



## Youth at Risk

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The period of life between 12 and 18 is characterized by rapid physical growth, emotional ups and downs, and the need to learn adult behaviors. For many young people, though, life is a painful struggle, with mixed messages and conflicting demands. A teenager who has inadequate resources and support to cope with those demands will experience stress overload, which may lead to non-helpful and even destructive behaviors.

Some adolescents resort to alcohol or drug use: some become abusive and aggressive. Some act up, act out, or exhibit antisocial behaviors (pregnancy, running away, delinquency). Some play hard and drive fast-others withdraw and silently harbor their resentment. Some attempt suicide.

In Hawaii in 1988, 11,537 males and 4769 females were arrested for Juvenile offenses (not including traffic arrests), with larceny-theft, running away, and assault the most often mentioned offenses. Likewise, there were 549 drug abuse arrests involving youth under age 18. Fourteen percent of high school seniors said they used marijuana at least monthly and 36 percent used it at least "some"; 86 percent had tried alcohol and 15 percent were drinking it weekly or daily.

There were 1750 births to teens in 1989 and 1115 (64 percent) were born out of wedlock. There were 1299 crisis suspensions from school in Hawaii (1988-1989), 19,136 regular suspensions, and 28 dismissals. The state-

wide dropout rate for grades 9-12 is estimated to be 5.5 percent. There were approximately 3300 reported and more than 2000 confirmed cases of child abuse in 1989 alone in the state. These data do not account for the countless conflictual and personal problems that adolescents experience as part of normal growing up.

These destructive behaviors may be only the tip of the iceberg and are symptomatic of other individual, family, and social problems. A Minnesota study in 1987 showed that young people had experienced an average of two negative life events in the last six months. The most common of these were a breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend, increased arguments with parents, problems with a brother or sister, increased tension between parents, and trouble in school (with teacher, classmates, or failing grades).

These events are centered in the two most important domains of a teenager's life: home and school. They relate to issues of conflict and the loss of something of significant value. In general, the longer lasting and more intense the stressor, the more devastating it is to the individual. For example, if Michelle lives in an alcoholic home, if she is in continual conflict with a parent, if she is under pressure to get better grades, if some of her friends drink alcohol, and if she feels uncomfortable about her body and blemished skin, then another negative event, like a painful breakup with her boyfriend,

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is the final straw. The primary warning sign of high stress in an adolescent is a major change from the way he or she normally feels or acts.

### **Factors that indicate vulnerable youth**

It is critical for parents and helping adults to be aware of the factors that put a youth at high risk, especially when there are several stressful events involved. Some of these are:

#### ***Family factors***

- history of depression or suicide in family
- alcoholism or drug use in family
- sexual, physical, or emotional abuse
- history of psychiatric disorders (eating disorder, schizophrenia, depression, conduct disorder)
- death, serious loss, chronic illness, disability
- family conflict, poor communication, highly controlling and inflexible parental behavior, poor parent-child relationships.

#### ***Personality traits***

- impulsive behaviors, obsessions, unreal fears
- aggressive, antisocial, violent behavior
- withdrawal, isolation, detachment
- deficiency in social skills, low self-worth, feelings of blame or humiliation, feeling ugly
- sleeping or eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia).

#### ***Situational factors or events***

- loss experience: death, suicide, broken romance, loss of friendship, loss of parental job, family move
- unmet personal or parental expectations, failure to achieve a goal, poor grades, social rejection
- unresolved conflict with family members, peers, teachers, or coaches that results in anger, frustration, or rejection
- humiliating experience resulting in rejection or loss of self-esteem
- unexpected events such as pregnancy or financial problems.

These individual and family traits, life events, and dysfunctional behaviors weave a composite picture of youth at high risk for depression and antisocial or self-destructive behavior. Symptoms such as drug and alcohol use, running away from home, teenage pregnancy, unusual impulsivity, or dramatic changes in personal habits are interrelated with family and personal history, the individual's personality, and the emotional and social events taking place in a person's life. If symptoms persist or if individual or family problems escalate, the youth and his or her family may need outside professional help.