

**Remarks by  
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**Remarks by Kristin Anderson Moore, Ph.D., President and Senior Scholar, Child Trends;  
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*Good morning. I'm delighted to be here today. At Child Trends, we like to say that our mission is to improve the lives of children and their families – and that we do this by conducting research and providing science-based information to the public and decision-makers. Before I get into the heart of my brief remarks, I want to reflect a bit about two broad concepts – change and creativity – within the context of this mission.*

*What are the sources of creativity and the engines of change in the United States when it comes to enhancing children's development and well-being? Many people, particularly in this audience, would think of academe. Others would probably think of the federal government. And that is understandable. But citing just these two really ignores some other very important sources of creativity and change. The foundation community, for one. State and local government, for another. And community organizations, to give a third example. As we seek to better the prospects of children and families, we can bring together knowledge derived from these various places to generate some new understandings. And that's a very exciting thing to do.*

*Let me illustrate what I mean by telling you about some work that Child Trends has done with a national foundation – the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.*

*The Knight Foundation asked us to help identify promising youth development approaches and programs for the 26 communities that it has targeted for special support. To do this, we undertook a comprehensive study of the many contributing influences that lead to positive (and negative) teen behaviors in seven areas – from reproductive health to citizenship. And to do this, we tracked down and analyzed more than 1,100 research articles. I suspect that dozens of people in this audience have been cited in these reviews.*

*We've drawn on findings from this body of research to produce reports, research briefs, and electronic "What Works" tables that we post on our Web site.*

*To determine what works to promote positive youth development, and what doesn't, we restricted our review to studies that used a randomized, experimental control-group design – the gold standard – because only such studies can account for causality. But we recognize that other types of research – such as high-quality longitudinal multivariate research and quasi-experimental evaluation studies – also can provide helpful information and insights. And so, of course, can the wisdom of community leaders and program providers. We group information drawn from these other sources under the headings of "promising practices," or "best bets," as we label them in our "What Works" tables. And these are a critical resource for designing and improving programs.*

*While we did not specifically limit our review to studies of low-income families, most intervention programs focus on disadvantaged families, so the results in the “What Works” columns generally apply to adolescents in disadvantaged families.*

*What are some of the things we have learned from our intensive review and analysis of all these research studies? Let me suggest ten “take away” points.*

***Point Number 1: Adolescent behaviors often cluster.***

*Research confirms the common sense observation that teens who show one positive or negative characteristic are likely to have other positive or negative characteristics. For example, teens who drink, use drugs, and smoke are also more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior, to have poor sleep habits, and to be in poor physical health. And teens who do well in school also tend to be more involved in civic activities, to have fewer psychological problems, and to take fewer risks. This clustering suggests that programs and policies can bring about change in a number of areas even if their primary focus is on only one or two areas. Clustering also alerts parents and service providers that if an adolescent has one problem, he or she may have additional problems as well.*

***Point Number 2: Parent-child relationships are vital to adolescent well-being.***

*In other words, parents matter – really matter – although a lot of teens may not want to admit it. Over and over again, research confirms that teens who have warm, involved, and satisfying relationships with their parents are more likely to do well in school, to have better social skills, and to have lower rates of risky sexual behavior than other teens. In contrast, teens with poor relationships with their parents are more likely to have psychological and other problems. Further, research shows that supportive parents also help “build better teens” by modeling positive behaviors themselves and monitoring their teens’ behaviors and associations. When it comes to parenting approaches, research with which you are probably familiar suggests that the middle ground often seems to work best. Teens whose parents are overly strict and don’t allow them any degree of independence are more likely to engage in risky behaviors. Teens whose parents are warm but permissive tend to act impulsively and take worrisome risks.*

***Point Number 3: Peer influences are important and can be positive.***

*Many adults look at a teenager’s peers and automatically think, “Oh, oh, bad news.” But the evidence suggests that adolescents often influence each other positively, by either modeling behaviors or by pressuring each other to behave in certain ways or to adopt certain attitudes and goals. Adolescents whose friends have high educational aspirations, achieve academically, and engage in other positive and healthy behaviors tend to behave similarly. And “good kids” are likely to seek out other “good kids.” The opposite also occurs. Teens whose friends smoke, drink, use drugs, and engage in other deviant behaviors and those who are sexually active are more likely to take part in those behaviors themselves. And, yes, “bad kids” seem to seek out other “bad kids.” But influences can be positive.*

***Point Number 4: Siblings, teachers, and other adults and mentors can provide additional support.***

*Brothers and sisters can act as models for positive behaviors, such as physical activity, and negative behaviors, such as drug use. Sibling relationships are also a good training ground for*

conflict resolution and negotiation skills. Mentors can offer friendship, guidance, and assistance, as well as serve as positive role models. The key phrase here is “positive role models.” (The Washington, D.C., area, is still reeling from the horrific results of a mentoring relationship that cannot be described as positive.) Teachers and adults who act as surrogate family members also can serve as role models, teach social skills, and provide support to teens that may not be available at home.

**Point Number 5: Teens should be viewed as whole people, more than just students, patients, or delinquents.**

Taking a more complete and balanced approach to youth development requires an awareness of the many factors associated with adolescent well-being. For example, schools, communities, family socioeconomic status, the media, and public policies, all have implications for adolescent development. And what happens in school can affect health, while health can affect school success.

**Point Number 6: Engage young people.**

Experimental evaluations have shown repeatedly that programs that lecture to young people from on high fail to change behavior, whether targeting smoking, drugs, gun violence, or teen pregnancy. On the other hand, many experimental evaluations find that adolescents who take part in programs that build relationships, truly involve adolescents, and provide well-implemented and structured activities tend to have lower rates of pregnancy and drug, alcohol, and tobacco use. These adolescents also tend to have higher rates of civic engagement and school achievement.

**Point Number 7: Successful programs specifically target desired outcomes.**

This point may sound obvious, but it is frequently overlooked. For example, a program meant to increase academic achievement may have many attributes, but if it doesn't focus on improving academic skills, it is unlikely to meet its original goal.

**Point Number 8: It helps to start early and sustain the effort.**

The psychological, behavioral, and academic problems that start in childhood often continue for years. That's why implementing intervention programs when kids are very young makes sense. And, in fact, intensive preschool programs, such as the Perry Preschool program and the Abecedarian program, confirm this approach. Research shows that both programs are associated not only with educational advances, but also with reduced teen pregnancy and childbearing years later.

**Point Number 9: Implementation is critical.**

Relatively little experimental evaluation research exists on the implementation of programs to promote adolescent well-being. But information from other sources, such as program staff themselves, can tell us something about what makes a program effective. Among these ingredients, proper staff training, a well-developed infrastructure, buy-in from parents and teens, and success in attracting and keeping a committed, involved staff appear to be important; but this is an arena in great need of rigorous new work.

**Point Number 10: Think positively about teens.**

Many adults look at teens and see walking billboards for problems. Thus, many programs directed at youth, understandably perhaps, focus almost exclusively on preventing problems from occurring. However, an accumulating body of research suggests that taking a positive approach may be a better way to help teens realize their potential and avoid negative influences. By a more positive approach, I mean promoting skills and assets instead of just preventing deficits.

So these are the ten key points culled from our extensive review of the research literature on adolescent development and approaches and programs that seek to steer it in a positive direction. In this project, Child Trends has acted, essentially, as a go-between and translator: We drew on the good work by the academic community to inform foundation planning in communities, and we are circulating the findings widely in the media and among policy makers.

I think our experience shows how useful good academic work is, even if professors and university-based researchers are simply publishing this work in refereed journals. Academic researchers might not always even know it, but their work is being reviewed and used for other purposes.

What next? Despite all the good research that is out there about influences on adolescent development and approaches to enhancing it, there remains much to be learned. Here's my short list of challenges for the research community:

- Conduct more long-term research that looks at multiple variables.
- Evaluate program interventions with experimental studies.
- Examine the whole set of factors that influence adolescents.
- Expand the research base on cultural influences on adolescent development.

In closing, let me just mention that my remarks today are based on a research brief that we released this month called "Building a Better Teenager: A Summary of 'What Works' in Youth Development." I invite you to read this brief, and the six that preceded it, by visiting our Web site, [www.childtrends.org](http://www.childtrends.org).

Thank you.