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Connections Count

By Andrew Malekoff

There are times that I feel as if I am being buried alive, one tablespoon of tabloid dirt at a time. It would be redundant to name the culprits. Besides, they all blur together in blaring headlines accompanied by a steady beat of sneering and self-righteous talking heads.

I wonder what young people think of the endless parade of public figures – government officials, businessmen, entertainers and professional athletes - crashing and burning before their eyes. Then again, maybe they have other things on their minds.

In a survey conducted by North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center a few years ago we asked 1200 high school students from all across Long Island to reveal their concerns now and for the future.

One of them wrote, “I don’t think this world is ever going to get better. To live in this world you have to be very, very strong, because if you’re not, the system will walk all over you. You cannot trust politicians because they are all snakes in the grass...you really cannot trust anybody but your family, and not even them half the time.”

Relationships, illness, divorce and death weighed heavily on their minds. One wrote about the dissolution of his parents’ marriage, “My parents are getting a divorce and now there is talk about my mother being forced to move out of the house and my father move in and I have no say. I have lost faith in the court system. I thought we had the right to freedom of speech, but I guess actually being heard is another story.”

Another talked about his fears, “I am afraid of a lot of things - mainly dying too young and not getting to live to my greatest expectations.”

We asked some of these youths, “When you’re confused about life, who helps you sort things out?” Almost three-quarters said their parents and friends filled that role. Far from rejecting their parents in favor of peers, family is part of the solution, not the problem.

In an all-day gathering of teens and adults that followed the release of the survey results, the young people talked about well-meaning parents who were overwhelmed with trying to make ends meet, with little or no time for substantive discussion with them; and they talked about teachers who they admired but who were too preoccupied with preparations for standardized testing.

One parent commented, “What stood out for me the most was the observation by several of the kids that they need support from adults to tackle the challenging issues they face.

Often, adults complain that kids are apathetic, lazy, unmotivated or apolitical. Maybe it is our own apathy and fears that prevent us as adults from helping.”

And, a teacher said, “Listening to the depths of emotion and world concerns from the students, I came away feeling that *we* are missing the boat with our kids. I know this is a generalization, but so many young people are walking around with such powerful feelings that we, as adults, are not helping them with. Our schools appear to be more interested in control, assessments and achievement scores than the life events that affect our children.”

As I reflect on the voices of young people living across Long Island, I am reminded of a simple truth – *connections count*. The good connections in their lives enable our children to bounce back from private crises such as illness, divorce, drug addiction, child abuse and death. It also helps them keep from being weighed down by the daily drumbeat and demoralizing impact of public scandal and corruption that beset us.