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NEW STUDY SHOWS TEENS WITH “NATURAL” MENTORS HAVE HIGHER SENSE OF SELF AND TAKE MORE POSITIVE RISKS

Strong connection found between depth and breadth of that mentoring and teen decisions around drinking, drug use, sex

BOSTON (December 13, 2006) – Teens who identify at least one influential, “natural” mentor in their life – a person not assigned by a formal mentoring program – report that they have a higher sense of self and are more likely to take risks that affect their lives positively, says new data released today from the 2006 SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) and Liberty Mutual seventh annual *Teens Today* study.

In the study, 46 percent of teens with a mentor reported a high sense of self versus 25 percent of teens who did not identify a natural mentor in their life. Additionally, teens with mentors reported that they are significantly more likely than teens without mentors to challenge themselves by taking positive risks (38 percent versus 28 percent), such as joining an athletic team or volunteering to perform community service. Notably, more than half of teens (56 percent) say the absence of a mentor would negatively affect them.

Natural mentoring occurs outside of a formal mentoring program that may match teens with a dedicated mentor. Natural mentors can include family members (such as parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents), other adults (such as teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, neighbors, clergy) and peers – people who may have opportunities for interaction with some frequency.

In one of the first concentrated studies on natural mentoring, more than 3,300 middle school and high school teens across the country were surveyed.

The study also reveals that the breadth and depth of mentoring – the number of mentors teens have or the range of topics teens can discuss with a mentor – significantly influences decisions teens make around drinking, drug use, and sex.

“This new research demonstrates that there are a whole host of opportunities for adults to influence teenagers outside of formal or planned mentoring programs,” said Stephen Wallace, the chairman and chief executive officer of the national SADD organization who also has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. “We see this research as a call to action to adults who interact with teenagers – either in their professions or in their daily routines. This research shows that adults who make extra efforts to connect with teenagers can have a profound impact in guiding our nation’s youth.”

Teens' Sense of Self Higher With Mentor

According to the study, 35 percent of teens with no mentor have a low sense of self (versus 12 percent of mentored teens). *Teens Today* research identifies sense of self as teens' self-evaluation on their progress in three key developmental areas: identity formation, independence, and peer relationships. High sense-of-self teens feel more positive about their own identity, growing independence, and relationships with peers than do teens with a low sense of self. They are also more likely to avoid alcohol and drug use. Teens struggling with those developmental areas, on the other hand, are more likely to drink, to use drugs such as ecstasy and cocaine, and to cite boredom and depression as reasons to have sex. They also note a greater susceptibility to peer pressure when making choices.

Additionally, teens with mentors are significantly more likely than those without mentors to also report frequently feeling happy (94 percent versus 86 percent) and less likely to report regularly feeling depressed (24 percent versus 31 percent) or bored (66 percent versus 75 percent).

Mentoring Influences Positive Risk-Taking Behavior

The study reports that teens with no mentors are significantly more likely to shy away from positive risk-taking than are their mentored peers (51 percent versus 31 percent).

Earlier *Teens Today* data reveals that teens who take positive risks (**Risk Seekers**) in their lives, their schools, and their communities are 20 percent more likely than teens who do not take positive risks (**Risk Avoiders**) to avoid alcohol and other drugs and 42 percent more likely to avoid drinking because of concerns about academic performance. Many of these teens are also more inclined to delay intimate sexual behavior.

Breadth and Depth of Mentoring Has Bearing on Teen Decisions Around Drinking, Drugs and Sex

The breadth and depth of the mentoring a young person receives also correlates strongly with decision-making. For example, teens who report high levels of mentoring – those who can talk with a variety of people about a wide range of topics – are significantly more likely than those who report low levels of mentoring to be “Avoiders” of alcohol, other drugs, and early sexual behavior (69 percent versus 64 percent). And, among those teens who have reported using alcohol or marijuana, those with high levels of mentoring said initiation of such behavior was significantly later than teens with no or low levels of mentoring.

Additionally, those with a high level of mentoring took more positive risks (48 percent versus 29 percent), reported a higher sense of self (59 percent versus 36 percent), and reported lower levels of depression (21 percent versus 26 percent). Finally, “high mentored” teens are significantly less likely than “low mentored” teens to have driven a car under the influence of alcohol (13 percent versus 26 percent).

Whom Do Teens Look to as Mentors?

The *Teens Today* report reveals that teens rank family members, friends, teachers, counselors, and coaches among the most influential people in their lives. The characteristics young people tend to ascribe to them include trustworthy, caring, understanding, respectful, helpful, dependable, fun, compassionate, and responsible.

Being a good listener and offering good advice were also seen as key skills of successful mentors.

Tips for Parents to Facilitate Mentoring

While parents clearly play the most influential mentoring role in the lives of their children, it is also clear that peers and other “significant” adults can, and do, affect important developmental outcomes. SADD and Liberty Mutual provide the following tips for parents to facilitate mentoring.

1. Stay involved! Parent mentors are important regardless of the presence of other mentors. *Teens Today* research shows that teens whose parents talk to them regularly about important issues are more likely to make good choices.
2. Encourage your teens to communicate with and seek advice from adults in their lives.
3. Get to know your teen’s other mentors. Working together will benefit you and your teen.
4. To alleviate potential concerns, find out if the organization has a screening process, including background checks, for adults who are mentoring children.

For more information on this and past years’ *Teens Today* studies from SADD and Liberty Mutual, please visit www.sadd.org or www.libertymutual.com.

Study Methodology

The *Teens Today* 2006 Study involved both qualitative and quantitative phases. The study was initiated with a series of 12 focus groups held in Atlanta, Los Angeles, and St. Louis conducted on successive evenings March 13-15, 2006. The study also included a series of in-depth interviews (IDIs) with teens in Atlanta, Boston, Los Angeles, Phoenix, and St. Louis.

The results of the focus groups were used to instruct development of the quantitative research, a self-administered survey conducted at 40 schools across the nation. The study involved a weighted total of 3,312 students overall to reflect a proportionate distribution of high school and middle school teens. The survey was administered in May and June 2006.

SADD, Inc. (Students Against Destructive Decisions) is the nation’s preeminent peer-to-peer youth education organization, with thousands of chapters in middle schools, high schools, and colleges. With a mission of preventing destructive behaviors and addressing attitudes that are harmful to young people, SADD sponsors programs that address issues such as underage drinking, substance abuse, impaired driving, and teen violence, depression, and suicide.

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