Askable Adults: A Summary of Best Practices

What makes an "Askable Adult"? and how can prevention programs equip adults for this role?

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Introduction

Identifying promising efforts to boost protective factors and reduce risks for young adults is a priority for national, state, and local sexual violence prevention programs. Emerging research about sexual violence prevention for youth and young adults is grounded in the CDC's understanding of risk and protective factors[1], including increasing empathy and concern, emotional health, connectedness, and community support; and decreasing tolerance of sexual violence within communities. This report summarizes research and practice-based literature about how preventionists and communities can improve adults' abilities to prevent and address sexual violence in the context of reducing risks and increasing protective factors.

The pivotal role adults play in youth sexual violence prevention in Vermont has been identified in several separate studies:

- The 2017 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) conducted by the Vermont Department of Health (VDH) includes measures of protective factors, assets, and engagement. The YRBS asks high school students whether they have "at least one teacher or other adult" they can talk to if they have a problem. Four out of five 9th through 12th grade students were able to identify an adult, with similar results for male and female students, and students at each grade level. The YRBS also measures the extent to which students "feel like they matter to people in the community." The percent of students who agree with this statement has increased significantly in the last decade, from 47% in 2007 to 61% in 2017. LGBT students were the least likely to agree that the feel valued (39% compared to 64% of heterosexual students).[2]

- In 2017, the Youth Advocacy Task Force (YATF) of the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence (the Network) surveyed 584 Vermont youth up to age 24 to improve outreach and advocacy by YATF members.[3] The survey asked about issues that concerned youth in their homes, schools, and communities, and about what actions would help to address the issues they identified. ***The survey revealed that Vermont youth are looking to adults for help with issues that concern them.*** Roughly half (51%) of youth said that "having more askable/supportive adults" would be "really helpful" in helping to change school and community concerns, making it the most favored action across all age groups and gender identities of the youth who responded. "Having more askable adults" was identified by 83% of nonbinary and genderqueer youth and 73% of youth who were ages 17 and 18. The third most common response was "training for school staff/ adults in the community," identified by 46% of respondents, including 63% of those in the oldest age group.

- A 2014 community needs assessment survey of youth in the Northeast Kingdom was

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[1] Basile, K., et al. (2016). STOP SV: A technical package to prevent sexual violence. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[2] Vermont Department of Health. (2018). 2017 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Burlington, VT: Vermont Department of Health.

[3] Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. (2018). Wanted: More askable adults, A survey of Vermont's youth. Montpelier, VT: Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence.

conducted under VDH's CDC-funded Rape Prevention & Education Program (RPE) and found a similar response. From a list of numerous information sources, youth stated that they were most likely to seek information about sexual and domestic violence from a trusted adult or teacher. [4]

- A 2018 statewide assessment of sexual violence prevention stakeholders about preventing sexual violence among youth conducted for RPE identified key adults, including parents, educators, and youth workers. Participants spoke to adults' roles in conveying prevention messages, reinforcing positive and negative social norms about sexual violence, and intervening when sexual or dating violence occurs, [5] and sought additional attention to how prevention efforts can prepare adults for these roles.

These data suggest that engaging adults in the work of preventing sexual violence is needed and wanted, and that youth themselves are asking for adults to step up. This report reviews and summarizes scholarly and practice-based literature to better understand what roles adults can play in sexual violence prevention, the characteristics of adults who effectively engage with youth, and what qualities, actions, or contexts make adults "askable" when a young person needs help, support or information.

Research Questions
1. What is an 'askable adult'?
   a. What does the literature have to say about who askable adults are?
   b. What does the literature have to say about the qualities or characteristics of askable adults?

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[4] Vermont Department of Health (2015). Unpublished program data.

[5] Vermont Department of Health. (2019). Sexual Violence Prevention Stakeholder Assessment. Burlington, VT: Vermont Department of Health.

> *Askable Adults Best Practices*
> 1. Creating effective, affirming relationships with youth is a process, and the process itself is important.
> 2. Positive outcomes (reduced risks, increased protective factors) increase when the relationship is the priority (and not program goals or outcomes).
> 3. Effective communication and building trust are non-negotiable— efforts that do not have these ingredients are unlikely to succeed.

   c. In equipping/ training askable adults, what learning objectives or outcomes are cited in the literature?
   d. Are there differences among youth populations in the qualities of an askable adult?

2. What strategies are effective in reaching and preparing adults to engage with youth?
   a. Are there best practices for askable adult programs?
   b. Is "askable" the best word/ frame for this approach?
   c. Are there differences among youth populations in how askable adults are most effective?
   d. What makes it hard for adults to be engaged with youth?

Methodology and limitations:
The Vermont RPE evaluator reviewed published reports, journal articles, practitioner websites, and other materials and publications related to "askable adults," "youth-adult partnerships" and "developmental relationships." Research from these domains produced key words, and themes across many arenas and disciplines that are concerned about how youth and adults interact. Items reviewed for this summary included literature dealing with:
- Educational settings
- Foster/ former foster/ transition aged youth organizations
- Homeless youth advocacy and direct services
- Mentoring

Defining "Askable Adult"

There is no single, accepted or authoritative definition of what an askable adult is, because the idea of askable adults has grown out of sexual health intervention programs in a variety of locations and contexts over two or three decades (at least). Local and national organizations offer these definitions:

"*To be askable means that young people see you as approachable and open to questions.*

~AdvocatesForYouth.org

"*Being an askable adult means that you are approachable and make space for the young people in your life to come to you with any question. Young people will turn to askable adults for information and values before going to other sources (friends, the internet).*

~Planned Parenthood Massachusetts

"*Askable Adults are adults who are trained to talk openly with teens. They learn to listen carefully and non-judgmentally and provide information and referrals about sexual and reproductive health. Askable Adults need not know everything in the universe about sexual health. But they are willing and able to talk to teens and to use strategies that will help teens feel supported.*

~Access Matters

- Parenting skills and educational interventions
- Pediatric and adolescent mental health
- Public health initiatives (alcohol/tobacco/substance use; suicide; sexual health and pregnancy prevention)
- Violence prevention
- Youth leadership efforts
- Youth with disabilities organizations

This report does not constitute a formal literature review so much as a summary of best practice literature that is organized for prevention practitioners to consider when identifying strategies to employ with adults. Academic research was not evaluated according to the rigor of study methods or validity, and no attempt has been made to verify approaches that are evidence-based or evidence informed. Despite these limitations, the body of research suggests that there is wide consensus about how adults can be agents of positive healthy outcomes for youth.

Theoretical Frameworks

Efforts to increase protective factors and reduce risks for youth, including askable adult programs overwhelmingly incorporate three interrelated theoretical frameworks: 1) Positive youth development (PYD); 2) the Developmental Relationships Framework; and 3) Youth Thrive. Each framework builds on a shared set of ideas rooted in cultivating resiliency, addressing vulnerability, and building assets that protect youth in the face of risk. [6,7] Over the decades since youth development approaches were first tested, new science related to neurobiology, child development, and their interplay in dynamic environments has expanded practitioners' understanding of what works well to help youth navigate and avoid risks. [8] The following three theoretical frameworks provide the foundation for current efforts to increase protective factors and reduce risks for youth, including sexual violence and dating violence prevention efforts:

1. *Positive Youth Development*

Positive youth development (PYD) draws on child and adolescent developmental psychology, public health, health promotion, prevention, sociology, social work, medicine, and education, to provide a set of theories, approaches, policy directions, and practical applications for promoting healthy

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[6] Resnick, M. (2000). Protective Factors, Resiliency, and Healthy Youth Development. *Adolescent Medicine*, 157-164.

[7] Ungar, M. (2013). The impact of youth-adult relationships on resilience. *International Journal of Child, Youth, and Family Studies*, 328-336.

[8] National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2015). Supportive relationship and active skill-building strengthen the foundation of resilience: Working Paper 13. Cambridge, MA: Center on the Developing Child Harvard University.

development for adolescents and young adults. [9] While different researchers and practitioners have identified a variety of core elements, many have distilled PYD to require seven main themes: competence, confidence, connection, character, caring/compassion, and contribution. [10] PYD approaches have been linked to higher levels of youth resilience, and increased indicators of wellbeing, including reduced risk for sexual violence victimization.[11]

2. *Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework*

Building on its widely used *Developmental Assets* framework, the Search Institute's substantial research on how to support positive outcomes for youth finds that 'developmental relationships' are an essential component of young people's healthy development. [12] Developmental relationships are defined as those that "help young people discover who they are; develop abilities to shape their own lives; and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them." A developmental relationship involves five elements (*Express Care, Challenge Growth, Provide Support, Share Power, Expand Possibilities*) which are expressed through actions such as being dependable, listening, and setting boundaries. Recent research has demonstrated that "*the presence or absence of developmental relationships distinguishes effective and ineffective interventions for diverse populations across*

developmental settings. We conclude that developmental relationships are the foundational metric with which to judge the quality and forecast the impact of interventions for at-risk children and youth*". [13]

3. *Youth Thrive: Advancing healthy adolescent development and well-being*

The Youth Thrive framework is a strengths-based initiative developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy to support all youth in ways that advance their healthy development and well-being and reduce the likelihood or impact of negative life experiences. The model identifies five factors that work together to decrease risks: youth resilience; social connections; knowledge of adolescent development; concrete support in times of need; and social and emotional competence. [14] Within the Youth Thrive framework, the presence of a caring adult is identified as an effective way to help children and adolescents flourish. [15]

Making Askable Adults: Trust, Connection, and Communication

Across the PYD, Youth Thrive, and the Developmental Relationships frameworks and literature, there is substantial evidence that youth do not develop into healthy, thriving adulthood without substantial assistance from the adults in their lives. As Li identifies, attention to healthy youth-adult relationships is found to be the most important driver of positive outcomes for youth-focused programs. [16]

[9] Benson, P. L., Scales, P. C., Hamilton, S. F., & Sesma, A. (2007). Chapter 16: Positive Youth Development: Theory, research, and applications. In W. Damon, & R. M. Lerner, *Handbook of Child Psychology V.1* (pp. 895-933). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons.

[10] Forrest-Bank, S. S., Nicotera, N., Anthony, E. K., & Jenson, J. M. (2015). Finding their way: Perceptions of risk, resilience, and positive youth development among adolescents and young adults from public housing neighborhoods. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 55:147-158.

[11] Sanders, J., Munford, R., Thimasarn, T., Liebenberg, L., & Ungar, M. (2015). The role of positive youth development practices in building resilience and enhancing wellbeing for at-risk youth. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 42:40-53.

[12] Roehlkpartain, E., et al. (2017). *Relationships First: Creating connections that help young people thrive*. Minneapolis: Search Institute.

[13] Li, J. & Julian, M.M. (2012). Developmental relationship at the active ingredient: A unifying working hypothesis of what works across intervention settings. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. 82(2) 157-66.

[14] Browne, C. H. (2014). Youth Thrive: Advancing healthy adolescent development and well-being. Washington D.C.: Center for the Study of Social Policy.

[15] Murphy, D., Bandy, T., Schmitz, H., & Moore, K. A. (2013). *Caring Adults: Important for positive child well-being.* Bethesda: Child Trends.

[16] Li, J. & Julian, M.M. (2012). Developmental relationship at the active ingredient: A unifying working hypothesis of what works across intervention settings. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry.* 82(2) 157-66.

Researchers have identified opportunities for adults in formal and informal roles; personal and relationship characteristics of adults who are effective in supporting healthy youth development; and kinds of support that adults may provide.

Adults' Roles
Virtually any adult can provide a developmentally positive presence. The literature identifies effective roles for "natural" and "informal" mentors, [17] as well as those who take on a formal mentorship role. [18, 19,20,21,22] A natural mentor is any adult who the youth themselves selects, who is consistently accessible, who spends time purposefully developing a supportive relationship with the young person[23]. Likewise, researchers have examined specific roles for parents, teachers, youth workers, coaches, healthcare providers, faith leaders, and others in supporting healthy development for youth,

acknowledging that different relationships offer different kinds of support, [24] and that more types of relationships offer more sources of support. [25]

- **Parents and family members:**
Parents play an enormous role in endowing children and youth with qualities and skills that protect them from risks. A national school survey of 90,118 middle and high school students found that parent and family connectedness were protective against numerous health risk behaviors. [26] When youth feel connected to parents and perceive that they care, they report fewer high risk behaviors, including high risk sexual behaviors. [27,28] Interventions aimed at improving parent-child relationships prevent many risky behaviors, [29] especially when they emphasize positive communication. [30] Extended family members, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and others are similarly strong sources of connection for youth. [31]

[17] Dang, M. T., & Miller, E. (2013). Characteristics of natural mentoring relationships from the perspective of homeless youth. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing,* 26(4), 246-253

[18] Change, E., Greenberger, E., Chen, C., Heckhausen, J., & Farruggia, S. (2010). Nonparental adults as social resources in the transition to adulthood. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 20(4), 1065-1082.

[19] Greenberter, E., Chen, C., & Beam, M. (1998). The role of "very important" non parental adults in adolescent development. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 27(3), 321-343.

[20] DuBois, D., & Silverthorn, N. (2005). Natural mentoring relationships and adolescent health: Evidence from a national study. *American Journal of Public Health*, 95(3), 518-524.

[21] Haddad, E., Chen, C., & Greenberger, E. (2011). The role of important non-parental adults (VIPs) in the lives of older adolescents: A comparison of three ethnic groups. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence,* 40(3), 310-319.

[22] Hurd, N., & Zimmerman, M. (2010). Natural mentors, mental health, and risk behaviors: A longitudinal analysis of African American adolescents transitioning into adulthood. *American Journal of Community Psychology,* 46(1-2), 36-48.

[23] Zimmerman, M. A., Bingenheimer, J. B., & Behrendt, D. E. (2005). Natural Mentoring Relationships. In D. DuBois, M. Karcher, & M. Karcher, *Handbook of Youth Mentoring* (143-158). Sage Publications.

[24] Center for Promise. (2016). Don't Quit on Me: What young people who left school say about the power of relationships.

[25] Feeny, B., & Collins, N. (2014). A new look at social support: A theoretical perspective on thriving through relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 19 (2), 113-47.

[26] Resnick, M. D., Bearman, P. S., Blum, R. W., & Bauman, K. E. (1997). Protecting adolescents from harm: Findings from the national longitudinal study on adolescent health. *JAMA*, 278(10): 823-832.

[27] Ackard, D., Neumark-Sztainer, D., Story, M., & Perry, CL. (2006). Parent-child connectedness and behavioral and emotional health among adolescents. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 30(1):59-66.

[28] Jaccard, J., & Levitz, N. (2013). Parent-based interventions to reduce adolescent problem behaviors: New directions for self-regulation approaches. In G. Oettingen, & P. Gollitzer, *Self-regulation in Adolescence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[29] Ackard, D., Neumark-Sztainer, D., Story, M., & Perry, CL. (2006). Parent-child connectedness and behavioral and emotional health among adolescents. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 30(1):59-66.

[30] Jaccard, J., & Levitz, N. (2013). Parent-based interventions to reduce adolescent problem behaviors: New directions for self-regulation approaches. In G. Oettingen, & P. Gollitzer, *Self-regulation in Adolescence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[31] Gulliver, A., Griffiths, K. M, & Christensen, H. (2010).

• **Teachers and educators:** Beyond their role in supporting students to achieve positive academic outcomes such as high school graduation, and in cultivating "school connectedness," (another protective factor for youth), teachers and school staff play a significant role as adults who can establish and advance developmental relationships. While teacher relationships do not rate as highly as parent relationships in the hierarchy of where youth are most likely to seek help, positive relationships with teachers are highly correlated with positive outcomes and reduced risks for students. [32] Emotional and social support by teachers has been found to reduce peer victimization and bullying and reduce the emotional and behavioral issues that can result from negative peer interactions. [33]

• **Youth workers:** Much of the research about the roles' youth workers play as potential askable adults is found in the literature on Youth-Adult partnerships, discussed below. One study found that youth were more likely to seek help from youth workers than teachers and sought these individuals almost as frequently as parents.[34] In general, adults who hold formal roles in the lives of youth (coaches, youth group leaders, community program staff, etc.) have the same opportunities as parents and teachers to provide natural mentorship and serve as askable adults.

Types of Support
Youth-adult relationships that are effective in

> **From *Don't Quit on Me: What Young People Who Left School Say About the Power of Relationships*:**
>
> *"Supportive relationships can buffer the effects of adverse life experiences on leaving school and open the opportunity for youth to express their strengths. To access the support they need to stay in school and succeed in life, young people need both a stable relationship that serves as an anchor in their lives and a wider web of relationships.*
> (Center for Promise, 2016)

supporting healthy development have several defining qualities. Youth experience the greatest benefits when they have a variety of adults in different roles whose help they can seek for different needs.[35] While relationships matter the most, all relationships are not equally beneficial for youth. The existence and number of relationships (quantity); the depth, intimacy and frequency of the relationship (relationship structure); the source of the support (e.g., parent, teacher, coach, peer); and the quality of the relationships (relationship content) all affect the impact that social support can have on developmental outcomes. [36,37] In its work to improve high school retention for youth who have been in foster care, the Center for Promise identifies four domains of social support that are integral to youth development: 1) emotional support (comfort, caring, trust); 2) informational support (insight, advice, practical information); 3) appraisal (positive feedback, affirmation, constructive criticism); and 4) instrumental support (tangible resources such as providing transportation or making an introduction to a potential employer). [38]

Perceived barriers and facilitators to mental health help-seeking in young people: A systematic review. *BMC Psychiatry*, 10, Article ID 113.

[32]Sanders, J., Munford, R., & Liebenberg, L. (2016). The role of teachers in building resilience of at-risk youth. International *Journal of Educational Research*, 80: 111-123.

[33] Yeung, R., & Leadbeater, B. (2009). Adults make a difference: the protective effects of parent and teacher emotional support on emotional and behavioral problems of peer-victimized adolescents. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 38(1):80-98.

[34] Kaim, Z., & Romi, S. (2015). Adolescents at risk and their willingness to seek help from youth care workers. Children and Youth Services Review, 53:17-23.

[35] Ungar, M. (2013). The impact of youth-adult relationships on resilience. *International Journal of Child, Youth, and Family Studies,* 4(3):328-336.

[36] Center for Promise. (2016). Don't Quit on Me: What young people who left school say about the power of relationships.

[37] Feeny, B., & Collins, N. (2014). A new look at social support: A theoretical perspective on thriving through relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 19 (2): 113-47.

[38] Center for Promise, 2016.

Qualities and characteristics of adults who are "Askable"

Adults' individual characteristics such as patience, consistency, respectfulness, honesty, attentiveness, trustworthiness, as well as personal traits such as having a similar racial/ ethnic, sexual identity or other background as the young person contribute to establishing relationships that help young people thrive. [39,40,41] The adult's personality, having shared interests, and the length and amount of time a young person spends with an adult are also important facilitators of connection. [42] In interviews with African American teen girls, Greeson and Bowen found that trust, love and caring, and a feeling that is "like parent and child" are the qualities girls sought with natural mentors. [43] Girls also sought emotional support, informational support, and "appraisal support," in which natural mentors shared perspectives about how they might handle a similar situation.

Establishing and Building Trust

Consistent with the developing relationships model, how adults engage in relationship-building is important to establishing trust. Youth are most likely to seek help from and become engaged with adults whom they trust. Interviews with adolescents who participated in community youth programs found that relationships develop in stages, "with youth moving from a stage of suspicion and distrust, to a stage of facilitated contact, to a stage of meaningful connection." [44] Resulting relationships provided youth with access to adult resources such as information, assistance, exposure to adult worlds, support, and encouragement (key supports youth need, as described above)**.** A review of literature about trusted adult support found that access, emotional qualities, and functions of relationship (e.g. listener, inspirer, advisor) are critical categories when youth seek to build trust. [45] Effective approaches to building trust with youth include respecting youth; building rapport and "moments of connection;" being consistent; and occupying a nuanced adult role in youth's lives. [46,47] While these processes may look different in different kinds of relationships (e.g. parent-child versus coach-youth), trust formation is the precursor to the developmental benefits that youth may gain.

[39] Chang, E., Greenberger, E., Chen, C., Heckhausen, J., & Farruggia, S. (2010). Nonparental adults as social resources in the transition to adulthood. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 20(4), 1065-1082.

[40] Ahrens, K., et al. (2011). Qualitative exploration of relationships with important non-parental adults in the lives of youth in foster care. *Children and Youth Service Review*, 33(6): 1012-1023.

[41] Griffith, A. (2014). The formation of adolescents' trust in adult leaders at project-based youth programs. Dissertation.

[42] Futch Ehrlich, V. A., Deutsch, N. L., Fox, C. V., Johnson, H. E., & Varga, S. M. (2016). Leveraging relational assets for adolescent development: A qualitative investigation of youth-adult "connection" in positive youth development. *Qualitative Psychology*, 3(1):59-78.

[43] Greeson, J. K., & Bowen, N. K. (2008). "She holds my hand" The experiences of foster youth with their natural mentors. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 14(4): 1178-1188.

[44] Jarrett, R. L., O'Sullivan, P. J., & Watkins, N. D. (2005). Developing social capital through participation in organized youth programs: Qualitative insights from three programs. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33:41-55.

[45] Pringle, J., et al. (2019). Developing a taxonomy to characterise trusted adult support in the lives of adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence*, 76:30-36.

[46] Davis, C. (2016). A Study of Best Practices in Youth Engagement and Leadership Development. Human Service Collaborative, *Endowment for Health*.

[47] Griffith, A. (2014). The formation of adolescents' trust in adult leaders at project-based youth programs. Dissertation.

Connectedness

Connectedness between youth and adults has been shown to protect youth from numerous adverse outcomes. Markham et al. found that connectedness with family, parents, peers, schools, and communities are particularly protective in adolescent sexual and reproductive health domains.[48] The characteristics of effective parent-child connectedness substantially overlap with those needed for any adult-child connection, and emphasize the quality of the emotional bond, and the extent to which bonds are mutual and sustained. Determinants of positive parent-child connection include attachment/bonding, warmth/caring, cohesion (closeness and conflict), support/involvement, communication, monitoring/control, autonomy granting, and maternal/paternal characteristics. Notably, except for monitoring/control, autonomy granting, and parent characteristics, the same characteristics have been identified as drivers of strong relationships for any "connected" adult-child relationship. For all kinds of adults who provide natural mentorship, youth say that providing emotional support, cognitive guidance, positive feedback, and tangible assistance. Connection is found to be a mechanism for preventing risky youth behavior across racial,

ethnic, cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic characteristics.[49]

Communication

Effective communication between adults and youth is critical to building connection. Both how adults communicate with youth, and what they communicate about are important. Youth report that communication from adults (and particularly parents) about their own values and using accurate information are important dimensions in promoting positive behaviors.[50,51] A literature review of interventions to improve parental communication with adolescents about sex found that across a dozen studies, parents who participated in a program to improve communication skills increased the frequency, and improved the quality, intentions, comfort, and self-efficacy for talking about sexuality with teens.[52] The study found that these factors also

[48] Markham, C. M., et al. (2010). Connectedness as a predictor of sexual and reproductive health outcomes for youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 46(3 Suppl):S23-S41.

[49] David-Ferdon, C. et al. (2016). A comprehensive technical package for the prevention of youth violence and associated risk behaviors. *Division of Violence Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,* Atlanta.

[50] Klein, J., et al. (2005). Evaluation of the parents as primary sexuality educators program. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 37(3 Suppl):S94-9.

[51] Markham, C. M., et al. (2010). Connectedness as a predictor of sexual and reproductive health outcomes for youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 46(3 Suppl):S23-S41.

[52] Akers, A. Y., Holland, C. L., & Bost, J. (2017).

have relevance for educators, healthcare personal, and youth workers. Importantly, parent communication and connectedness have been found to reduce risks for dating violence, including in minority populations.[53] High levels of communication with mothers and/or fathers is associated with lower rates of victimization among male and female young adults. Askable adults are equipped to talk about sex and sexuality with youth. Based on their survey of 3,000 high school and college aged youth, the *Making Caring Common* survey recommends that adults talk with teens about love; help teens understand differences between mature love and other forms of intense attraction; guide young people in identifying healthy and unhealthy relationships; and talk about what it means to be an ethical person.[54]

"Askable" program models
Beginning with the *Plain Talk* program, there are many programs, curricula, and intervention approaches that prepare adults to become "askable." Because Askable Adults interventions were originally developed to reduce pregnancy risks and other risks related to adolescent sexual health, most of the program models remain focused on communication about sexual health and sexuality topics. In the twenty years since the *Plain Talk* program was initiated, prevention practitioners have updated and expanded the topics that are covered. More recent interventions using an Askable Adults framework have been designed to reduce HIV/AIDS and/or sexually transmitted infection risks and to include talking about LGBTQI identities, experiences, and sexual health concerns. A Google

search of "Askable Adult" produces numerous workshops, presentations, and resource handouts generated by local organizations, health agencies, and educational programs. Most of these used some or all of the Plain Talk program framework, although many only borrowed the name "Askable Adults" and appear to use home grown content that differs from the original *Plain Talk* askable adults approach.

Evaluations of askable adult programs have identified several significant results for these interventions:
• Parents are more likely than professionals to introduce sexuality topics for discussion;[55]
• Professionals have not identified those community resources that would be most helpful to them in working with parents around sexuality issues and concerns;[56]
• When sexuality topics are discussed, the most common subjects are the changing roles of men and women, love and marriage;[57]
• Parents and professional prevention educators indicate a desire for more education and training to become "askable adults."[58]
• Parents need opportunities to learn about how to provide sexual health information to adolescents;[59]
• The combination of communication with a knowledgeable adult about sexuality together with access to contraceptives is associated with changes in teens' sexual health knowledge and behavior, and can be effectively addressed at the community-level;[60]
• Youth who engage with both "askable

Interventions to Improve parental communication about sex: A systematic review. *Pediatrics,* 127(3):494-510.
[53] Kast, N., Eisenberg, M., & Sieving, R. (2016). The role of parent communication and connectedness in dating violence victimization among Latino adolescents. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence,* 31(10):1932-1955.
[54] Weissbourd, R., Ross Anderson, T., Cashin, A., & McIntyre, J. (2017). The Talk: How adults can promote young people's healthy relationships and prevent misogyny and sexual harassment. Cambridge: *Making Caring Common Project*, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

[55] Dean, S. A., & Hrnyak, J. M. (1982). Are parent educators and trainers helping parents to become "Askable"? *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, 41-43.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Kyman, W. (1995). The first step: Sexuality education for parents. Journal of Sex Education and Therapy, 21(3): 153-157.
[60] Grossman, J. B., Walker, K. E., Kotloff, L. J., & Pepper, S. (2001). Adult Communication and Teen Sex: Changing A Community. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

parents" and "askable adults" have the most positive outcomes. Training adults who are parents and adults who are not parents increases the options youth have to select which adults to reach out to for different needs at different times.[61]

- Adults can effectively receive education and training to improve their skills for communication and connection via in-person single and multi-session workshops, worksite-based programs, online learning programs[62,63].

Askable Adult Program Models
Some programs and interventions that seek to prepare adults for roles that convey health risk information, support, and guidance to youth include:

- *Plain Talk*[64]
- *Parents at Primary Sexuality Educators* Program[65]
- *Talking to Parents About Adolescent Sexuality*[66]
- *Prime Time*[67]
- *Talking Parents, Healthy Teens*[68]

- *ReachOut Parents*: a multicomponent online program targeting parents to improve youth mental health outcomes.[69]

Youth-Adult Relationships in Vulnerable Youth Populations
Youth of color, youth who identify as LGBTQ, youth living in poverty, and other groups of vulnerable youth have all been found to benefit from strong positive relationships with adults. As Ungar's reflection on the literature of youth resilience describes, for youth with the fewest resources, engagement may influence their life trajectories more than for youth with greater access to supports. The benefits of youth-adult partnerships are realized for marginalized youth when specific conditions that promote interactions that contribute to resilience are created.[70] Research on the role of relationships with adults for youth of color, foster and homeless youth, and LGBTQ youth all find that these populations have higher risks of adversity, and therefore, can substantially benefit from interventions that prioritize supporting healthy relationships with adults.

About Youth-Adult Partnership and Youth Engagement approaches

"Youth-Adult Partnership" and youth engagement constructs are related to, but distinct from, askable adult literature. These constructs endeavor to understand the mechanisms of "connection" within the Positive Youth Development framework to build protective factors and reduce risks. The intended outcomes

[61] Ibid.

[62] Schuster, M. A.,et al. (2008). Evaluation of Talking Parents, Healthy Teens, a new worksite-based parenting program to promote parent-adolescent communication about sexual health: randomized controlled trial. *BMJ*, 337:a308.

[63] Cairns, K., Potter, S., Nicholas, M., & Buhagiar, K. (2018). Development of ReachOut Parents: a multicomponent online program targeting parents to improve youth mental health outcomes. Advances in Mental Health, 1:55-71.

[64] Douglas, E. (1998). Plain Talk: The story of a community-based strategy to reduce teen pregnancy. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation.

[65] Klein, J., et al. (2005). Evaluation of the parents as primary sexuality educators program. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 37 (3 Suppl)S94-9.

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[69] Cairns, K., Potter, S., Nicholas, M., & Buhagiar, K. (2019). Development of ReachOut Parents: a multicomponent online program targeting parents to improve youth mental health outcomes. *Advances in Mental Health*, 1:55-71.

[70] Ungar, M. (2013). The impact of youth-adult relationships on resilience. *International Journal of Child, Youth, and Family Studies*, 4(3):328-336.

of Youth-Adult Partnerships and youth engagement approaches emphasize developing youth voice, leadership, self-advocacy, and change-making skills. These interventions may occur at the individual, relationship, or community level. In many cases, these interventions focus on developing both positive youth-adult relationships, and adults' roles in cultivating a youth peer group culture that reinforces their engagement, voice, and leadership. From this literature, information about how adults can effectively engage with youth is relevant in thinking about the nature of adult-youth relational dynamics, and prioritizing authenticity in relationships. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative[71] defines authentic youth engagement as follows:

Youth engagement has been defined as "young people who are actively and authentically involved, motivated, and excited about an issue, process, event or program." Authentic youth engagement can best be described by focusing on the experiences of young people when they are engaged:

- They are respected, valued, and trusted and they feel appreciated, safe, and comfortable.
- They feel they are working in an environment that facilitates their engagement, and they are involved in a meaningful way as teachers as well as students.
- Their voices are being heard and treated as worthwhile.
- They are given the opportunity to be involved and make decisions, gain leadership skills, and see their ideas realized.
- They are able to participate in the social aspects of their involvement.
- They see change and progress happening as a result of their contributions.
- They are in a space where they have ownership and control in decision making processes.

This framework illuminates how youth engagement differs from the work of creating askable adults. Most askable adult interventions function on a one-to-one scale, in the way that formal mentoring relationships do. Through Youth-Adult Partnerships, desirable outcomes might include that an individual or group of youth leads a community prevention campaign, improves team performance, or takes leadership on a civic issue. Both Youth-Adult Partnerships and askable adult strategies have the strongest success when the adult establishes "a more equal relationship with the youth they are trying to engage,"[72] however equality is not equivalent to trust. Adults can be supportive within the naturally hierarchical roles of "parent," "teacher," or "mentor."

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[71] Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. (2012). Issue Brief #3, Authentic Youth Engagement: Youth-adult partnerships. St. Louis: *Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative*.

[72] Ungar, M. (2013). The impact of youth-adult relationships on resilience. *International Journal of Child, Youth, and Family Studies*, 4(3):328-336.

Additional literature about youth engagement and Youth-Adult Partnerships

The following resources were reviewed and specifically address youth-adult partnerships and youth engagement efforts.

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Davis, C. (2016). A Study of Best Practices in Youth Engagement and Leadership Development. Human Service Collaborative, Endowment for Health.

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Summary: An Askable Adults Theory of Change

"Askable Adults" Framework: Establishing Developmental Relationships with Youth