

Reconnecting: Bringing Hope To A Lost Generation

By: Tricia Propson for the Times Villager-May 2010

“I guess I didn’t want to believe that my child was involved in things that were hurting her. It was easier for me to look the other way and hope for the best.”

That revelation came from the mother of a teenage girl in Green Bay. Statements like this are not unusual. I hear confessions like this from parents all of the time. It isn’t that we as parents intentionally look the other way but the busyness of life can be distracting and overwhelming. I am no different. My children face the same challenges as any teen. I know full well that my own pressures and problems sometimes cause me to miss the hints my teens drop about the struggles in their everyday lives.

There is nothing surprising about the rising numbers of hurting youth in our area. The statistics in our Northeast Wisconsin communities are right in line with national numbers. Communities all across our land are facing a severe crisis. While tough economic times are impacting our region, a far greater long-term threat exists. This impending crisis is crippling and destroying families. It is the crisis of hopelessness. Left unchecked this crisis will escalate and cause damage such as increased violent crime, more cases of abuse, and higher suicide rates within our communities. This crisis of hopelessness has invaded our community and is attacking our homes.

The centerpiece of any great community is its strong families. With rising divorce rates, we are seeing families fractured and disconnected at an alarming rate. Many teens today find themselves in single parent homes, alone while both parent’s work, or being raised by extended or non-relative families. In these situations our youth can find themselves burdened with responsibilities and anxieties that are beyond them.

Experts are calling this generation ‘the lost generation’ because the messages youth receive are confusing and contradictory depending on the source. Today’s teens may not have accessible

adults in their lives to help them understand how to cope with even the most basic issues. They are left to handle things on their own and this leads to anxiety and despair. The National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center claims that almost 1 in 5 teens has thought about suicide, about 1 in 6 teens have made plans for suicide, and more than 1 in 12 teens have attempted suicide in the last year.

Suicide still remains the third leading cause of teen death. The vital statistic we as parents must not miss is this: 90 percent of suicidal teen-agers believed their families did not understand them. Ninety percent is a number worth pondering.

“What am I supposed to do? I have so much heavy stuff going on in my life that I don’t even know where to start to get help. I don’t have anyone to help me sort it all out.”

This statement came on an anonymous evaluation form from a fourteen year-old Fox Valley boy. This teenager is not alone. Phil Coltoff, executive director of the Children’s Aid Society in New York City conservatively estimates that 20 million kids in America come home to an empty house. This leaves kids to deal with the pressures, fears, and despair of their lives alone.

Children look to dangerous behaviors to try to connect and find “meaning” in their lives. And where do they turn to find answers to their confusion? Our kids seek comfort and connection from media and the Internet. Our children are now 80% more likely to turn to strangers or ‘friends’ on the Internet with a problem instead of talking with their own parents. Often this is simply because the Internet is readily available and parents are not.

Many teens feel alone or abandoned and struggle to find hope and meaning in their everyday lives. The need to connect drives them to other places and other people to help fill the void. Consider this. Parents spend an average of 38.5 minutes per week in meaningful conversation with their kids. That is 5.5 minutes

per day. Teens spend an average of 8 hours per day consuming media.

Technology, for all its benefits, is driving a dangerous wedge between parents and their teens. Too often, busy parents rely on schools, television, the Internet, church, or their kid's friends to help them cope. Some parents do this knowingly but many fall into it without even realizing it is happening.

The good news is this. According to the Family Research Council, 78% of teens list their parents as the most influential people in their life and 76% of teenagers say they would like to spend more time with their parents. While 76% of teens desire a stronger relationship with their parents, the remaining 24% may not. There is no easy answer to connecting with your teenager. It would be arrogant to offer a quick fix to repair conflicts or confusion within your relationship. With four teenagers of my own, I will be the first to acknowledge that sorting through relationships with teenagers can be murky and challenging. But pursuing a relationship with them is the first step towards connection.

I work with parents and teens through a program called rekenekt to help them find connections with one another. In break out sessions, they practice role-playing and listening techniques and learn to speak honestly with one another sharing things they normally wouldn't.

You can try some of the rekenekt exercises with your own teen. This may feel awkward at first if it is something you have not done recently. Don't worry about saying things perfectly and if it does not go well, try again another time. The point is to make the attempt to reach out to your teens. Remember, in their hearts, the vast majority of teens crave honest relationships and connection with the people who mean the most to them, their parents.

If you are interested in more information about the parent/teen connection program-rekenekt, or other programs available from Cornerstone Communications, please visit:
www.cornerstonecomm.org



Try these simple “Take 5 to Save Lives” conversation starters with your own teen. Set aside at least five uninterrupted minutes with your teen sometime when you normally would be doing something else. Ask them if you can talk and grab their attention with a favorite food or dessert, or a trip to their favorite Restaurant or Coffee Shop.

- 1) Reassure: First of all you need to reassure them that they are not in trouble and you will not overreact to anything they say. Help them know that you want them to trust you with their thoughts and feelings.
- 2) Reinforce that you just want to talk with them because you miss being with them. Tell them that you love them and you care about them.
- 3) Remind them of something you used to have fun doing together. Find an old picture to get the conversation going. “I found this old picture and it got me thinking...”
- 4) Remorse- Admit that you don't understand the things they face. Tell them that you want to know what they go through. Apologize if needed for not showing interest before and ask for help to understand what their life is like.
- 5) Recommit to pursuing an open, honest communication. Ask them if you can try to connect like this again soon. Set a date. Have them choose an activity and then follow through to keep it.