

The Best of Times, the Worst of Times

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: Youth Protection and Child Safety

Risk Management Strategies for Nonprofits Serving Young Adolescents

If youth is the season of hope, it's often so only in the sense that our elders are hopeful about us; for no age is so apt as youth to think its emotions, partings, and resolves are the last of their kind. Each crisis seems final, simply because it is new.

— George Eliot [Marian Evans Cross] in *Middlemarch*

Introduction

Tens of thousands of community-serving organizations center at least part of their programs on youth. Services range from child-care programs for infants and tots to social and fraternal organizations for teens. Included in this wide-ranging selection of educational and recreational activities are youth sports, youth development, scouting, mentoring, religious instruction, and search and rescue. This wealth of experiences equips the youth of today with the social and vocational experiences to become the adults of tomorrow. Ideally, those of you who are leading these programs see childhood or youth as the season of hope. It's a period when children under your care need nurturing, while they explore, test, grow and stretch into becoming themselves. The season seems long to the children who hungrily grab at life, wanting to do more and more without your help. But as adults you know that childhood disappears much too fast, and that freedom guided within limits during the season of youth in the end can produce a hardier and more resilient season of adulthood.

Much as the children under your care need to be protected from harm, the organization serving them needs to be protected to survive and continue to operate in the future. Each youth-serving program has unique risks, as well as risks shared by other nonprofits, that should be addressed. These risks encompass youth as service recipients, as unpaid volunteers and as paid staff. The risks extend from early childhood to participants who may be as old as 21 years of age — older than the age of majority in most states.

[The Season of Hope](#), a new book available from the Nonprofit Risk Management Center ([click here for more info](#)), focuses on using risk management as a tool to protect children, as much as we can, from harm irrespective of its source.

Our intent is twofold: 1) to improve the safety of youth who participate in nonprofit and volunteer programs, and 2) to ensure that the ability of nonprofits to accomplish their youth-development missions isn't impaired due to inadequate risk management planning and implementation. Several specific risk exposures common to youth-serving organizations, including child maltreatment, are discussed.

The book was written to offer assistance to youth development professionals, program managers, agency and organizational executives, board members, and paid and volunteer staff members of youth-serving organizations as they consider their risk management needs.

An excerpt from Chapter 2, “Because They Are Children,” follows. For the full table of contents [click here](#).

Early adolescence

“With the exception of infancy, no time of life compresses more physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and moral development into so brief a span” as does early adolescence, according to *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours*. “The young adolescent is simultaneously coping with the onset of puberty, progressing from the protective neighborhood elementary school to the more distant, more impersonal middle-grade school; growing taller; walking, biking, or using public transportation to travel further from home without parental supervision; and experiencing a new sense of independence.”

The report continues, “Young adolescents are preparing to become adults and experiences in early adolescence help shape the kind of adults they will be. They are developing skills, habits and attitudes that will determine whether they succeed or fail in school and establish personal and career goals.”

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychology identifies four primary developmental areas for adolescents:

1. movement toward independence,
2. development of career interests,
3. sexuality, and
4. ethics and self-direction.

Each of these four areas has risks that accompany them for youth-serving organizations, as well as potential perils for the youths themselves.

Area 1: Movement Toward independence

The drive toward independence is extremely strong for young adolescents, and it may be fed by their perceptions of the degree of independence that their peers have. This drive is often responsible for friction between adolescents and their parents, and between adolescents and other “authority figures,” such as teachers, coaches and youth-group leaders.

Part of becoming more independent is recognizing that parents and other adults aren’t perfect. No matter how idealized their perceptions of adults were earlier in their childhood, young adolescents make it abundantly clear that they recognize the faults of adult authority figures, often going on ad nauseam to point them out during arguments. For example, if parents chastise their teenager for drinking alcoholic beverages, they can expect to hear from their teen about their own drinking habits.

The fear of losing independence frequently inhibits adolescents from seeking adult help when confronting a problem. Not only are they afraid that their freedom will be curtailed, they also don’t want to hear the “I told you so” that often accompanies parental, as well as other adult, assistance.

Young people in this developmental stage often look for non-threatening adult mentors from whom to seek guidance and counsel. Such individuals are often popular schoolteachers, youth-group leaders or adults with whom they have formed a bond of mutual respect and friendship.

During this period, young teens struggle to develop a sense of identity. Part of the identity they seek is with their peer group. The peer group influences interests and clothing styles. When adolescents perceive themselves as not being accepted by their peers, they may resort to forming anti-social groups to help define their sense of “self.” According to James Garbarino in *The Lost Boys*, “having some identity in relation to peers is so important to most children and youth that even a negative definition of self is better than nothing at all.”

Young adolescents can be very self-centered. They are very concerned about their appearance and want to be perceived as being pretty or handsome. They want to be liked by their peers. They are prone to sudden mood shifts. They may perceive minor events to be catastrophic. Depression and suicide are serious risks for young adolescents that are discussed in Chapter 8 of the book, titled “Physical and Mental Health.”

Area 2: Development of career interests

These 11-to-14 year olds realize that they have to make decisions about their futures; but they aren't ready to commit to a specific career field. They are apt to view part-time employment as a way to earn money and be more independent. First jobs might be babysitting or doing chores for neighbors. While on-the-job learning is important, adults shouldn't permit a young person's job responsibilities to interfere with academic or vocational education.

Many young adolescents participate in volunteer activities. These activities are an important means for learning about the world of work in general, and specifically what it might be like to pursue a career related to their volunteer activities. Many schools are requiring community service in order to graduate.

Employers of young adolescents must be mindful that federal, state and local labor regulations limit the hours and kinds of employment that youth are permitted to engage in. Whether employees or volunteers, adolescents' on-the-job success depends on the training and supervision provided by their employers.

Area 3: Sexuality

During adolescence, boys and girls become young men and women and must learn to cope with their newly awakened sexuality — a process that is smoother for some than others. Periods of shyness, blushing, and modesty occur as they become used to their new appearances. They worry about being normal. Thus while they may experiment sexually with same-sex peers, movement toward heterosexuality, with fears of homosexuality, is common.

Socially, they focus their attention on same-sex friends and group activities. One-on-one dating is fairly rare during this stage. However, girls, who develop physically sooner than boys, may establish social or dating relationships with boys a year or two older than they are.

Adults need to be available to answer questions and offer guidance during this phase. Observing young adolescents as they develop social skills responsive to their hormonal changes can be almost painful for adults. To adults, adolescent attempts to establish relationships often appear humorous. Sensitive adults, however, think back to when they were going through the same process of development, and will only chuckle to themselves.

Area 4: Ethics and self-direction

Early adolescence is a time of experimentation, and of rule and limit testing. As they try "adult experiences," they indulge in considerable risk taking. Young adolescents are prone to experiment with cigarettes and marijuana, alcohol and other drugs. They perceive these activities as expressions of their independence and things that their friends are doing. They may rationalize that if it's OK for adults to smoke and drink, it should be OK for them, too.

Young adolescents don't fully appreciate cause-and-effect relationships. They tend to act without consideration of possible consequences. For example, they may think that setting up a meeting with someone they meet through the Internet is an acceptable expansion of their social life without considering that the person with whom they will be meeting is likely to be someone who could do them great harm.

Peers influence the moral choices that young adolescents make. When friends and associates are involved in delinquent activities, individuals who would never engage alone in such activities are prone to go along with the group. Studies by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services show that the best indicator of whether a teen will smoke is whether his or her best friend does.

Risk Management Strategies

Risk management considerations that programs for 11-to 14-year-olds must take into account include:

- Developing skills in conflict resolution, negotiation and anger management.
- Teaching age-appropriate personal safety skills.
- Avoiding promises of confidentiality for information shared by adolescents that clearly needs to be

communicated to their parents or the authorities.

- Stressing the use of protective sports gear and automobile seat belts, and adhering to safety procedures.
- Establishing a zero-tolerance policy for possession of weapons, alcohol and drugs in any nonprofit program.
- Setting up communication with parents about scheduled activities and their children's participation.
- Encouraging social relationships between young men and women based upon mutual respect of personal boundaries.
- Involving young people in the creation of "Codes of Conduct" and other rules so adolescents can feel somewhat empowered and responsible for their own behavior.
- Monitoring adolescents' behavior and intervening when it places them or others in potentially dangerous situations.

Children Aren't Small Adults

Before leaving the topic of children, it's important to remember that children aren't small adults. Often, one hears adults talking about the children's behavior being immature. You must place children's behavior in context. A 16-year-old acting as an eight-year-old is being immature; a 16-year-old behaving as a 16-year-old is showing age-appropriate behavior. By understanding the context of the behavior, the professional will be in a better position to apply more appropriate risk management practices to the program.

On the other hand, the organization, by understanding the developmental stages of the children it serves, can anticipate and develop strategies to manage the risks created by the normal maturation and development of children, whether they are recipients of service, volunteers or employees.

[The Season of Hope](#) was written by John C. Patterson, Senior Program Director at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center and Barbara B. Oliver. For information about the Nonprofit Risk Management Center, visit www.nonprofitrisk.org/ or call (703) 777-3504. [For more information about this publication, click here.](#)