

## **It's Our Health: Teens included, respected and involved.**

By Erin Findaly, Patti Melanson, RN, and Jason Risley

Involve everyone in the decision-making process and they will feel included. Treat everyone like an equal and they will feel respected. Give everyone a voice and they will speak.

These are the principles that guide the Teen Health Centre at J.L. Iisley High School in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This approach is what we call youth-driven - teens identify their health needs and work with the Nurse Coordinator to address those needs. For the past three years, the Nova Scotia Department of Health has provided ongoing funding for the Centre, which provides teens with a safe, confidential place where they can get support and education on health issues of concern to them.

One of the health issues we have been addressing is violence in society. We formed a Students Against Violence Committee. This committee participated in the Purple Ribbon fundraising campaign against violence (with proceeds going to transition houses in Nova Scotia), produced a statement on tolerance that was adopted by the students' council and held a workshop on dating violence.

We believe the youth-driven philosophy of the Centre is the key to its success. As one student said, "If we were not involved in the Centre, we would feel that it was something that [adults thought] would be good for us?" However, living out this philosophy is a big challenge because it is at odds with the typical youth-adult relationships in our society~ Traditionally, youth have not been respected or listened to, and their solutions have not been given proper consideration.

Youth need to take up the challenge presented to them:

- Take the initiative and go with it. We have to show we are responsible if we are to overcome the negative stereotype of irresponsibility~ It takes a great deal of time and trust to believe that our voice is being listened to and that we are not being patronized or seen as having hidden agendas. Being involved with the Board of Directors and the Teen Advisory Committee are ways we have proven our commitment and have also gained leadership skills and confidence.

Sometimes the youth-driven philosophy is challenged -whether by our peers not taking it seriously or by adults trying to take control. Sometimes it is difficult working with such a diverse group of students and adults. In times of difficulty; we find it helpful to go back to our basic principles for guidance. Here are a few tips for adults working to empower youth:

- Look at issues of power and control in your own life.
- Step back, listen to youth and keep your own power **in check**.
- Respect their viewpoint.

- Educate other staff and adults on the importance of working with youth on their issues.
- Remember, youth are volunteers juggling the demands of school, jobs, social life and, in some cases, parenting. Some things may not get done, or may not get done to your standards. That's okay.

The experiences of the Teen Health Centre and Red Door Adolescent Health and Support Centre in Kentville are described in a guidebook called *A Working Guide to Establishing Community-based Youth Health and Support Centres*.

Limited copies are available free of charge from Heather Young, Director, Public Health Services, Nova Scotia Department of Health, 1600 Bedford Highway, 3rd Floor, Bedford, NS, B4A 1E8.

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