

# The PASS Program...A Means to Success

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The Prevention, Access, Self-Empowerment, and Support Program (PASS) is an innovative, curriculum-based, statewide prevention program that works with teens who experience challenges in their daily lives, or whose parents are seriously and persistently mentally ill. Program participants report having emotional issues revolving around building and maintaining relationships; anger management; feelings of frustration, distraction; lack of self-control; poor decision making; inability to finish tasks and an overall lack of focus. The therapist data indicates that some of the participants have serious challenges with aggressive, suicidal and/or self-destructive behavior and substance abuse.

P.A.S.S. utilizes a strengths-based approach to helping individuals, families, and communities to develop the resources needed to maintain healthy lifestyles. It focuses on the development of a culturally competent, inclusive system of support that fosters self-help, empowerment, advocacy, support, and education. Junior and adult mentors help the adolescents apply the strategies taught in the program to their unique life situations. Ongoing parent support groups and contacts with schools and other community programs complete the circle of support.

The PASS program is based on the philosophy that:

- Adolescents *can* be taught and empowered to make informed choices.
- Adolescents *can* be assisted in developing and utilizing self-help skills that are "tools" that will improve their probability of success in today's society.
- Program graduates *can* serve as effective peer advocates, mentors, or role models for youths experiencing challenges.
- Services provided in partnership with both parents/guardians and adolescents, can create an avenue for improved communication between parents and teens.
- A culturally competent and culturally supportive approach to working with youth can reach those who typically do not respond to other service approaches.
- By strengthening support and increasing a family's knowledge of information, systems, and supports within their communities, the whole community will benefit.

## Key Program Components

The program's dense curriculum covers a variety of topics/lessons and is designed to provide participants with tools and skills to cope with the stressors of daily life. The environment is intense and conducive to learning, as the adolescents engage in highly

structured activities over the course of nine contact days (three-day overnight workshops, three times a year). Consultants, junior mentors and adolescent guests from different cultures and educational backgrounds present the core curriculum content through a wide variety of mediums. This highly participatory curriculum engages the adolescents in self-expression, public speaking, debates, role-play, martial arts as a means of discipline, daily morning exercises focusing on healthy lifestyles, and self-advocacy.

Adult and junior mentors are carefully screened, interviewed, and trained prior to participation in the program. The mentor guidelines provide a comprehensive guide for being an effective mentor and advocate. Program mentors and administrators are culturally competent, and as a result of their awareness and skills, are well equipped to address the diversity of program participants within the context of their culture.

Prior to the workshops for participating adolescents there is an initial 3-day training for both mentors and parents/guardians. This training focuses on the role of the mentor as a friend; expectations of both parents and mentors are reviewed. Parents receive information on family support networks in their localities. Professionals from the healthcare field provide a general overview of the service delivery system and symptoms relating to emotional challenges in young people. Both parents and mentors are given an overview of the topics in the curriculum and the methods used for delivering the curriculum. This orientation to the PASS program provides a safe venue for parents and mentors to meet each other. Parent Support Group sessions are subsequently held one evening per month from 6 – 9 p.m. throughout the duration of the program. Program workshops are offered in a retreat style setting at various hotels around the state. This approach removes adolescents and parents from their natural environment so they can be immersed into the philosophy and concept of the P.A.S.S. program without interference from daily challenges.

Throughout the program, feedback is sought from mentors, parents, and other individuals involved in the adolescent's life regarding their perception of growth and development. Adolescents are also asked to report on their sense of personal improvement. It is common that the reported changes seen in the adolescents are dramatic.

As one Psychiatrist puts it, "I have seen more changes in this kid over a three day weekend than in the past three years we have been working with this child".

A school administrator from a New York City High School points to one of his most challenging student as one of his proudest allies in advocating changes among gang members.

**Continued on page 18...**

## The PASS Program, continued from page 4

A suicidal adolescent from Rochester now proudly speaks of how "I now choose life..."

Parents speak of a student who used to earn "D's and F's" now has a report with mostly "B's" and some "A's".

Since 2002, PASS program participants have completed the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, Second Edition. The data on several dimensions of the instrument – intelligence, school status, happiness and satisfaction, and behavioral adjustment, supports the fact that the program positively impacts the self-concept of the participants. These results are being seen in adolescents that face extremely difficult emotional and psychological challenges.

### **Lessons learned and implications for program design:**

- One obvious lesson gleaned from our interaction with participants in the PASS program is that when adolescents are prepared to make informed choices and are supported in implementing their positive choices, their chances of accomplishing their goals are greatly improved and the impact of the challenges they face can be diminished.
- Culture is essential to the process of providing care. The PASS program staff is cognizant of their own cultural identity and attitudes, and of the impact that it has in their relationship with participants, especially when the youth has a different cultural or ethnic background.
- One must be constantly aware of the "power" that we as caregivers bring to the encounter process and how it hampers the development of true partnership.
- Program staff need to be passionately committed to their work with youth and believe in the "can do" philosophy of the program.
- It is important that the program embrace a recovery philosophy that entails respect for each individual's ability to make informed choices and have the opportunity to learn from failures.
- Parental involvement is critical and must have a focus on using the family's strengths in partnership with the professional team.
- Utilize the power of peer support by employing mentors who have already experienced success through the program. They can conduct youth-to-youth sessions (without adult involvement), serve as role models, and become a part of the adolescent's support system.

*Continued on page 31...*

## The PASS Program, continued from page 18

- The focus on teamwork helps build self-confidence and valuable self-help and advocacy skills.
- The program's holistic approach includes experiential activities that engage youth on a physical, emotional, and inter-personal level as well as integrates tutoring and a focus on the value of individual learning. Basic etiquette is taught and practiced. Self-awareness is fostered to help youth learn to manage their behavior, get out of their comfort zone and discover their personal power in an emotionally safe environment.

The PASS program uses an emersion model that employs an intensive overnight "retreat" experience that reinforces the principles taught. P.A.S.S. facilitates a process that encourages adolescents to "change" themselves. One of the PASS mantras to adolescents is "We will show you the door; but only you can walk through it." Most of the adolescents entering PASS have been labeled a "problem child" by society and have internalized that negative self-image. The anecdotal stories make it clear that most failed to recognize the power they had, to not only influence their own sense of self (behavior, attitude, actions) but the world around them as well. The program's curriculum and the adolescents' experiences with supportive individuals have created positive internal changes and a renewed sense that they too can enjoy positive outcomes.

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