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February 2010
Updated September 2011

By: Saras Chung, MSW
Annie Philipps, MSW

Advised by: Debra Zand, Ph.D
Lorien Carter, MSW
Allison Williams, MSW
Wyman’s TOP® fosters teen resiliency through a specific approach to work with adolescents.

Wyman’s Teen Outreach Program (TOP)® is a national program for teens whose effectiveness has been proven in over 30 years of operation. TOP® is currently being administered in over 400 organizations and schools in the United States and the Virgin Islands.

Based upon the principles of positive youth development, an approach that provides teens with the necessary supports and opportunities to prepare for successful adulthood and avoid problem behavior, TOP® has proven effective in increasing academic success and preventing teen pregnancy and other negative behaviors among program participants.

At a crucial time in youth development where noncognitive skills are rapidly developing, the curriculum-guided discussions and activities support brain development as youth are engaged in thinking about their ideas, decisions, goals, and behaviors.

Key aspects of the TOP® approach linked to youth outcomes include:
- Continuity of the program
- Weekly group discussions and activities
- Youth-initiated community service learning
- Connections with a skilled, caring adult in the program

TOP’s FLEXIBILITY
Wyman’s TOP® and its flexibility in a variety of settings has been one of the most compelling factors for its sustained success in schools and community organizations. TOP® can be effective as an in-school, after-school or community-based program. The curriculum is rich in experiential exercises that enhance student knowledge and skill development, and the sequence of those lessons may be varied to meet the students and the group where they are. This allows skilled facilitators to gauge the groups’ interests and needs and apply a lesson that is perceived as relevant and timely to the students.

RECOMMENDED BY NATIONAL REPORTS
TOP® is routinely recommended by national reports as a positive youth development approach worth replicating. In fact, TOP® is featured as a “best practice” or evidence-based program proven to work on over 20+ lists from experts in the field. (Not a comprehensive list below).

- SAMHSA’s NREPP (National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices)
- CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning - under review)
- The US Department of Justice - OJJDP (Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention: Model Programs Guide)
- The Rand Corporation’s Promising Practices Network – “Programs that Work”
- The Brookings Institution – “Cost-Effective Investments in Children”
- National Academy of Science’s Institute of Medicine - “Community Programs that Work”
- Mathematic Policy Research, Inc.
- National Dropout Prevention Center
- The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

A RETURN ON INVESTMENT
Wyman’s TOP® is cost effective. In 2007, the Brookings Institution found that for every $1 spent on TOP™, $1.29 is returned back to the community. It is important to note that this figure is strictly for a reduction in teen pregnancy. Factoring in school metrics and resiliency factors would likely produce far greater returns and improve school outcomes! Schools and community organizations can effectively operate TOP® with relatively little expense, start-up costs, or maintenance.

Wyman’s TOP®, with its multifaceted skill-development approach, is suggested as a method to help youth build positive core competencies that will provide a means to reducing a myriad of other risky behaviors.
INTRODUCTION

Using universal prevention as a foundation for the development of behavioral and social competencies offers a cost effective model for mental health promotion and develops young people who are prepared and motivated to become successful, contributing members of society. Prevention and promotion programs also offer a return to society through both the reduction of intensive spending on targeted and individual interventions and the benefit received by society when young people become employed, build healthy communities and neighborhoods, participate in civic activity, and voluntarily engage in community service.

According to the CDC, efforts to improve child and adolescent health typically have featured interventions designed to address specific health risk behaviors, such as tobacco use, alcohol and drug use, violence, gang involvement, and early sexual initiation. However, results from a growing number of studies suggest that greater health impact might be achieved by also enhancing protective factors that help children and adolescents avoid multiple behaviors that place them at risk for adverse health and educational outcomes. Protective factors may include personal characteristics such as a positive view of one’s future; life conditions such as frequent parental presence in the home at key times (e.g., after school, at dinner time); and behaviors such as active participation in school activities.

In addition to protective factors, research on brain development has found that programs teaching noncognitive skills such as perseverance, motivation, and self confidence are most effective in reducing negative outcomes for youth. A method that has been rigorously researched and proven to possess best-practice methods for effectively promoting resilience among youth, Wyman’s Teen Outreach Program® (TOP®), will be outlined as a way to develop positive qualities in adolescents.

As an extremely affordable model with a monetary return for each dollar invested, Wyman’s TOP® can be replicated across schools and other institutions to help reduce the strain of mental health issues on individuals, communities, and state governments.

Mental health is not the “mere absence of mental illness” Rather, mental health provides a context within which to examine a person or group’s capacity for “positive emotion, engagement, purpose, positive relationships, and positive accomplishment”

—Martin Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association

For the Promotion of Mental Health and Well-Being in Teens

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Why invest in promoting positive well-being in adolescents?

• The promotion of well-being in teens can help mitigate the onset of negative effects of mental illness.

Mental health disorders in adolescence frequently reflect a physiological predisposition and/or the effects of environmental stress or triggers. While clinical and mental health treatment may be required for individuals who have developed significant mental health issues, research has shown that prevention programs can equip youth with resiliency skills including self-regulation, self-efficacy, prosocial behaviors and responses to conflict. Research also suggests that competence enhancing programs such as Wyman’s TOP®, targeted at large groups of young people, hold the potential to impact young people relative to their need. Promoting well-being may be one of our best weapons against mental disorders.14

• The promotion of well-being builds competent and resilient youth who are poised to successfully navigate the challenges of transitioning into adulthood.

According to Dr. Ann Masten, Distinguished McKnight University Professor of Child Psychology and the Director of Project Competence, adolescence and the transition to adulthood can be described as a “window of development where the leverage for change increases. Gains in cognitive capacity for planning and decision-making related to brain development coincide with opportunities afforded by new contexts.”9 Masten’s pioneering research on resilience has shown that “promoting competence has the potential to prevent or ameliorate problems” and that “competence in the age-salient developmental tasks of childhood and adolescence, such as doing well in school, social competence with peers, and rule abiding conduct in society, forecasted later success in life”.9 Masten thus recognizes the power of universal prevention and asset building programs in building positive mental health assets during adolescence. She notes that “well-timed interventions have the potential for building competence well into the future, yielding high long term returns on investment.”9

Masten provides the mental health field with a sample of resilience factors that bode well for health and success for a young person. Listed below are Masten’s resilience factors with those particularly relevant to Wyman’s Teen Outreach Program® bolded.

<table>
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<th>RESILIENCE FACTORS9</th>
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<td>• Positive relationships with other nurturing and competent adults</td>
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<td>• Self-regulation skills</td>
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<td>• Positive self-perceptions; self-efficacy</td>
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<td>• Bonds to effective schools and other prosocial organizations</td>
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- Faith, hope, and a sense of meaning in life
- Friends or romantic partners who are supportive and prosocial
- Intellectual skills
- Positive attachment bonds with caregivers (attachment; family)
- Communities with positive services and supports for families and children
- Cultures that provide positive standards, rituals, relationships and supports
Investments into Positive Well-Being in the Education System

The opportunity for resiliency factors, or contributions to positive mental health, to be built through universal strengths-based programs for young people, fits neatly within the Response to Intervention, or RTI. RTI systems are being implemented in school districts across the country. RTI recommends a tier-based system for integrating academic and behavioral content and interventions, accompanied by constant monitoring and assessment, to create an environment that promotes students’ positive development, learning, and success.

Within the areas of academic and behavioral systems, the RTI model recommends universal, primary prevention activities for all youth, with the understanding that this level of intervention will be sufficient for 80-90% of students to develop necessary skills and competencies. These primary prevention activities then serve as a context within which trained school personnel identify the students who require targeted group interventions, intensive, individual interventions, or both.

In championing a universal prevention and asset building system, RTI experts note that prevention programs hold the potential to decrease the development of new problem behaviors; to prevent worsening of existing problem behaviors; to teach, monitor, and acknowledge prosocial behavior; and to redesign learning and teaching environments to eliminate triggers and maintainers of problem behaviors.

Wyman’s TOP® is a program that fits into the existing framework of RTI in the primary and secondary zones of universal activities for prevention and positive development.

Wyman’s TOP® is part of a system of care in schools that addresses the primary, secondary and tertiary zones in partnership with school counselors and other community mental health providers.

The RTI Pyramid
Influencing positive self-perception and self-efficacy

Cognitive psychologist Albert Bandura defined self-efficacy as people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave. He argued that one of the "strongest ways to develop self-efficacy is through 'mastery experiences' or those experiences that provide challenge, practice with new skills, and perseverance." A strong sense of efficacy enhances human accomplishment and personal well-being in many ways. People with high assurance in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided. Such an efficacious outlook fosters intrinsic interest and deep engagement in activities. They set themselves challenging goals and maintain strong commitment to them. They heighten and sustain their efforts in the face of failure. They quickly recover their sense of efficacy after failures or setbacks. They attribute failure to insufficient effort or deficient knowledge and skills which are acquirable. They approach threatening situations with assurance that they can exercise control over them. Such an efficacious outlook produces personal accomplishments, reduces stress and lowers vulnerability to depression.

The service-learning experience can bolster self-efficacy as students work, learn and find success both with the process and the outcome of their project. A high quality service learning experience is characterized by inclusion of a meaningful, yet challenging goal; a project that takes time and effort to plan; implementation and evaluation processes; and rigorous reflection and input on both the process and outcome of the service learning. The result is students who find themselves surprised and awakened by the impact they can have on a problem and their community. They receive feedback from community members, the people they serve, and their peers on how their service matters. All of this leaves a young person with a new found – or enhanced – sense of purpose and efficacy.

How TOP® fosters self-efficacy:

The two cornerstones of Wyman's Teen Outreach Program® are service learning and group lessons focused on developing self-regulation and social emotional skills. These two approaches are interwoven to provide both safe, experiential learning opportunities coupled with 'real life' context (service-learning) where young people develop mastery of their new skills. In service learning, the act of serving itself conveys a sense of caring. High expectations are communicated when students take on service projects to respond to genuine community needs. Students participate in meaningful ways when they assume ownership of both the service and learning aspects of their projects. Through service learning, students experience real world applications of a variety of skills for social-emotional growth as well as academic development.

TOP® connects young people to the needs and assets of their community and provides them genuine opportunities to make and feel their impact. Youth in Wyman's Teen Outreach Program® complete a minimum of 20 hours of service each year. Students select projects that are both challenging and of importance to them.

Students do their own research on community issues, learn about the people they may serve, utilize a variety of planning tools to prepare the service, and have facilitated opportunities to reflect on their process and success throughout. The work is often completed in groups, which provides ample opportunities for students to practice their communication, conflict management, and self-regulation skills. The service-learning experience provides context for those skills to be actualized. At the end of a project the students always have some sort of celebration of their personal growth, learning and the impact they have made in their community.
Influencing School Connectedness and Bonding

“School connectedness was defined as the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. Because studies indicate that individual students’ feelings of being connected to school are influenced by their peers as well as by adults, the Centers for Disease Control has expanded that definition to include peer influence.6

In a study conducted by the CDC, it was found that school connectedness is the strongest protective factor for both boys and girls to decrease substance use, school absenteeism, early sexual initiation, violence, and risk of unintentional injury (e.g., drinking and driving, not wearing seat belts). In this same study, school connectedness was second in importance, after family connectedness, as a protective factor against emotional distress, disordered eating, and suicidal ideation and attempts.

Research from the Centers for Disease Control6 has also demonstrated a strong relationship between school connectedness and educational outcomes, including school attendance; staying in school longer; and higher grades and classroom test scores. In turn, students who do well academically are less likely to engage in risky behaviors. Compared with students with low grades, students with higher grades are significantly less likely to carry a weapon, smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, and have sexual intercourse.

Students’ health and educational outcomes are influenced by the characteristics of their peers, such as how socially competent peer group members are or whether the peer group supports pro-social behavior (e.g., engaging in school activities, completing homework assignments, helping others). Being part of a stable peer network protects students from being victimized or bullied.6

How TOP® impacts School Bonding and Connectedness.

A key strategy to increase school connectedness is to provide students with the academic, emotional, and social skills necessary to be actively engaged in school. Another is to foster pro-social behaviors found within activities such as service-learning and peer helpers.6

TOP® is designed to provide students with an emotionally and physically safe environment in which to explore both the skills and issues essential to healthy, prosocial interactions with peers and adults in the teen years. It fosters engagement in school and appears particularly effective in supporting teens already identified as having higher risk factors. TOP® appeared to provide the greatest gains toward a normal developmental trajectory for youths who were initially the farthest off from this trajectory. One explanation for this outcome is that TOP® enhances development by providing opportunities for adolescents to establish their autonomy and competence in a context that also allows them to remain engaged and receive encouragement from their schools and communities. Disengagement from school is a robust correlate of risk of both academic problems and pregnancy in adolescence; failure of schools to provide opportunities for adolescents to establish autonomy within them has been identified as a likely cause of this disengagement.1

The TOP® curriculum, Changing Scenes®, focuses on skills including self-regulation, influence, negotiation, communication, conflict management and decision-making, frequently defined as Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) skills. SEL strengthens young people in their personal, school and social domains. In a meta-analysis of SEL studies the Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) found that students in SEL programs demonstrated positive effects on students social-emotional skills; attitudes toward self, school and others; social behaviors; conduct problems; emotional distress; and academic performance. Notably, SEL programming yielded an average gain on academic test scores of 11-17 percentile points.13
In order to successfully transition from childhood to adulthood, adolescents must develop the abilities to regulate behavior, emotion, attention, arousal, and goal-oriented actions. Adolescence represents the second critical “window of opportunity,” with the first being early childhood, to align best practice prevention and intervention practices with rapid physiological changes occurring in the chemistry of the brain. As the adolescent brain undergoes rapid change, teens are uniquely poised to develop abilities to plan ahead, consider alternatives, and evaluate the direction of their life, thus developing capacities for improved decision making and judgment.

How TOP® fosters Self-Regulation

Wyman’s Teen Outreach Program® Curriculum builds upon this window of opportunity by engaging teens in activities to promote strong self-regulation. The TOP® curriculum engages teens in discussions, interactive activities, and role plays that positively shape their abilities to self-regulate.

Core themes across the curriculum levels, a description of each theme, and sample lesson plans within each theme are listed in the box to the right.

Sample Lesson Plans from TOP®

- **Relationships**: Teens examine the dynamics of friendships, family relationships and conflicts, peer pressure, romantic relationships, dating, and violence within relationships.
  - Introduction to Relationships: What Is A Friend?
  - Introduction to Romantic Relationships
  - Love or Infatuation?

- **Influence**: Teens explore and grapple with the various influences on their lives and decisions, including peer pressure and media messages.
  - Who Influences You and Why?
  - Have You Been Influenced?
  - Peer Pressure Experiences
  - Social Pressures
  - Media Messages: Plus or Minus?
  - Dealing with Pressure Situations
  - Pressure Role Plays

- **Decision-Making**: Teens examine choices and consequences, practice using decision-making tools, and reflect upon recent decisions they have made.
  - Choices & Consequences
  - A Decision-Making Model
  - Examining Recent Decisions
  - Practicing Making Decisions

- **Values Clarification**: Teens explore and challenge their own values, the impact of gender roles on values, the values of their family and friends, and the impact of the larger society on their value formation.
  - Introduction to Values: Favorite Activities
  - Value Auction

- **Communication/Assertiveness**: Teens discuss and apply concepts such as active listening, assertive communication, nonverbal communication, how to say “no” and refuse a request, the use of “I” messages, and how to utilize personal and community resources to meet their needs.
  - Introduction to Communication: Saying What You Mean
  - The Other Side of Communication: Being a Good Listener
  - Communicating Feelings: Nonverbal Communications
  - Introduction to Assertiveness: Are You Assertive?
  - Asking for What You Need and Want

- **Goal-Setting**: Teens practice goal identification, understand short-term versus long-term goals, explore their future options, and think about plans for life after high-school.
  - Introduction to Goal Setting: Short-Term v. Long-Term Goals
  - Parenthood: It Can Wait
  - Achieving My Goals

- **Development and Human Sexuality**: Teens learn about adolescent development (emotional and physical) and human sexuality from a holistic perspective. The curriculum is designed as an abstinence-plus approach. This technique provides information on abstinence as the safest way to not become pregnant/father a child and to remain free of any sexually-transmitted diseases. Information on the reproductive process and contraception is also provided, however, for teens to make informed choices about their sexual activity. Each organization and community can tailor the human sexuality content to their and the teens’ particular needs.
  - Introduction to Emotional & Social Changes: Name Your Feelings
  - The Risk of Sexual Relationships
  - When Relationships Lead to Pressure
Nurturing and Competent Adults

Positive relationships with nurturing and competent adults have the potential to promote positive development.9

A positive relationship with an adult can be described as one where the man or woman will instill pride, nurture hopes and dreams, and promote responsible, success-oriented behavior in a teen. Although some individuals are physiologically vulnerable to the development of mental illness and disorders, studies consistently show that environment matters greatly in mental health functioning. Relationships with caring adults, development of positive life goals, and belief in a positive future have all been consistently linked to healthy social and emotional functioning in youth and adults.16 In particular, environments that foster connection with others and provide opportunities for meaning and mastery serve as buffers against mental disorders and promote positive mental health.16

This research is encouraging because it points to pathways to promote positive well-being in youth. According to research completed by Blum and Colleagues, children and adolescents’ beliefs about themselves and their abilities are shaped by the extent to which they perceive that the adults in their lives care about them and are involved in their lives.4 In addition to the support of a child or teen’s family life, relationships built outside of the home can make an impact on the outlook of that individual.

How does TOP® offer bonds to caring and competent adults?

Each TOP® group is facilitated by a trained, caring and competent adult. This individual is a consistent support and role model for students throughout the year. In addition, a primary task of the facilitator is to create an emotionally and physically safe environment for every youth in TOP®. This includes demonstrating caring and concern for each student and fostering a group environment where each youth has a voice, positive boundaries, and where conflict and discord are managed proactively to resolution. Much of this group management and learning is done through social and emotional learning lessons included in TOP®. It is augmented by having youth help set and maintain positive expectations and norms for the group, and including youth in active roles in any dispute management. Facilitators ensure that their approach is values neutral and prompts youth with questions and opportunities to explore different points of view and the positive and negative consequences of their actions. Teens thus advance their critical thinking skills and abilities with regard to issues of importance in their lives.

CONCLUSION

Wyman’s Teen Outreach Program® develops the skills and abilities that adolescents need to succeed in making a healthy transition into adulthood. The program produces promising results in promoting teen resiliency and preparedness for a healthy future by aligning key components of positive teen development, including community service learning, relationships with trained, committed adults, and activities to teach self-regulation and social and emotional learning skills.

Touted as an affordable model and one that has been recommended by the Brookings Institution as a way to help balance the federal budget, the TOP® program produces a return on its initial investment.

Wyman’s Teen Outreach Program® presents a tremendous opportunity to invest in the mental health and well-being of our young people and, thus, the health and well-being of our families, communities, and society.

For more information, please contact:

Wyman
Teen Outreach Program®
600 Kiwanis Drive
Eureka, MO 63025
(636) 928-5245
teenoutreachprogram@wymancenter.org
www.wymancenter.org

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