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Advisors of student activities spend long hours with the members of their organizations, often developing strong relationships that extend beyond the typical student-teacher roles. A recent study by SADD and Liberty Mutual shows that natural mentors such as activity advisors greatly influence teens in many positive ways.

Mentors Make a Difference

Teens who identify at least one influential, “natural” mentor in their life—a person not assigned by a formal mentoring program—report that they have a higher sense of self and are more likely to take risks that affect their lives positively, says data released last December from the 2006 SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) and Liberty Mutual seventh annual *Teens Today* study.

In one of the first concentrated studies on natural mentoring, more than 3,300 middle school and high school teens across the country were surveyed. In the study, 46% of teens with a mentor reported a high sense of self versus 25% of teens who did not identify a natural mentor in their life. Additionally, teens with mentors reported that they are significantly more likely than teens without mentors to challenge themselves by taking positive risks (38% versus 28%), such as joining an athletic team or volunteering to perform community service. Notably, more than half of teens (56%) say the absence of a mentor would negatively affect them.

Natural mentoring occurs outside of a formal mentoring program that may match teens with a dedicated mentor. Natural mentors can include family members (such as parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents), other adults (such as teachers, guidance counselors, club advisors, coaches, neighbors, clergy) and peers—people who may have opportunities for interaction with some frequency.

The study also reveals that the breadth and depth of mentoring—the number of mentors teens have or the range of topics teens can discuss with a mentor—significantly influences decisions teens make around drinking, drug use, and sex.

“This new research demonstrates that there are a whole host of opportunities for adults to influence teenagers outside of formal or planned mentoring programs,” said Stephen Wallace, the chairman and chief executive officer of the national SADD organization who also has broad experience as a school

psychologist and adolescent counselor. “We see this research as a call to action to adults who interact with teenagers—either in their professions or in their daily routines. This research shows that adults who make extra efforts to connect with teenagers can have a profound impact in guiding our nation’s youth.”

Teens’ Sense of Self Higher With Mentor

According to the study, 35% of teens with no mentor have a low sense of self (versus 12% of mentored teens). *Teens Today* research identifies sense of self as teens’ self-evaluation on their progress in three key developmental areas: identity formation, independence, and peer relationships. High sense-of-self teens feel more positive about their own identity, growing independence, and relationships with peers than do teens with a low sense of self. They are also more likely to avoid alcohol and drug use. Teens struggling with those developmental areas, on the other hand, are more likely to drink, to use drugs such as ecstasy and cocaine, and to cite boredom and depression as reasons to have sex. They also note a greater susceptibility to peer pressure when making choices.

Additionally, teens with mentors are significantly more likely than those without mentors to also report frequently feeling happy (94% versus 86%) and less likely to report regularly feeling depressed (24% versus 31%) or bored (66% versus 75%).

Mentoring Influences Positive Risk-Taking Behavior

The study reports that teens with no mentors are significantly more likely to shy away from positive risk-taking than are their mentored peers (51% versus 31%).

Earlier *Teens Today* data reveals that teens who take positive risks (Risk Seekers) in their lives, their schools, and their communities are 20% more likely

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than teens who do not take positive risks (Risk Avoiders) to avoid alcohol and other drugs and 42% more likely to avoid drinking because of concerns about academic performance. Many of these teens are also more inclined to delay intimate sexual behavior.

Mentoring Influences Decisions Around Drinking, Drugs, and Sex

The breadth and depth of the mentoring a young person receives also correlates strongly with decision-making. For example, teens who report high levels of mentoring—those who can talk with a variety of people about a wide range of topics—are significantly less likely than those who report low levels of mentoring to have driven a car under the influence of alcohol (13% versus 26%). And, among those teens who have reported using alcohol or marijuana, those with high levels of mentoring said initiation of such behavior was significantly later than did teens with no or low levels of mentoring.

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Whom Do Teens Look to As Mentors?

The *Teens Today* report reveals that teens rank family members, friends, teachers, counselors, and coaches among the most influential people in their lives. The characteristics young people tend to ascribe to them include trustworthy, caring, understanding, respectful, helpful, dependable, fun, compassionate, and responsible. Being a good listener and offering good advice were also seen as key skills of successful mentors.

For more information on this and past years' *Teens Today* studies from SADD and Liberty Mutual, please visit www.sadd.org or www.libertymutual.com.

The Advocate is published six times per year by the Alliance for Student Activities, a nonprofit corporation whose mission is to promote the value of cocurricular student activities and to provide professional development and support for advisors and future advisors.

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