



National Center for Children in Poverty

Mailman School of Public Health
Columbia University

BACK-TO-SCHOOL FEATURE RELEASE

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Even the School Janitor Can Play a Role In Guiding Adolescents Through Those Difficult Years

New York City – The angst-addled adolescent years descend upon hapless children, morphing them into adults and leaving them flailing about in anxious confusion while the fully-grown-ups around them bite their lips, hold their breath and wait for it all to be over. Or so one common misconception about adolescence goes.

What really happens is that most adolescents are pretty conformant and make it through those transitional years just fine. That said, a sizeable enough chunk of the adolescent population does get weirded-out enough to warrant interventions and treatment and it's this part of the bunch that has long intrigued, perplexed and engaged adolescent specialists.

One such specialist is Robert Blum, MD, PhD, director of the Johns Hopkins Urban Health Institute, and subject of one segment of an interview series being conducted by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), part of Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. Dr. Blum (who also chairs the Department of Population, Family and Reproductive Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health) says one approach that has been particularly effective at helping adolescents make it through the difficult years is one-to-one mentoring.

“Programs that provide role models are very effective,” says Blum. “Schools that focus on creating engaging communities, engaging environments for their students, have shown solid success with adolescents.”

A particularly effective example Blum cites involves a school where the principal taped cards with the names of each of the incoming students on a gym wall and asked all the adults – including teachers, cafeteria workers, janitors and others – to take down any card bearing a name they already knew and could connect with a face.

“They go around and they take off all the names of kids they know, and in the end there are 25 or so names that are still up there that no one has identified.” The principal then has each adult choose a name of a remaining student they will make a concerted effort to get to know in the new school session.

“So by the time kids show up – every single kid – there is an adult who is committed to getting to know them, keeps up with their lives... ‘Susie, I heard your mom wasn’t well,’ and so on.

Does that matter? It matters. It matters because each adolescent feels that there's someone at school who cares about them as a person as well as a student. That creates a protective environment. Does that reduce teen pregnancy? You bet it does. It has a positive effect. Does it reduce violence? It does. Why? Because it's more likely that you'll stay in school when you have an environment where you feel that people care about you."

Blum says there's a lot that can be done to create that type of environment in schools for young people, but warns that the process can't wait to start until children enter adolescent years: "We can't start in the 9th, 10th, 11th grade – way too late. We need to start in elementary school, but particularly important are the transitions to middle school – 5th, 6th, 7th grades – because we lose a lot of kids then – and then the transitions into high school."

Beyond the school environment, parents and a strong sense of family remain central to the lives of adolescents, says Blum. While a solid sense of family has been shown to be a very positive influence, conversely, problems in those areas can manifest in problems with the adolescent. "Families where there is poverty, or significant abuse, or where there are mental health problems, for example, or families where young kids grow up experiencing turmoil for any number of reasons – the outcomes can be negative."

The interview with Dr. Blum was conducted by Susan Wile Schwarz, research analyst at NCCP, as part of the organization's *Improving the Odds for Adolescents* project, funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies. The project aims to change the policy framework to support positive youth development. NCCP focuses its research efforts on how poverty, in particular, affects families and children from birth, through their adolescent and young-adult years.

"We're hoping this video series [ultimately there will be four] will bring about fertile and informed public discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of existing policies," says Schwarz. "America's policymakers need to work towards building a system that equitably supports the health and well-being of all children, including adolescents."

More information about NCCP or its Improving the Odds for Adolescents Project, can be found at www.nccp.org. The interviews can be found at: www.nccp.org/projects/ITOAdolescents_resources.html.

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The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) is the nation's leading public policy center dedicated to promoting the economic security, health and well-being of America's low-income families and children. Part of Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, NCCP uses research to inform policy and practice with the goal of ensuring positive outcomes for the next generation.

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