavior?
- What are the positive effects of social bonds on girls?

Methodology:

This study combines results from two publicly available surveys:

- Student Drug Use Surveys, 2004-2006
- The 2002 School-based Mental Health Survey .
- In addition, four focus groups were held with girls in the Cincinnati area

Key Findings

Key Influencers/Actors:

Parents play a key role in growing strong girls, through open communication and by taking a vested interest in their girls' lives. Girls generally desire stronger bonds with their parents as they understand that parents intervene in their lives for a good reason. Additionally, children mature successfully when parents are present in their lives, show constant love, and when parents realize inappropriate behavior is a form of acting out.

Teachers & schools also play an important role in growing strong girls. Girls view teachers as important mentors and appreciate when teachers take an active interest their lives. This teacher support fosters social and cognitive development. Safe schools, regular attendance, and striving for good grades are some of the strongest deterrents to drug use, which also promote good mental health.

Friends are a vitally important source of support for young girls. Having friends who disapprove of using substances is the strongest deterrent to both using substances and contemplating suicide among girls. Parental involvement increases the likelihood that daughters will develop a network of friends who model successful lifestyle choices and help deter bad choices.

Boys & Sex:

Sex education is lacking in schools. Girls almost unanimously feel that sex education classes in schools inadequately conveyed information on the complications and how to resist the temptation of engaging in early sex. Many girls expressed an irritation at having to endure sexual harassment from boys. It is not until high school that sex education in schools addresses how to negotiate intimacy decisions with the opposite sex, but girls claim that high school is too late for this discussion since many of their peers already engage in sex by that time.

Adulthood & Future:

Future Success - In general, girls appear hopeful for the future and optimistic that they will reach their future goals. Many girls define future success as avoiding financial independence on men. Some girls also define success as being compassionate, engaged, and a role model to others.

College - Most girls see college as important for future success, however, girls from one low-income community focused on how expensive and difficult it would be to attend college.

Next Steps

Communication

Encourage strong relationships with the major players in girls' lives, including parents, teachers/school administrators, and friends, as these actors matter in predicting youths' likelihood to use dangerous substances or show poor mental health. This may involve having more family meals to create dialogue between parents and children, encouraging girls to seek out mentors in their schools, and having parents spend more time with and getting to know their children's friends.

Education

Although some view sex education as a parental responsibility, school systems may need to also provide early and appropriate sex education. Girls are calling out the inadequacy of sex education in schools, and the sexual behavior of teens ultimately concerns the entire community, as research has shown that teen pregnancy perpetuates the cycle of poverty. A reluctance to discuss teen sexuality and develop programs to combat teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease may be a practical political decision, but it is a costly one.

Continued Investigation

Currently, there is no comprehensive survey on teen sexual practices, leaving parents, educators and researchers blind about what information girls need, when they need it and how to address the concerns of girls. This will be key to understanding the full impact of teens' sexual behaviors on girls and the community.



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