

## School Connectedness Counts!

**W**HEN YOU WERE IN SCHOOL, did you feel included and respected? Did you feel your opinions were considered fairly by teachers, staff and other students? Did you “connect” with school—with an activity you and your friends liked, a favorite class, or a teacher who helped you develop a skill or hobby?

A feeling of “connectedness” to school is consistently associated with healthier behaviors among students, including less use of alcohol and other drugs.



by Erica Fogle

*Erica Fogle is a Research Associate with The Evaluation Management and Training (EMT) Group in Folsom, California. She directs the statewide Community Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention Technical Assistance project.*

prevention *Tactics* 3:3 (1999)

**Tactics** (tak'tiks) *n.* 1. a plan for promoting a desired end. 2. the art of the possible.

Recent school tragedies have focused national attention on students who lack this connection to school and to people at their schools. Experts from many fields are now looking deeper into what can be done to prevent students from becoming so severely alienated. New evidence is confirming that “school connectedness” not only helps students feel they belong but also protects them from engaging in harmful behaviors, including use of alcohol and other drugs.

Research shows that a strong attachment to school can result in reduced use of cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana. Where youths report high levels of connectedness to their schools, studies say they report less frequent use of illegal substances.

Most recently, the comprehensive “Add Health” study (see next page) found that a feeling of “connectedness” to school—that is, feeling close to people at school, feeling part of the school, and feeling that teachers treat students fairly—was consistently associated with better health and healthier behaviors among students. This finding was true across race, ethnicity, family structure and economic status. The Add Health Study identified school connectedness as a highly effective protective factor against drug and alcohol use, second only to connectedness to parents and family.

Other studies demonstrate the protective nature of school connectedness as well. Whether referred to as a “sense of community in schools,” “positive school climate” or “school bonding,” this protective factor involves how youth perceive 1) their involvement with school, 2) their place within the school context, and 3) their treatment by staff or other students. This issue of *Prevention Tactics* explores state-of-the-art research and approaches for helping students build a stronger connection to school.

## The “Add Health” Study

### *National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health*

IN 1993, Congress mandated the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to investigate the determinants of “health risk” behavior among youth. Together with 17 other federal agencies, the NICHD conducted the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). A very important component of the study was understanding family, school, and community influences on adolescent behavior.

The Add Health study consisted of two phases. The first examined 90,000 youth in grades 7–12 in 145 schools. The second conducted in-home interviews of 20,000 students and 18,000 parents. A follow-up survey of 15,000 students was completed in 1996.

The study assessed five adolescent health-risk behaviors:

- 1) emotional distress
- 2) suicidality
- 3) violence
- 4) substance use
- 5) sexual activity

It then examined how family connections, school connections, and individual characteristics affect these risk factors.

The first analysis of survey data, “Protecting Adolescents from Harm: Findings From the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health,” was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in September 1997. Lead author Michael Resnick calls Add Health “the most comprehensive adolescent health study ever done in the world. [It is] unique among studies of adolescent health because it includes rich measures of the influences that can protect young people from harm or, conversely, predispose them to risk.”

The longitudinal nature of the study will permit eventual analyses of the causal relationships between adolescents’ social context and behavior. At this point, however, the longitudinal data have not yet been analyzed. With such a large volume of information, a complete analysis is expected to take more than a decade, with periodic reports issued by teams of scientists.

To obtain further information on the Add Health study, see Resources on page 8.

“We did find that kids who did better academically tended to be happier kids, but above and beyond the influence of academic performance, that sense of bonding and attachment to school was very important. . . .



It wasn't the size of the school, the student/teacher ratio, or whether it was public or private or religious—those structural characteristics did not make a difference. . . . There was an emotional component that rested in the young person's perception that teachers cared and that teachers were fair minded.”

**Dr. Michael Resnick**  
Add Health researcher



## RESEARCH

## Developing a Sense of Community in Schools

The Developmental Studies Center (DSC) in Oakland, Calif., is a frontrunner in research on how children develop a “sense of community in school.” Dr. Eric Schaps of the DSC calls the sense of community in school, “a pivotal condition for children’s ethical, social and emotional development, and also for their academic motivation.” After 20 years of study on the subject, the DSC has determined that for students to form this sense of community in school they need to experience being valued, influential, contributing members of a group that is committed to everyone’s growth and welfare.

### Caring Classroom Practices

According to Schaps, practices that help create a caring community within the classroom include regular use of:



Photo by Michelle Clow

- ★ CLASS MEETINGS in which children help shape classroom norms and practices and solve problems that arise;
- ★ ACTIVITIES that help students and teachers get to know one another as people and build a sense of unity;
- ★ DISCIPLINARY APPROACHES that foster students’ desire to do what is right and engage them in active self-improvement rather than relying primarily on rewards and sanctions;



Photo by Michelle Clow

Students need to experience being valued, influential, contributing members of a group that is committed to everyone’s growth and welfare.

- ★ COLLABORATIVE LEARNING that emphasizes challenging academics and respectful treatment of fellow students; and
- ★ CURRICULA that engage students in studying the ethical issues at the heart of history and literature—such as what it means to be a principled, compassionate person, and what values enable diverse individuals to live together humanely.

### School Policies

As ways to foster a sense of community at school, Schaps also emphasizes school policies that promote intimacy, such as minimal use of tracking and “pull out” programs, pairing of younger and older students in “buddy” partnerships for mutual learning experiences, and programs that boost the comfort and involvement of parents with their children’s learning. Schaps cautions that simply holding class meetings or matching up buddies is not enough to build school communities. To be effective, these policies must be implemented as part of a comprehensive effort to improve school climate.



## RESEARCH

## Child Development Project

*An elementary school program designed to create a caring community*

Designed by DSC, the Child Development Project (CDP) is an elementary school program that strives to create a caring community in the classroom and school based on a shared commitment to prosocial,

democratic values. CDP seeks to enhance children's social and ethical development through systematic changes in the classroom and school environments.

### Learning to Relate

The school program creates opportunities for students to:

- collaborate with others in the pursuit of common goals;
- provide meaningful help to others and receive help when needed;
- discuss the experiences of others and come to understand their feelings, needs and perspectives;
- develop and practice important social skills and competencies; and
- assume responsible roles in the school community.

### Approaches

Key features of CDP include:

- A literature-based approach to reading and language arts
- Cooperative learning
- Developmental discipline
- School-wide activities
- Family-involvement activities
- Restructuring to support teacher collaboration, planning and reflection

### Outcomes

DSC research shows that children thrive in this environment. They are more likely to be motivated for the sake of learning rather than for grades or incentives. They are more likely to treat each other with respect and, as a result, feel safer and more secure in school. They are better able to stand up for what they believe and to be sensitive to the feelings and opinions of others. They can work out problems, and they are more likely to take responsibility for their behavior and their learning. DSC characterizes classrooms and schools like these as "caring communities of learners."

## CONCEPTS IN ACTION

### *What do youth care about?*

*For school connectedness to work as a protective factor, understanding the perspective of students is essential. Here is what some students say are key factors affecting school climate:*

#### ★ STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

The extent to which students participate in and enjoy classes and extracurricular activities at school.

#### ★ STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

The way students relate to one another, and the ease they feel in making friends and dealing with new people.

#### ★ SUPPORT FROM TEACHERS

The amount of help, concern, and friendship that teachers direct toward students; whether teachers talk openly, trust students and are interested in their ideas and feelings.

#### ★ PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The way students feel about the school environment—the physical structures and the atmosphere they create.

#### ★ CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The extent to which students are clear about their rights and responsibilities, how conflicts are resolved and whether rules are consistently enforced.

#### ★ PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING

The extent to which students, administrators and teachers share responsibility for decisions about school improvement.

#### ★ CURRICULUM

The extent to which students feel that what is taught in classes meets their needs.

#### ★ COUNSELING SERVICES

The extent to which students feel counselors are accessible and able to help with personal problems, job and career information, and concerns about drugs, alcohol or sex.

#### ★ RECREATION ALTERNATIVES

The extent to which students are satisfied with existing activities and teachers' support of these activities.

SOURCE: Adapted from Sherrin Bennett, "Something More than Survival: A Student Initiated Process for School Climate Improvement" in *School Safety Checkbook*, National School Safety Center, 1990.

## Seattle Social Development Project

*Multi-faceted intervention helps students, teachers and parents connect*

The Seattle project is a school-based multi-component intervention for grades 1–6 that seeks to reduce shared childhood risks for delinquency and drug abuse by enhancing protective factors. Interventions are designed to enhance opportunities, skills, and rewards for children's prosocial involvement in both school and family settings, thereby increasing their bonds to school and family commitment to the norm of not using drugs.

### Training for Teachers and Parents

The Seattle project trains elementary school teachers to use active classroom management, interactive teaching strategies, and cooperative learning in their classrooms.

The project also provides support and education to the parents of enrolled students. Three training curricula are offered: How to Help Your Child Succeed in School, Preparing



for the Drug-Free Years, and Catch 'Em Being Good (family management skills training).

### Outcomes

Long-term results indicate positive outcomes for students who participate in the program: reductions in antisocial behavior, improved aca-

## CONCEPTS IN ACTION

ademic skills, greater commitment to school, reduced levels of alienation and better bonding to prosocial others, less misbehavior in school, and fewer incidents of drug use in school.



## SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

### SCHOOL CLIMATE

#### How does your school rate?

For a quick assessment of your school's climate, read the statements below and rate your school on a 4-point scale (4 = strongly agree; 3 = agree; 2 = disagree; 1 = strongly disagree).

1. Our school has comparatively few discipline problems.
2. Vandalism is not a problem in our school.
3. Attendance is good at this school.
4. Our student and staff morale is high.
5. Our student achievement is high.
6. Students feel a sense of ownership and pride in this school.
7. Our staff & students trust, care about and respect one another a great deal.
8. Our school's social groups, or cliques, communicate well with one another, respect one another and work together for the benefit of the school.
9. Our students and staff frequently participate in problem-solving and school-improvement activities.
10. The threat in our school is low (i.e., people do not have to worry about being treated disrespectfully, becoming failures or being physically harmed).

A score above 30 indicates a very positive school climate; 26–30, a positive climate; 20–25, a negative climate; and under 20, a climate in severe need of attention.

SOURCE: Adapted from Robert S. Fox, Eugene R. Howard and Edward Brainard, "School Climate Improvement: A Challenge to the School Administrator" in *School Safety Checkbook*, National School Safety Center, 1990.



## DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS

## What Developmental Assets Can Schools Help Build?

*The Search Institute, a nonprofit organization in St. Paul, Minn., has identified 40 Developmental Assets as key protective factors in the lives of youth (see Prevention Tactics 2:4). A reciprocal relationship exists between the Developmental Assets model and the concept of school connectedness—that is, efforts to build assets in youth are often activities that simultaneously build school connectedness, and vice versa. Below are specific developmental assets that schools can take a role in promoting.*

### External Assets

#### SUPPORT

**Caring school climate:** School provides caring, encouraging environment.

**Parent involvement in schooling:** Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.

**Other supportive adult relationships:** Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.

#### EMPOWERMENT

**Safety:** Young person feels safe at home, at school and in the neighborhood.

#### BOUNDARIES AND EXPECTATIONS

**School boundaries:** School provides clear rules and consequences.

**Adult role models:** Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.

**Positive peer influence:** Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.

**High expectations:** Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.

#### CREATIVE USE OF TIME

**Youth programs:** Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, organizations at school and/or in community organizations.

### Internal Assets

#### COMMITMENT TO LEARNING

**Achievement motivation:** Young person is motivated to do well in school.

**School engagement:** Young person is actively engaged in learning.

**Bonding to school:** Young person cares about her or his school.

**Homework:** Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.

#### POSITIVE VALUES

**Caring:** Young person places high value on helping other people.

**Integrity:** Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.

**Honesty:** Young person “tells the truth even when it is not easy.”

**Responsibility:** Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.

**Restraint:** Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.

#### SOCIAL COMPETENCIES

**Planning and decision making:** Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.

**Interpersonal competence:** Young person has empathy, sensitivity and friendship skills.

**Cultural competence:** Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.

**Resistance skills:** Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.

**Peaceful conflict resolution:** Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.

#### POSITIVE IDENTITY

**Personal power:** Young person feels he or she has control over “things that happen to me.”



**“Overriding classroom size, rules, all structural things, the human element of the teacher making a human connection is the bottom line.”**

**Dr. Michael Resnick**  
Add Health researcher

## NEXT STEPS

### Be a Climate “Enhancer”!

School staff need to be aware of when they are “robbing” the climate instead of “enhancing” it, says Clay Roberts, Senior Health Education Consultant for the Search Institute. This awareness is important because the impact of positive and negative attitudes on students is not equal. A student in one focus group expressed great difficulty in recovering from the negative impact of a teacher with a sour disposition, even though the student’s other five classes were quite positive. One might think that a 5:1 ratio would leave a student feeling pretty good, but the one “climate robbing” teacher had a lot of power to undo the good work of the others, to lower the student’s overall perceptions of school and to drain away connectedness.

### Commit Random Acts of Asset Building!

Teachers and other adults can *immediately* begin making a difference in the lives of youth by engaging in “random acts of asset building,” as Clay Roberts and others advocate. This simply means taking the time and effort to make contact with youth. The contact can be a mentor-like relationship over a long period of time, or something as small as a word of encouragement to a student practicing a sport. The effects of random acts of asset building are cumulative. The more often adults reach out, the better the health outcomes for youth. *The key is to think of building assets and connectedness not as just a program, but as a philosophy.*

### SETTING GOALS

*What will connectedness look like at your school?*

As a part of working toward connectedness at your school, think about how you would like things to be. Outlining this mental picture in a series of statements can serve as the beginning for policies, guidelines or pledges for staff and students. Priorities will be different for each school depending on its strengths and needs, but the themes discussed earlier will still be central.

The following are examples of school planning goals:

- ★ Students and staff will feel physically and psychologically secure from physical and verbal attacks.
- ★ Students, parents, and staff will work together to ensure that strategies are in place to build a sense of community within the school so that all can feel pride in their school and feel that they are important members of a team.
- ★ The dignity and heritage of each person will be affirmed and respected.
- ★ Strategies will be implemented to break the code of silence among students and enable students to take ownership of plans for the safety of all by reporting weapons on campus or other threats to the health and welfare of all persons at school.
- ★ Students and staff will be concerned about what happens to each other.
- ★ Students and staff will accept ownership of conditions and events that happen at school.
- ★ Students and staff will work together with a minimum of favoritism.

SOURCE: *Safe Schools: A Planning Guide for Action* (1995 edition)

### Add Health Study

Blum, R.W. and P.M. Rinehart. *Reducing the Risk: Connections That Make a Difference in the Lives of Youth* (1998). Division of General Pediatrics and Adolescent Health, University of Minnesota, Box 721, 420 Delaware Street, SE, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 55455. Designed for a broader audience than the JAMA article, below.

Resnick, M.D. et al. "Protecting Adolescents from Harm: Findings From the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 278:10 (September 1997).

More information on The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health is available from the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/addhealth>

### Sense of Community in School

Developmental Studies Center, 2000 Embarcadero, Suite 305, Oakland, California, 94606; Phone: (510) 533-0213; Web Site: <http://www.devstu.org/ObeyPorter.html>

Schaps, E. "Risks and Rewards of Community Building." *Thrust for Educational Leadership* (September 1998).

Schaps, E. and C. Lewis. "Building Classroom Communities." *Thrust for Educational Leadership* (September 1997).

### Developmental Assets

Search Institute, 700 South Third Street, Suite 210, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 55415-1138; Phone: 612-376-8955; Toll-free: 1 (800) 888-7828; Fax: (612) 376-8956; E-mail for general information: [si@search-institute.org](mailto:si@search-institute.org); Web Site: <http://www.search-institute.org>

### School Climate

*Safe Schools: A Planning Guide for Action* (1995 edition). California Department of Education School Safety and Violence Prevention Office and Office of the California Attorney General Crime and Violence Prevention Center, Sacramento.

*School Safety Check Book* (1990). National School Safety Center, Pepperdine University, Malibu, California, 90263.

### Other

*Preventing Drug Use Among Children and Adolescents*. National Institute on Drug Abuse (1997). Information available online at <http://www.open.org/westcapt/bp32.htm>

Resnick, M.D., L.J. Harris and R.W. Blum. "The Impact of Caring and Connectedness on Adolescent Health and Well-being." *Journal of Pediatrics and Child Health* 29, Suppl. 1 S3-S9 (1993).

Seattle Social Development Project. Contact David Hawkins and Rico Catalano, Social Development Research Group, University of Washington, 9725 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue NE, Suite 401, Seattle, Washington, 98115-2024; Phone: (206) 543-6382.

## LET'S HEAR FROM YOU!



We welcome readers' comments on topics presented. Call us at 916.983.6680, fax us at 916.983-6693, or send an email to [erica@emt.org](mailto:erica@emt.org)

*prevention Tactics* is published periodically by The EMT Group, Inc., under its Community Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention contract with California Department of Alcohol and Drug Prevention (DADP). The purpose of this publication is to help practitioners in the prevention field stay abreast of best practices emerging from current research and to provide practical tools and resources for implementing proven strategies.

The information or strategies highlighted in *Prevention Tactics* do not constitute an endorsement by DADP, nor are the ideas and opinions expressed herein those of DADP or its staff.

© 1999 by The EMT Group, Inc. Permission to reproduce is granted, provided credit is given.

**Editor/Author** Erica Fogle

**Copy Editor/Design** Jacqueline Kramm

*Tactics*  
prevention

Evaluation, Management and Training  
771 Oak Avenue Parkway, Suite 2  
Folsom, CA 95630-6802

**EMT**