

SCIENCE & EDUCATION Impact

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Youth at Risk

Curbing the violence through education and research.

Tragic stories involving children and youth unfold in newspaper headlines and on television every day. The Columbine High School shootings awakened the nation to the serious problem of violence that damages lives. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Land-Grant universities believe that investing in young people is not a luxury or even a choice. It's a national imperative. Violence is a learned behavior and can be curbed by education and research, by conflict resolution, by mentoring and by a myriad of ways that build strength, character and purpose among dysfunctional families and troubled youth.

Payoff

- **Choose alternatives to violence.** South Carolina State Extension's "Talking With TJ" teaches second- through fourth-grade children non-violent ways to work out problems. They learn to calm down, count to 10, say, "Let's work this out" or ask an adult. During the six-week program, 80 percent of the 75 children found alternatives to control their anger so that conflicts could be resolved peacefully. Utah State matches at-risk youth with college-age mentors, resulting in less violent behavior and reduced substance abuse.
- **Rethink anger.** RETHINK helps parents and children reduce anger, violence and abuse and increases communication skills in the home. After 77 percent of the participating parents made positive behavior changes, Colorado Extension trained 600 extension professionals in 14 states. One state, Nevada, adapted RETHINK for child-care providers, schools, social-service centers, churches and work sites. One parent reports, "This program taught me it's OK to get angry, but not OK to be destructive with my anger. Can my husband come to the next class?" Wyoming teaches anger management in 23 of its counties and the Wind River Indian Reservation.
- **Stop the repeat offender cycle.** Intervention programs that teach juvenile offenders conflict resolution and communication techniques keep youth out of court and save taxpayers money. Nebraska Extension pairs parents and offending youth who work on projects together. Their recidivism rate is 20 percent lower than the na-

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tional average, saving the courts \$170,000 per year.

Georgia lowered its student return-to-court rate by 79 percent, and in **Nevada**, Project MAGIC caused a sharp incarceration decline in three rural counties.

- **Character Counts!** School officials are concerned about students' lack of respect, responsibility, self-control and caring. **Louisiana** Extension specialists taught six positive character traits to teens who, in turn, taught them to younger children. The program spread throughout the state, with reports of fewer detentions, suspensions and other negative outcomes. "There's a wonderful calm in the school," reports a high school librarian. Preschoolers and adults participate in **North Dakota**, and nearly half of all **Nebraskans** have taken part in some Character Counts! program since 1996. In **Tennessee**, 2,500 4-H members joined in, showing they cared with community service projects.
- **Rooting out substance abuse.** **Iowa State** Extension strengthens families by teaching parents and youth together how to prevent substance abuse. More than 500 teachers, ministers, counselors and volunteers teach a seven-week course with the help of role-playing videos. As a result, youth use less tobacco, alcohol and marijuana and exhibit less aggressive behavior at home and school. Their parents learn better skills too. **Arkansas** educators help pregnant women who have alcohol and drug addictions. Most have delivered full-term babies and are drug-free and employed.
- **How not to become a statistic.** Parents need help when families are torn by fighting, abuse, alcohol or drug addictions. **Arizona** Extension's Pinal Parent Project brought down the county's reports of child abuse by 14 percent. Nearly 90 percent of the 1,500 participating families have improved their discipline methods. In **Texas**, more than 1,400 volunteers helped parents improve their parenting skills, cutting the reported cases of child abuse and neglect in half.
- **Helping teen moms.** **Maine** Extension home visitors teach pregnant mothers and biological fathers parenting skills and healthy eating habits. Nearly all the young moms delayed second pregnancies for two years, and 78 percent graduated from high school. Their babies were above average in birth weight. **Mississippi's** young mothers reduced their repeat cycle of teen

pregnancy and saved the state \$1.2 million in health-care costs. A 17-year-old graduate of **Purdue's** "Have a Healthy Baby" said, "I've decided to give breast-feeding a try. I eat well-balanced meals and I stay away from smokers." **University of Arkansas-Pine Bluff** took an abstinence approach with 65,000 teens, resulting in a decreased adolescent birth rate in 13 counties.

- **Get a job.** To help young people, particularly in rural areas, enter the world of work, **Cornell** Extension developed "eXploring Careers," a Web site that receives 1,000 hits a week. Schools throughout New York use the site to help students plan their futures. In **Wyoming**, juvenile offenders ages 8 to 16 channel negative behavior into a positive summer entrepreneurship project. One group came up with a new company, KIDZBIZ, generating pride and self-esteem, plus the interest of the local newspaper. More than 400 **Virginia** 4-H youth learned job skills and an understanding of the global economy.
- **Talk to teens.** By surveying teen-agers, communities can discourage problem behavior and support positive youth development. **New Hampshire** Extension's Teen Assessment Project (TAP) asked more than 16,000 youth and 5,000 parents what was on their minds. The needs identified attracted \$600,000 in grants to boost families. As a result, 84 percent of participating parents talked to their teens about risky behaviors. **Wisconsin** conducted TAP surveys in 280 communities, resulting in 150 grants totaling \$1.5 million that help teens meet the challenges of adulthood.



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