



## **SADD Op-Ed:**

**Helping Teens Through Turbulent Times  
Continued Threats of Violence Disrupt Development**

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**by Stephen G. Wallace**

For most of us, September 11th represented far more than a modern day of infamy, far more even than a harbinger of a fundamentally or structurally different way of life. Sadly, we have already become accustomed to the telltale signs of altered existence, previously witnessed only during travel to other lands. Armed patrols in our offices, airports, harbors and skies now seem a small price to pay for the freedom they oddly protect.

Never before have adults and children so uniformly sought such elusive explanations or worked harder to find "normal," knowing all the while that normal doesn't really exist anymore. The horrible, incalculable events of that day left in their wake something both less tangible and more insidious—a collective uncertainty about the formerly predictable, ordered "world" we cognitively constructed in order to find meaning in life, love and work.

This may be the case especially for teens.

While there has been proffered much advice on how to talk to young children about this tragedy - President Bush even visited with elementary students, seeking to listen, learn and console - there has been little discussion about the unique consequences these acts of terror have visited upon our teens. Their world, of course, differs in some significant ways from that of their parents or younger siblings. Our guidance must be calibrated accordingly.

Adolescence is consumed by a relentless search for identity, independence and social/emotional connections with peers: issues all teens struggle with as they navigate the path from childhood to adulthood. That struggle contains not a small amount of uncertainty, anxiety and even fear. The "two steps forward, one step back" paradigm of adolescent development requires a not-so-peaceful coexistence of freedom and safety, along with healthy doses of predictability, self-confidence and trust.

Unfortunately, those are the very things that have now given way to uncertainty, anxiety and fear, particularly as moon-suited men investigate rising anthrax scares and government officials warn of other possible attacks on US soil. Result: the already difficult developmental milestones of adolescence just became harder to reach.

The good news is that teens remain a remarkably adaptable, pragmatic, and resilient segment of our population. Their natural proclivity toward risk-taking, problem solving and service to others, particularly in times of crisis, makes them a considerable force during these difficult times. They seem to have just the right combination of sensitivity, empathy, focus and action the rest of us have been looking for.

Paralleling reports of acting out, aggression and flights of retaliatory fancy by teens reacting to the terrorist attacks are moving stories of teens engaged in rallying peers, parents and communities in seeking common gain and common good—offering the rest of us some clues as to how we might best respond.

But teens, like younger children, can't go it alone. What they need now is adult guidance to understand, temper, articulate and make operational their thoughts, concerns and hopes for the future. Helping this activist generation of adolescents process what is happening in it and to it



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their world will better equip them to restore some semblance of predictable life and to steer their anger and compassion toward the benefit of others.

Recent research conducted by SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions/Students Against Driving Drunk) and Liberty Mutual Group underscores the important role of parents in talking teens through uncertain times and in recognizing the issues they are most concerned about, including violence.

Teens don't expect parents to have all the answers, especially now. What they do expect and desperately want is for the significant adults in their lives to lead the way in discussing what is most immediately relevant, and then helping them to build a bridge between their experiences and the important developmental tasks they must complete.

More so than ever before, adults and children bear together an incredible national burden, sinking or swimming in a strange sea bordered on one side by vulnerability, irritability, fear, anger and aggression and on the other by compassion, commitment, pride, patriotism and resolve. Parent-teen communication is now more important than ever in helping to minimize feelings of powerlessness and nurture feelings of freedom, confidence and trust.

Stephen Wallace is a psychologist and the national chairman/chief executive officer of SADD, Inc. SADD sponsors school-based education and prevention programs nationwide and makes available at no charge the *SADD Contract for Life* and the *Opening Lifesaving Lines* brochure, both designed to facilitate effective parent-child communication. Toll-free: 877-SADD-INC. For more information on the SADD/Liberty Mutual *Teens Today* research, visit [www.saddonline.com](http://www.saddonline.com) or [www.libertymutualinsurance.com](http://www.libertymutualinsurance.com).