

Teens act with ‘Respect!’

By Jody K. Althouse

Centre Daily Times

Posted: 4:00am on Jun 29, 2011

When was the last time you sat down with teens and listened to what they had to say? Really listened. Intentionally listened.

For the past nine months, I have had the privilege of working with teens from the Penns Valley Area Junior High. Are they perfect people? Not a chance. But they are perfect teens: questioning, discovering, arguing their beliefs, debating a point and yearning for social justice.

Through the Expect Respect! Program, 46 seventh- and eighth-grade students gathered weekly to learn how to take a stand against bullying, sexual harassment, sexual assault and dating violence. Expect Respect! is a research-based program that promotes safe and healthy teen relationships.

Why do we need to engage teens in prevention education? Teens are also much more likely to go to their peers for advice, feedback and information.

“Young people ... pay more attention to messages and advice from their peers than from adults,” according to a 2006 report by the National Center for Victims of Crime and the National Crime Prevention Council.

Contrary to popular belief, not all peer pressure is bad. Teens have the power to educate other teens, to become engaged bystanders and to become role models.

From the stories I’ve been told by teachers, parents and the teens themselves, during the school year, a change began slowly in Penns Valley. Students began to stand up for each other, to defend those being teased, to reach out to isolated students; students felt proud to be seen as a leader.

Here is just a peek into what some of the Penns Valley Teen Leaders had to say:

- “We need to teach one another; we need to tell each other how the hate and cruel remarks really do hurt.”
- “I made the choice to stand strong and say things through words that won’t shoot a person down. Now it’s your turn.”
- “Reflect upon what you just did. Just think. You are in control of your actions. You can think.”
- “Racism isn’t funny. It is wrong. We need to end racism.”
- “Engage and step up for a person, even if it is not your friend. Put yourself in their shoes.”
- “Everyone has feelings, everyone has a voice, but why do only some people get heard?”

- “Stick up for even those not close to you. Because we can be — no, we are — the future.”

Expect Respect! is an ecologically informed dating violence prevention program for middle and high school students that engages the entire community in changing social norms about social and dating relationships and creating a respectful environment.

If you are interested in incorporating Expect Respect! into your school, or for more information, contact the Centre County Women’s Resource Center at 814-238-7066.

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Read more: <http://www.centredaily.com/2011/06/29/2806183/teens-act-with-respect.html#ixzz1a1sEgbKi>