

# Do Prevention Programs Go Far Enough?

## MARKETING RISK TO TEENS

*It's time to expand our definition of what can harm youth as they mature*

By Karen Pittman

For the past several decades, parents and policymakers alike have worried about young people smoking, drinking, having unsafe sex and being victims (or perpetrators) of violent crime. But recently many who work with, live with and study young people have begun to notice that the challenges and pressures facing young people are becoming increasingly complex and dangerous.

Relatively new risky behaviors like physical inactivity and gambling have now joined behaviors like smoking and alcohol abuse in the big league of national youth problems. We are also seeing a new spin on some of the old risks; while

landscape of teen risks are marketing and the media. Consider the news coverage of these issues over the last year: cell phone firms “wooing” teens; Hello Kitty debit cards; teenage girls getting plastic surgery; and teens going into debt over expensive, high-fashion clothing. The amount, scope and nature of advertising have all changed, with youth consuming an unprecedented amount of commercially-driven media via the internet, print, television, music and film, and with marketers getting more creative about infiltrating once “safe havens” like schools. So in addition to the traditional concerns that kept parents up at night, we now have to worry about who is marketing what negative behaviors to our kids.

Keeping a teen from developing a smoking habit is important, but what if that same young adult graduates from college with a gambling habit and \$20,000 in credit card debt? Given that more young people declare bankruptcy than graduate college, it is clear that our current prevention efforts do not go far enough.

At the beginning of the decade, the U.S. Public Health Service identified what they called “the new morbidities” in an effort to encourage pediatricians to take risks like obesity and media consumption seriously. That was a good start, but it is time for families, communities and policymakers to take deliberate and practical steps to support teens’ healthy development and to expand our nation’s definition of what could harm young people as they mature. Keeping a teen from developing a smoking habit is important, but what if that same young adult graduates

negative body image has always been a challenge, the category once restricted to concerns about bulimia and anorexia must now expand to include things like plastic surgery and diet pills. Additionally, all of the risky behaviors teens contend with today — new and old — are now playing themselves out in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context that may fuel their prevalence or increase the consequences of involvement.

We do know that two factors contributing to this evolving

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Finding answers to this growing set of risks is a complex challenge, but we might begin to explore the possibilities with:

### Innovative research

After decades of national attention, elaborate data collections systems are now in place across the country to track things like teen pregnancy and substance abuse, and the risk factors that contribute to these behaviors. Meanwhile, anecdotal reports of caffeine addiction, gambling and credit card debt among teens are cropping up, but where is the research community in exploring these issues? We need help updating our risk radar screens and identifying effective prevention methods.

### More youth engagement and leadership

Programs and initiatives are increasingly engaging youth and adults in analyzing and evaluating things like obesity, media exposure and financial literacy. Efforts to build on young people's social and civic interests and skills can empower youth to consider how these issues directly impact their lives and take action.

### Community support

Taking on such important issues requires the support of not just a few, but all stakeholders in the community. Schools, doctors, parents, youth programs and faith-based institutions should all examine what they can do to help young people critique unhealthy messages and images, assess their own attitudes and behaviors and decide on appropriate responses (individual and collective).

### Policy change

It is up to each of us to place consistent pressure on local and national policy-makers and on business leaders and media companies to spark systemic change. This year will likely see a host of proposals, campaigns and legislation addressing issues such as obesity, exercise, bullying and truancy. The advocacy community must work together toward comprehensive policies and programs for youth rather than treat these as individual threats that each warrant a narrow "prevention program" response.

While the path will be difficult, we have the ability to stand up for what is right for our young people and to help them avoid risks and embrace opportunities that will ensure that they are ready for work, college and life by the time they turn 21.

*Karen Pittman is the executive director of the Forum for Youth Investment, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping communities and the nation make sure all young people are "Ready by 21" — ready for work, college and life. She was the opening keynote speaker for the 2005 Illinois Prevention Conference.*

