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Helping Teens Grow Through Wilderness Program

Even though the chill of autumn is well upon us, it's always a great time to enjoy the outdoors—and it's also important for a youth's development to keep their connection to our natural world.

With teens so immersed in texting and video games and other tech-focused pursuits, they often lose both the connection to each other and to the world around them. That's why North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center designed our Wilderness Respite Program, which provides a unique opportunity for at-risk adolescents to participate in nature activities that foster individual growth, leadership skills, self-esteem and friendships while also promoting environmental stewardship.

Following is a "slice of life" from the program:

During one of the planning meetings for an upcoming hike, a few of the boys tried to take control of the situation by dominating the other group members through physical

One of the more idyllic moments of the wilderness program.



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posturing and verbal banter. That all changed once the teens drove to the state park and departed from the van. We found ourselves immersed in the forest, with no pavement, stores, traffic lights or any of the usual trappings of the home neighborhood—the kind of



Some of the less forgiving terrain the kids had to traverse.



Kids bonding on the bridge.

natural environment many of the teens had rarely if ever experienced.

To our surprise, the boys did not volunteer to lead the way. Instead, they followed the girls, who became models of leadership. Little by little, all of the teens learned to work together, decoding the trail markers located on trees and rocks. Relying on their growing awareness of themselves and the direction of the staff, the teens gradually learned to hike at a controlled, measured pace, rather than starting out in a sprint and tiring as the day wore on. Although this was emphasized during preparation meetings, it was in the "doing" that this learning was integrated by the hikers, who soon learned how easy it was to get worn out.

The hike was a challenging one, lengthy and with rough terrain. It was an experience most of the teens felt was beyond their capabilities, but once they realized they could overcome these perceived limitations, they felt exhilarated. They also developed a noticeable respect, admiration and affection for each other. Tired and done-in, the group gathered around some rocks, leaning on one another for support, warmth and belonging.

Self-discovery took another turn on a canoeing trip by the same group. The

teens were faced with strong winds and an unfriendly current as they attempted to learn basic canoeing skills on Long Island Sound. All of the teens experienced a great deal of frustration, disappointment and anger as they struggled in teams to control the direction and progress of their canoes. They learned that the elements and obstacles proved too formidable on that day for us to reach our destination, when after three hours of tiresome paddling, we needed to turn around and paddle back to our starting point, rather than continue to our original destination six miles away.

But the trip wasn't by any means a failure, because learning how to handle disappointment is just as valuable as experiencing success. The group learned that when the challenges of the wilderness became tiring and weather conditions on the water became burdensome and oppressive, they had to reach inside themselves to summon up additional strength to overcome frustration, anger and fear. So, even though the trip had more than its share of disappointments, the teens were able to carry over the feeling that they could handle it when things don't go smoothly.

These wilderness outings to excursions on both land and sea were successful because they all serve to prepare the teens for unknown challenges ahead.

For more information about the Wilderness Respite Program, contact Director Bruce Kaufstein at 516-626-1971, ext. 316.

Andrew Malekoff is the executive director of North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center, which provides comprehensive mental health services for children from birth through 24 and their families. To find out more, visit www.northshorechildguidance.org. The views expressed in this column are not necessarily those of the publisher or Anton Media Group.

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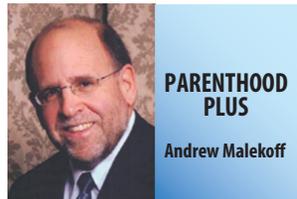
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Sexting: A Danger That Must Be Discussed

A few years ago, in an effort to better understand where sex and social media intersect with respect to attitudes and behavior, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy conducted a survey of teens and young adults. The study measured the proportion of them who are posting sexually suggestive text and images. There were a total of 1,280 respondents—653 teens (ages 13 to 19) and 627 young adults (ages 20 to 26).

The survey found that a significant number of the 13 to 19 year olds have electronically sent, or posted online, nude or semi-nude pictures or video of themselves. Sexually suggestive messages via text, email or IM (instant message) were even more prevalent according to the survey. Seventy-five-percent of the teen respondents and 71 percent of young adults said sending sexually suggestive content "can have serious negative consequences," yet they continue this behavior despite substantial personal safety and legal risks.

In the past few months on Long Island, sexting has been all over the news, including arrests and school suspensions of teens charged with



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sexting and viewing these messages. Parents, caregivers and other relevant people in kids' lives need to be attuned to this behavior and be prepared to address it.

Despite the influence of peers,

American Academy of Pediatrics



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which is not all negative, this is only one part of a four-part community that includes family, larger community and media influences, all of which have demonstrable effects on adolescents' sexual attitudes and behavior and all of which interact in a complex way. For example, beyond the peer group are information and images transmitted by the media that



Peer pressure can play a major role in the sending of texts, with parties being a major contributing factor.

may typify values that are detrimental to young people's self-image and health.

In families in which sexuality is not a taboo subject and related discussions occur quite naturally throughout childhood, pathways are forged for ongoing dialogue about all aspects of sexuality. If parental influence is strong enough—that is, if their relationships with their children are warm and close and their parenting style is authoritative—it can be a powerful protector against negative peer influence.

The American Academy of Pediatrics offers some good tips for talking to you kids about texting (go to www.aap.org and search for "sexting"):

- Talk to your kids, even if the issue hasn't directly impacted your community. "Have you heard of sexting?" "Tell me what you think it is." For the initial part of the conversation, it is important to first learn what your child's understanding is of the issue and then add to it an age-appropriate explanation (see next bullet).

- Use examples suited to your child's age. For younger children with cell phones who do not yet know about sex, alert them that text messages should never contain pictures of people—kids, teens or adults—without their clothes on, kissing or touching each other in ways that they've never seen before. For older children, use the term "sexting" and give more specifics about sex acts they may know about. For teens, be very specific that "sexting" often involves pictures of a sexual nature and is considered pornography.

- Make sure kids of all ages understand that sexting is serious and considered a crime in many jurisdictions. If they "sext," there will be serious consequences, quite possibly

involving the police, suspension from school, and notes on the texter's permanent record that could hurt their chances of getting into college or getting a job.

- Experts have noted that peer pressure can play a major role in the sending of texts, with parties being a major contributing factor. Collecting cell phones at gatherings of tweens and teens is one way to reduce this temptation.

- Monitor headlines and the news for stories about sexting that illustrate the very real consequences for both senders and receivers of these images. "Have you seen this story?" "What did you think about it?" "What would you do if you were this child?" Rehearse ways they can respond if asked to participate in inappropriate texting.

- Encourage school and town assemblies to educate parents, teachers and students.

An important and related problem is that with social networking there is no respite. Social media has a 24-7 quality that leaves many teens feeling that there is nowhere to turn and no escape—not at home, not on vacation, no place.

Social media has opened the door to new avenues of sexual expression and new challenges for families, health educators and human services professionals. Don't miss this opportunity to educate your youngster about its dangers.

Andrew Malekoff is the executive director of North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center, which provides comprehensive mental health services for children from birth through 24 and their families. To find out more, visit www.northshorechildguidance.org. The views expressed in this column are not necessarily those of the publisher or Anton Media Group.

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