



### **Building Safer Communities: Youth/Adult Partnerships as Agents of Change**

*“I'd rather be the program, than the reason for the program.” –Word on the Street Research Project*

#### **Projects**

- PEACE: with Toronto Police Service, youth team, community agencies and Toronto schools
- Project Notsomuch: negative leaders to positive leaders

#### **Knowledge Transfer and Outcomes**

Youth engagement promotes healthy decision-making and reduces negative risk-taking. It is a comprehensive strategy that addresses multiple issues related to health and creating safer communities. Engagement focuses on the assets of youth and their capacity when supported by adults to contribute positively to the resiliency of themselves, their peers and their communities.

Youth who are engaged in extra-curricular activities are less likely to experience a number of negative risk-taking behaviours, as shown by lower arrest rates for crimes including homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault and burglary. The community benefits as does the individual young person; engaged young people are likely to experience less drug and alcohol use, lower levels of depression and suicide, increased rates school completion, and, as a result, increased financial prospects for a lifetime. Participation broadens young people's social networks and is associated with stronger attachments to families and friends.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, engagement benefits in particular young people experiencing risk, such as poverty and violent neighbourhoods. “High risk” youth who do not participate in extracurricular activities tend to be arrested at much higher rates than high risk youth who do participate. For example, the PALS project (Participate and Learn Skills) introduced 40 different programs for children and adolescents in one housing complex in Ottawa and saw charges against juveniles drop by 75% during the 32 months of the study.<sup>2</sup>

Support by adults is one of the critical components of successful programs. Creating effective youth/adult partnerships is a challenge. Finding the right balance between decision-making, power-sharing and support requires staff training, resources and organizational commitment.

Adolescence is a time of risk for all youth people. The adolescent brain undergoes an intense overproduction of gray matter (the thinking tissue), and then a period of pruning, where gray matter is discarded. “Use it or lose it.” Experience influences brain development and in turn brain development influences how young people experience their environments. Adolescent brains are far less developed than previously thought, and the “brakes” that govern impulsivity, judgment, and foresight are not complete until age 21 or 22.<sup>3</sup> Higher dopamine levels are good for learning, part of adolescence, and potentially a cause of risk-taking behaviour, either for good or bad. Effective youth engagement programs harness the energy into positive risk-taking, challenge and learning. Sadly in today's world, there are more opportunities in a typical young person's life to take drugs or street race than to go rock climbing or learn the high bars.

#### **Linkages**

The Centre is assisting coalitions of police forces, community agencies and youth experiencing risk.

#### **Some Resources and References:**

- 1) Rose-Krasnor, L.R., Pancer, M., Busseri, M (2003). Youth Engagement and Health Outcomes: Is there a link? Literature Review, ongoing updates. <http://www.engagementcentre.ca>
- 2) Pender, M., McCart S, Youth Engagement and Youth at Risk, (2007) a Literature Review, <http://www.engagementcentre.ca>
- 3) Adolescent Brain Development and Legal Culpability, American Bar Association, Spring 2003