

Promoting Healthy Choices among Youth: A Coordinated Community Response

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According to the 2001 Canadian Census, there are approximately 2000 self identified Jewish youth between 13 – 19 years in the Metro Vancouver area. A 2004 JESNA study estimated that approximately 20% of these youth are connected to Jewish organizations and Jewish youth groups. Although no data has been collected to determine the number of Jewish youth who are at risk or to document the extent and frequency of risky behaviour among Jewish youth, there have been growing concerns among youth serving professionals and volunteers about the number of youth that they have contact with who are involved in binge drinking, drug use and indiscriminate sexual behaviour. Following a public meeting hosted by the community in March 2007, with keynote speaker, Rabbi Elioivsun, an adhoc committee of communal professionals was formed. The purpose of the committee was to gather current information on the issue and develop a coordinated strategy in response.

Typically, youth at risk are associated with low socio-economic status, chaotic family life and poor school performance. Most of the programs and strategies designed to address youth at risk are based on addressing these risk factors. While there are some youth in our community who are at risk because of their home life or their family's socio-economic situation, most young people in our community come from stable families, attend good schools and are connected to supportive community institutions. Yet they experience the same challenges to making healthy choices faced by most adolescents regardless of their circumstances. Children of affluence are generally presumed to be "low-risk". However, recent studies conducted in the US suggest that affluent youth face particular problems in the areas of substance abuse, anxiety disorders and depression resulting from two key factors: the pressure to achieve and the amount of time left unsupervised.

It is generally accepted that approximately 5% of youth are actively engaged in "risky behavior" (binge drinking, drug use, indiscriminate sexual activity, fighting and/or carrying weapons, having an eating disorder, or are engaged in abusive behaviour) and that an additional 20% are "at risk" because of their social proximity to those actively engaged in risky behaviour. While this group may not be regularly involved in such behaviour, their values, actions and decision-making are threatened by the behavior of their close friends. Both groups of teens are at a crossroads: one road leads to a successful transition to adulthood, the other leads to a life of addiction and other social problems. The educators, youth workers, counselors and rabbis agree that they are seeing more young people engaged in such behaviour and that the current resources for youth in our community are not sufficient to address their needs.

With the advent of the Internet and social networking sites such as Face Book, another set of issues that put young people at risk are raising concerns. On-line gambling is emerging as a potential new addiction for young people. Initiating on-line friendships and displaying highly sexualized images on social networking sites makes young men and women vulnerable to sexual predators.

There are no simple solutions to the problems we are facing with youth in our community. We have limited financial resources and many young people do not want to access the existing services and programs available in community.

The most successful program models to address issues of risky behavior are those that incorporate the following principles:

- Holistic approaches that promote positive youth development
- Collaborative efforts among different agencies that serve youth
- Integration of family, peers and the community in efforts to intervene and treat at risk behavior
- Enhanced youth and adult interaction through mentoring
- Community services and service-learning opportunities.

The main goal of youth development strategies is to enable youth to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically and cognitively competent (Search Institute, 1999). These strategies help youth become healthy and productive by promoting the development of attitudes, behaviours and skills that enable them to succeed as parents, citizens and productive members of the community.

One of the most important components of a youth development strategy is **the emphasis on strengths** rather than weaknesses. This positive approach broadens the scope of intervention from just responding to the specific problem to addressing the more fundamental causes. For example, rather than suspend or expel a youth for drinking or using drugs on school grounds, a youth development approach would connect the youth with a mentor, involve the family in counseling and explore ways for the youth to make some form of restitution.

Another important component is **enhancing the community's capacity** to better support the healthy choices of its youth. Youth development strategies need to be anchored in an honest understanding of the risk factors of the community such as rates of substance abuse, violence, eating disorders etc and plan accordingly.

A final component of a youth development strategy is emphasis on **engaging youth, their families, schools, community institutions, synagogues and other institutions** in building the competencies and connections that enable youth to become successful adults.

This model involves all of the organizations who serve youth in our community including the day schools, youth organizations, JCC youth and recreation programs and camps. It includes services ranging from parent education and youth counselling to mentoring and crisis intervention activities. And, it involves coordination among the communal professionals to ensure that all of the partners share information and work together on common initiatives. Committee members have requested that this coordination function be managed through the Planning Department at Federation.

Crisis Intervention: There are no confidential crisis services for Jewish youth in our community. Individual rabbis, youth workers, teachers and family friends fulfill this role on an ad-hoc basis. Unless parents become involved, which many youth are reluctant to have happen, these individuals end up receiving no further help or seeking help from specialized youth services operated by mainstream agencies. While we do not have the resources nor the capacity to establish and maintain a youth crisis services just for Jewish youth, there are opportunities for us to partner with existing youth based crisis services. Organizations like the Kids Help Phone that provides telephone and on-line crisis intervention for youth, the Crisis Counselling and Suicide Prevention Centre, which trains volunteers to provide telephone counselling to those in need, and www.youthinbc.com, a web-based hotline operated by youth, have all expressed interest in exploring how they could better serve the Jewish community. SUCCESS, the largest social service agency for the Chinese Community, operates a crisis line, with funding from the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority and community donors.

Jewish Youth and Family Addiction Services: There are no addiction services for Jewish youth and their families struggling with addiction issues ranging from legal and prescription drugs, alcohol to gambling. In a number of Jewish communities across North America, branches of JACS (Jewish Addiction and Counselling Services) have formed to address the issue. JACS Toronto started with a small group of volunteers who staffed a 24 hour confidential phone line and facilitated 12 step groups in a rented storefront. With funding from Federation and private donors, JACS has been able to expand and now provides an array of public education, advocacy, counselling and peer mentoring programs, much of it provided through volunteers. Most recently, they received their first government grant to renovate their building. Recognizing the feelings of shame and embarrassment for individuals and families affected by addiction issues, most JACS programs operate independently of existing family service agencies. Zalman Goldman, the managing director of JACS, has expressed a willingness to meet with key professionals,

rabbis and volunteers in the community and to consult with us on the establishment of a similar program in Vancouver. As part of the discussion, we would have to explore the best model for Vancouver. Initial costs would be required to pay the expenses related to the consultation.

Youth Outreach Worker: There are a number of youth serving professionals in our community ranging from school counselors through to youth group instructors. Each of these workers has a role in providing programs, support and assistance to Jewish youth. Many of these workers see the same youth and are aware of those who are engaged in risky behavior or are vulnerable to becoming involved. Due to differing mandates and lack of formal communication links, these kids fall through the cracks or get lost before they receive help. There is a need for a youth outreach worker who can be the connecting link between the schools, the youth groups and JCC youth programs. The worker would be located in a youth friendly location such as the JCC and supervised through JFSA. Similar to the youth outreach model operating in many mainstream agencies, the worker would schedule specified hours at those day schools in our community who support the concept. Based on feedback from the elementary schools, there is interest in having this worker connect with students in Grade 6 & 7 identified by teachers or counselors as vulnerable, as well as high school aged students enrolled in the community high schools or identified through the JCC or other community based youth programs.

Family life education: Healthy communication between parents and children is an essential element of any youth strategy. There are a variety of programs available with varying degrees of connection to Jewish traditions and values. Given the diversity of opinions, religious observances and parenting practices, it is not possible to identify one particular family life program or one parenting education professional to meet this need. It is recommended that a small grant program be established to support schools, synagogues, and community centres and family counselling programs to design and deliver family life or parent education programs to their constituency. Eligible programs would need to demonstrate the links between their program and youth at risk issues and agree to have their program evaluated.

Youth Council: For young people to feel empowered, connected and interested in making a contribution to the Jewish community, there needs to be a forum or mechanism for them to share their views and expertise with those involved in funding, planning or implementing programs. The majority of successful youth initiatives involve youth, and most of our youth organizations have either a youth council or executive involved in planning and decision making. There are also several leadership and peer support programs in our community. These programs produce committed, involved young people who have the knowledge and skills to make a difference. While the youth that typically become involved in such

structures are not usually those engaged in risky behavior, they can be socially connected with the youth who are at risk and have the potential to have a positive influence on their peers.

There are many different models and mandates for youth councils and this paper is not suggesting any specific approach. However, it is important to involve representatives from each of the organizations who have structures in place as well as some youth who are not currently active in city-wide structure, to provide input on youth issues and involve in planning public awareness and educational events related to youth at risk. The financial resources required would be minimal and the staff support could be provided through the youth outreach worker.

Social Networking Site: Most Jewish agencies have a web presence. Few have developed an interactive modality that would allow them to actively engage their constituency using the full communicative capacity of social networking that now exists on the web. A few successful interactive sites directed specifically at the Jewish community exist (jdate.com: lockers.net: schmooze.com; koolanu.com; frum.toronto.com). There are also several open forums. However, no major Jewish institution and/or agency in Greater Vancouver have taken the leap into the world of Web 2.0. This is a lost opportunity as most opportunity are active users of the web and social networking sites and depend on them for much of their social connections and activities.

There is an opportunity to develop a training program for community agencies who wish to develop or enhance their skills in designing and using social networking sites to reach out to youth and other community members. In addition to increase the capacity of interested lay leadership and agency professionals to reach out, this program has the potential to build a customized site that would meet a number of outreach needs.