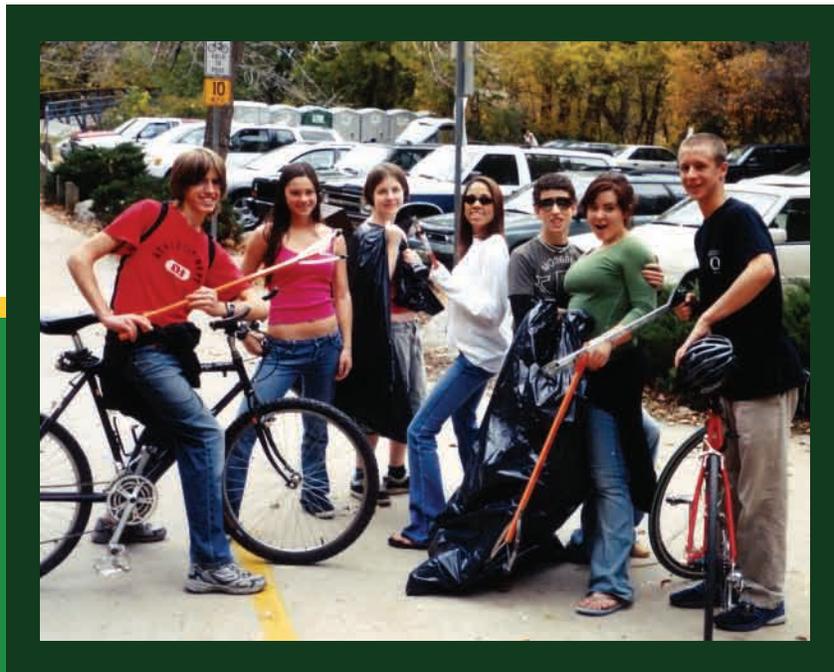


# Building Connections

Recommendations for the Boulder Valley  
to Help Teens Live Happier, Healthier Lives



Findings and Strategic Priorities from  
the Boulder Valley Youth Risk Behavior  
Community Engagement Process

**Thank you to the steering committee:**

Christina Suarez, Boulder Valley School District ; Lisa Cech, Boulder Valley School District; Leisha Conners Bauer, Boulder County Prevention Connection; Cameron Boswell, Teens Inc.; Kristin Aslan, Project YES; Beverly Alexander, Boulder County Public Health; Alice Swett, City of Boulder Youth Opportunities Program; Cindy Smith, City of Boulder School Based Services.

**Thanks also to the UCAR for their generous donation of a meeting space and event support staff for the Youth Summit.**

**Finally, a huge thank you to the many volunteers without whom we could not have completed the process.**

---

**For more information about the process contact:**

Cindy Smith  
smithc@bouldercolorado.gov  
303-441-4045

**For more information about the YRBS go to:**

<http://www.co.boulder.co.us/health/HP/data/youth/yrbs.htm>

**or contact:**

Leisha Conners Bauer  
lconnersbauer@co.boulder.co.us  
303-441-3839

# Building Connections

---

**Recommendations for the Boulder Valley  
to Help Teens Live Happier, Healthier Lives**

Findings and Strategic Priorities from  
the Boulder Valley Youth Risk Behavior  
Community Engagement Process

Sponsored by the City of Boulder, Boulder Valley  
School District and Boulder County

**Prepared by Conocer**

**June 2006**

# Table of Contents

---

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Perspectives from the Community</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Youth</b>	<b>4</b>
Youth Perspectives on Youth Happiness, Health & Safety	<b>4</b>
Youth Ideas for Building Connections	<b>6</b>
<b>Parents</b>	<b>7</b>
Parent Perspectives on Youth Happiness, Health & Safety	<b>7</b>
Parent Ideas for Building Connections	<b>8</b>
<b>Providers</b>	<b>9</b>
Provider Perspectives on Youth Happiness, Health & Safety	<b>9</b>
Provider Ideas for Building Connections	<b>10</b>
<b>Community Leaders</b>	<b>11</b>
Community Leader Perspectives on Youth Happiness, Health & Safety	<b>11</b>
Community Leader Ideas for Building Connections	<b>12</b>
<b>Strategic Priorities</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Shift Community Values</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Address Priority Focal Areas</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Incorporate Components of Effective Action</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Opportunities for Community Action: What You Can Do!</b>	<b>17</b>

# Executive Summary

Adolescents in the Boulder Valley have an abundance of opportunities and assets. The school district is one of the top districts in the state, many families have sufficient resources to provide a high quality lifestyle, the surroundings are beautiful, and the social services infrastructure is strong. Youth in the Boulder Valley relish adolescence as a time they can enjoy new opportunities without shouldering the full responsibilities of an adult, and as a time to learn and grow.

However, data from the 2003 and previous Youth Risk Behavior Surveys show us that youth in the Boulder Valley struggle with the “growing pains” of the transition from childhood to adulthood. Many are overly stressed by managing competing expectations and responsibilities. Some experience depression, peer pressure, and harassment. Some engage in risky behaviors that are a threat to their happiness, health and safety.

In 2006 the City of Boulder, the Boulder Valley School District and Boulder County launched a community engagement process to better understand how youth are faring in the community and how the community can more effectively support youth and their families. The process included: a youth summit, focus groups with parents and community service providers, interviews with community leaders and a community summit.

The process was informed by the 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Survey. The survey, given every two years, gathered information from over 1000 randomly selected high school students from across the district. The survey revealed enlightening information about the happiness, health and safety of youth. To see a full copy of the report from the 2003 data and the early results from the 2005 data, please visit <http://www.co.boulder.co.us/health/HP/data/youth/yrbs.htm>. For more information on this report or the community process please contact 303-441-4045.

## Youth Happiness, Health, and Safety

Through the community engagement process these three issues of greatest concern emerged:

- ▶ Teen Mental Health and Suicide
- ▶ Substance Use and Abuse by Young People
- ▶ Harassment and Safety of Young People

## Teen Mental Health and Suicide

**Data —** In the 2003 YRBS, 23% of students felt sad or hopeless almost every day, for 2 weeks or more during the year preceding the survey. 18% seriously considered attempting suicide. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and not-sure youth (i.e. youth who are questioning their sexual orientation) (GLBNS) youth, reported depression and attempted suicides at nearly double the rates of their heterosexual peers, with 50% of GLBNS youth reporting feeling sad and hopeless and 44% actually attempting suicide.

**Youth & Community Input —** Youth participating in the youth summit prioritized stress and depression as the biggest concern and the issue needing the most community attention. Many youth feel like mental health and suicide are “taboo” topics and the seriousness of these issues is not appreciated by adults.

Parents similarly rank this as the issue of greatest concern, but talk about the issue as youth self-esteem. Youth and parents say mental health and suicide are issues that are not well understood and are very difficult to talk about. Providers and community leaders are particularly worried about the availability of services for youth with serious, diagnosable mental illnesses.

## Substance Use and Abuse

**Data —** 44% of youth drank at least 1 drink of alcohol on 1 or more of the 30 days preceding the survey. Nearly one-third, 30%, of students had 5 or more drinks of alcohol in a row, within a few hours, in the 30 days preceding the survey. 23% reported riding in a car with a driver who had been drinking, 1 or more times in the 30 days preceding the survey. 42% of students have ever used marijuana and 25% of students currently use marijuana, smoking marijuana 1 or more times in the 30 days preceding the survey.

**Youth & Community Input —** Youth participating in the summit say alcohol use is an embedded part of the high school culture in the Boulder Valley. Some youth say marijuana use is also part of the culture and is considered safer than drinking. Substance use is a major concern of parents and they sincerely struggle with how to address the issue with their children. All participants in the process acknowledge that the messages around substance use are confusing and at times contradictory. The general community sentiment is that the community must take a harm reduction and a use reduction approach to substance use.

All sectors of the community agree that binge drinking and drinking and driving are serious issues and pose great danger to youth and the entire community. Providers and community leaders also believe there needs to be increased focus on early identification of youth who are at risk for developing addictions and helping these youth get support before they get into trouble.

## Harassment and Safety

**Data —** Nearly 5% of high school students felt too unsafe to go to school on one or more of the 30 days preceding the survey. Of the youth who identified as Hispanic/Latino, 17.3% were harassed because of race or ethnic origin during the year preceding the survey, compared to 4.2% of those who identified as White. 28.5% of young women received unwanted

sexual comments during the year preceding the survey.

**Youth & Community Input —** Youth participating in the summit described harassment at the high school level as pervasive, hurtful and much more subtle than “bullying.” They say there is a general feeling that someone is “always out to get you” and that a lack of relationship and opportunities to get to know youth from different social and ethnic groups is the underlying cause of harassment. Parents worry about the impact of harassment on youth self-confidence and self-esteem. Providers and community leaders are deeply troubled by the amount of harassment and see the impact it has on youth.

## Strategic Priorities

Youth, parents, providers and community leaders believe that the risk behaviors of young people in the community are interconnected and related to underlying feelings of isolation and detachment among some youth and families in the Boulder Valley. Stronger connections between youth, between youth and their families, and among families within the community are critical in order to improve the happiness, health and safety of youth. The community engagement process identified three types of strategic priorities to strengthen these connections in the community.

## Community Values

The first set of strategic priorities identified through the community engagement process is the need to shift the community values of the Boulder Valley to demonstrate:

- ▶ Youth are valued as a positive and contributing force in our community.
- ▶ Resource investments are aligned with how much we say we value youth.
- ▶ Community structures and attitudes support healthy relationships with and between our youth.

## Priority Focal Areas

The second set of strategic priorities is actions that can be taken now to improve the happiness, health and safety of youth in the Boulder Valley. The five identified strategies are:

- ▶ Make sure all youth have access to meaningful programs and activities.
- ▶ Create support networks and discussion forums for parents.
- ▶ Build communication about and appreciation of youth depression and suicide.
- ▶ Reduce the impact of substance abuse on youth and on the community.
- ▶ Strengthen support for families during the middle school years.

## Components of Effective Action

The third set of strategic priorities identified key components that all ideas, strategies, and programs to support young people should incorporate. Effective programs will:

- ▶ Include youth in the design, implementation/management, and evaluation
- ▶ Create meaningful relationships between peers and between youth and adults
- ▶ Help youth connect to something outside of themselves
- ▶ Involve youth from diverse social and cultural groups
- ▶ Strengthen the relationship between youth and their families
- ▶ Be grounded in the reality of the lived experiences of youth

# Perspectives from the Community

## Youth

### Youth Perspectives on Youth Happiness, Health & Safety

A youth summit was held as part of the community engagement process to better understand the perspectives of young people about their health decisions and risk behaviors. Insights from the youth summit were also used to help shape the rest of the community engagement process.

The youth summit conversations focused on four overarching questions:

- ▶ What is it like to be a young person in the Boulder Valley?
- ▶ What is going on with youth health and risk behaviors?
- ▶ What health issues require the most attention?
- ▶ How can the community support young people?

The youth summit included approximately 115 high school students representing each of the public high schools in the Boulder Valley School District. The students were selected, with parent approval, on a somewhat random basis to ensure that those participating in the summit would reflect the demographics of the student population within the Boulder Valley School District. The conversations at the youth summit were held in small groups with trained facilitators.

### Key Headlines from the Youth Summit

**Young people in Boulder Valley feel incredible stress and pressure in their daily lives.** Many youth feel overwhelmed by stress and pressure and report just “keeping our heads above water.” They say is it very challenging to manage expectations about academic performance and that adults simply don’t understand the grade pressure they feel and the academic difficulty of high school. Most youth report feeling crunched for time - they don’t have enough time to do their school work, play sports or exercise, have a job and have any “down time.” Some feel financial pressure to have enough money to buy things others have. Others experience sadness and hopelessness and even contemplate suicide because they can’t handle everything in their lives.



**Many youth in the Boulder Valley feel like they live in an “unsafe” world.** Many youth report instances of harassment in their lives. They say the harassment is sometimes overt, but also is subtle and nuanced. Many youth feel harassed at school because of the social groups they belong to or because of their grade level. Some young women report receiving unwanted sexual attention and contact. Youth of color say they feel harassed because of their race or ethnicity and hear racist jokes made by peers. Many gay, lesbian, bisexual and questioning youth report verbal harassment and physical threats. Youth say that they at times even feel subtle harassment by teachers and administrators that make comments about particular youth or social groups, or respond with praise and punishments differently to different groups of

youth. Many youth acknowledge that alcohol and drugs are used to escape the pain caused by harassment.



### **Young people express a certain level of optimism and pleasure in their lives.**

Youth say they enjoy the new freedoms and opportunities that come with being in high school. However, they also relish the idea that they don't have to manage all of the responsibilities that adults have to manage. They recognize that some of the challenges they face are just part of growing up and finding one's identity and that "figuring yourself out" is one of the greatest joys and challenges of being a young person. Youth also see their high school years as a time when they can make some mistakes and grow from them. As one youth said, "you can screw up BIG, but it is okay as long as you learn from it."



### **Some young people believe they can make a difference, however overcoming stereotypes about youth is a major challenge.**

Many young people believe they have the power to change how the future could be. They have the unique ability to still dream and have high goals. They believe rebellious minds allow for greater ideas to be explored. Young people also report feeling like adults don't take them seriously, that they have to work hard to gain trust from adults. Other youth are more resigned and pessimistic about their ability to change the world they live in.



### **Meaningful relationships with family, friends and intimate partners are critically important to youth.**

These relationships also bring much angst and stress to the lives of young people. Youth report that as they get older the relationships they have with others become more complex and rewarding. Most youth report they appreciate their family relationships and enjoy having "good friends." They also say that intimate relationships are

important aspects of a fulfilling life. However, managing different expectations between family and friends, negotiating complex social scenes at school, and peer pressure to fit in causes a lot of stress as well. Some use alcohol and drugs to ease social interactions or equate being sexually active with maturity.



### **Young people are impacted by societal values and stereotypes and messages in the media.**

Youth feel the impacts of racism, sexism, and classism. They report they feel the pressure of stereotypes and messages in the media such as: "people who drink are happy", "women should be thin" and "people of color are more likely to be violent". They say that sex and alcohol are glorified in the media and that issues of sadness and depression are rarely addressed.



### **Many young people think of happiness over health and safety.**

For many youth being happy is more important than being healthy and safe, although some believe that being healthy is important on the path to happiness. Youth do make the connection between stress, drinking, smoking, sleep deprivation, poor eating habits and unhealthy relationships and their health. However, the drive to be happy, to have fun, and to fit in is so important that sometimes youth make unhealthy and unsafe decisions.



### **Young people identify Sad and Hopelessness/Suicide, Alcohol Use/ Drinking and Driving and Harassment/ Safety at School/Violence as the top three issues that need attention to help them lead happier, healthier, safer lives.**

Youth say that many of the risk behaviors identified in the survey are interrelated. Feelings of sadness and hopelessness, navigating the complex social scene at high school, and coping with the effects of harassment lead youth to use alcohol, and drugs, and to engage in unhealthy sexual relations. Community support and new resources to help youth and their families address

these issues in their lives, change the high school environment and provide substance-free recreation opportunities will go a long way in helping youth lead happy, healthy and safe lives.

## Youth Ideas for Building Connections

Youth who participated in the summit offered five broad ideas for how the community can offer support to youth. They stressed that all approaches must include youth leadership in their design and implementation.

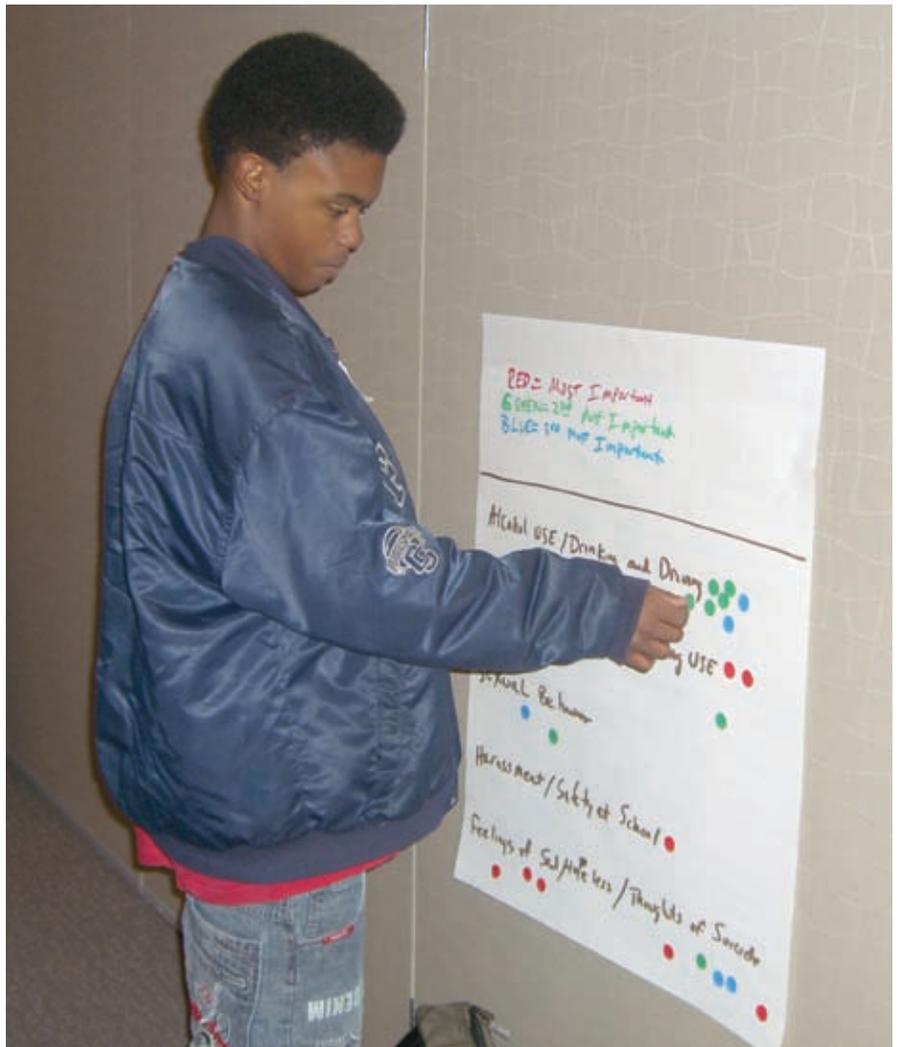
**Address isolation and stress as the core issues underlying risk behaviors, not just the behaviors themselves.** Youth believe that parents and the broader community must recognize isolation and stress as major issues for youth in the Boulder Valley. Youth truly believe that the amount of sadness, suicide, alcohol and drug use, and unsafe sexual activity would decrease if youth in the community felt more connected to each other and to the adults in their lives.

**Create opportunities for youth to talk openly about their experiences and their feelings.** Youth desire conversations with non-judgmental adults who will not “freak out” or start a sermon. Many youth are not able to have this type of conversation with their parents, teachers, administrators and other adults.

Some believe they might be able to have this type of conversation with young adults such as college aged youth, siblings or “cool” older adults.

## Build community understanding about teen sadness/hopelessness and suicide.

Youth report feeling most concerned about and least equipped to deal with sadness and suicide. Youth say that the community needs to open up the conversation about this “taboo” topic. The entire community – youth, families and schools – need basic information and tools to start the conversations. Youth say, “depression is scary because it is not so obvious and we don’t know how to solve it,” and suggest, “even posters on the wall could help.”



◆

**Youth want more substance-free social activities in the community.**

Youth desire to have more substance-free recreation opportunities. They are interested in more fun, cheap, late night activities similar to activities that take place after prom.

◆

**Develop a more honoring and inclusive environment in the schools and throughout the community.**

Youth want to be part of a more honoring and inclusive environment. Youth believe a chance to develop real relationships between youth of different social groups, grades, races, and sexual identities will help the groups be more tolerant of one another. Youth desire a more consistent approach to harassment from administrators and teachers and want to be in a school environment where single students or groups of students are neither harassed by teachers and administrators nor treated preferentially.

**Parents**

**Parent Perspectives on Youth Happiness, Health & Safety**

---

Four focus groups with parents of teens in the Boulder Valley were held as part of the YRBS community engagement process. Additionally, many of the providers and community leaders involved in the process shared their perspectives on these issues both as parents and as professionals. Highlights from the parent perspective include:

◆

**Parents worry first and foremost about their children’s self-esteem.**

Parents see isolation, substance use, peer pressure and harassment as major threats to their children’s self-esteem. They recognize that youth today face a variety of pressures and see the impact of

these pressures on their children. Many parents, however, do not feel that they have enough information about teen mental health and how to recognize signs of serious trouble. Some say they feel “disconnected and naïve” when it comes to engaging with their children about their mental health.

◆

**Parenting an adolescent requires a different set of parenting skills.**

Many parents say they felt well-informed about the developmental stages of young childhood and were comfortable with their parenting skills when their children were young. Parenting an adolescent requires a different set of skills, which many parents do not feel they fully understand or have mastered. Additionally, parents feel less clear about the developmental stages of adolescence and “what is normal for a teen.”

◆

**Parents sincerely struggle with how to approach substance use.**

Many parents are unsure about the best approach to take regarding setting expectations and limits for their children regarding substance use. Many recognize that alcohol is a part of the high school culture and they feel conflicted between expecting their children to abstain or guiding them to learn to drink responsibly. Parents do feel strongly that parents should never provide alcohol to other youth and that individuals and establishments that let youth access alcohol should face legal consequences. Parents also worry about drinking and driving and drug use because of the potential for harm to their children and others in the community and the long-term impacts from a drinking and driving accident or the legal consequences of being caught using alcohol or drugs.

◆

**Harassment is a real issue for youth in the community.**

Many parents believe that harassment is at its worst in middle school and that the more subtle nature of harassment at the

middle and high school levels is vicious and has a tremendous impact on youth self-esteem and happiness.



**Parents' self-esteem and sense of efficacy is connected to their children's successes and struggles.** Parents participating in the focus groups said it can be difficult to separate the successes or challenges their children experience from their own self esteem. They say when a child struggles, parents can sometimes get caught up in evaluating themselves as parents instead of focusing on how to best support their child.

## Parent Ideas for Building Connections

---

Parents offered seven ideas for ways to improve support for youth and their families and build greater connections in the community:

**Focus on developing youth self-esteem.** Efforts should be made to support youth self-esteem by keeping youth connected to meaningful activities, helping them manage peer pressure, and reducing harassment.



**Create networking opportunities for parents to talk about the challenges of parenting.** Parents feel isolated. They are hungry for opportunities to talk with other parents in a non-judgmental setting about how to manage the many challenges of parenting a pre-teen and teenager.



**Provide education and parenting resources about key issues, especially teen depression.** Parents feel they lack education and resources about many of the key issues they must manage as parents of an adolescent. Many parents want more information about key issues such as depression and substance use.



## Providers

### Provider Perspectives on Youth Happiness, Health & Safety

The community engagement process included two focus groups with youth service providers that work directly with youth as program leaders, interventionists, or counselors. These conversations revealed three important themes:

**The YRBS data is consistent with their experiences, and may be low for some risk behaviors.**

Many providers thought the data reported through the YRBS was consistent with the behaviors and experiences of youth they work with. Some believed that the data on marijuana use in particular seemed low. Participants cite an unusual permissiveness in the Boulder Valley as the reason for high use, saying, “pot is not considered a drug in parts of this community.” Other substances that are being abused include: prescription pain medications, anti-attention deficit disorder medications, cocaine and methamphetamines, especially in East County.

**The mental health data from the survey also seemed to reflect the experiences of the youth with whom providers work.**

Providers are deeply concerned about this issue and say they are seeing too many kids that are, “just giving up – they have no hope.”

**Multiple factors underlie risk behaviors.**

As professionals trained in mental health, health care, education and other professions dedicated to working with youth, providers identified five different aspects that underlie youth risk behaviors:

**Support parents with a range of tools to talk with youth about substance use.**

Parents recognize that there are many approaches to talking with their children about substance use. They would like a range of tools and ideas so that they can choose the most appropriate approach for their family.

**Enforce stronger legal consequences for providing alcohol to minors.**

Many parents support an increased community focus on cracking down on establishments and other parents that provide alcohol to minors. Some suggest there needs to be stronger communications from the schools about the legal consequences of providing substances to youth.

**Create opportunities for parents to connect with their kids.**

Parents want more opportunities to connect with their kids and other families in their schools and neighborhoods. Group activities such as movie clubs, book clubs, etc. are welcomed.

**Start support for youth and families when children are pre-teens.**

Parents acknowledge that the middle school years are a major transition for youth and for parents and that support for families with children in middle school is critical.



- ▶ **Internal** - Enormous pressure youth feel coupled with inadequate coping skills, an inability to plan for the long-term (6 months) and the transition from childhood to adulthood in a time when youth are not sure they like the world they see as adults.
- ▶ **Home Environment** - Unstable homes, over-permissive parents, parents that are using all their energy to simply pay the bills and help their families get by.
- ▶ **School Environment** - School size, especially during the critical transition from elementary school to middle school, harassment and threats of violence.
- ▶ **Local Community** - Community and government systems that do not work well for families and operate in a punitive rather than supportive manner.
- ▶ **Society At-Large** - Societal oppression of youth, youth of color and youth of varying sexual orientations. Societal pressures to engage in risk behaviors namely drinking and sex.



**There are several keys to serving youth effectively.** It takes special personalities and special attention to serve youth effectively. During the conversations with providers they shared that to serve youth effectively programs must:

- ▶ Be grounded in respect, inclusivity and honor all aspects of youth and their experiences.
- ▶ Include relationship-building between youth, either formally as mentors, or informally.
- ▶ Have youth in positions of power with real responsibilities and access to the larger community power structure.
- ▶ Be open to conversations about all topics, even the challenging ones such as depression, sex, racism, elitism and homophobia.

## Provider Ideas for Building Connections

---

Community service providers focused on five ideas for greater community support for youth and their families:

**Shift the community mindset to expect youth to be a positive force in the community.** The community should expect youth to contribute and bring their energy and assets to help support the community. All too often youth are viewed negatively and as a drain on the community.



**Focus efforts to stabilize families first.**

Youth will benefit more from services and support when they have stable family situations. To have the most impact, investments in the community should support family stabilization as well as youth development.



**Make services more accessible and family-friendly.** Providers feel that there needs to be a shift in municipal and county social services from punitive and anti-family to collaborative and supportive of families. Some ways to do this include reducing the restrictions on who can be served by programs, less “silencing” of services, and a real effort to make services linguistically and culturally appropriate.



**Recognize the impact of school size and the availability of supportive adults to youth.** Many providers believe that large high schools create a challenge to helping youth develop intimate relationships with peer groups and with caring adults. The community must recognize this issue and do what it can to foster stronger relationships between youth and adults.



**Focus on supporting youth and families earlier, especially through the middle school years.** Experienced youth service providers believe that the transition from elementary school to middle school is a critical time in youth development when many youth begin to struggle and lose confidence. The community should invest in supporting youth and families through this challenging transition.

# Community Leaders

## Community Leader Perspectives on Youth Happiness, Health & Safety

---

The community engagement process included one-on-one interviews with 17 community leaders representing elected officials from municipalities across the community, leaders of municipal programs and non-profit service programs, law enforcement and the justice system, the faith and business community, and the school district. Below are the highlights from the conversations:

**Substance use and abuse is a major concern of community leaders.**

Community leaders are very concerned about the impact of substance use and abuse on youth and the entire community. Leaders worry that youth who use and abuse substances put themselves at risk for making unsafe and unhealthy choices that may have a lasting impact on their lives. Community leaders worry particularly about drinking and driving because of the potential for harm to both youth and other community members.



**Youth today face a complicated and challenging world and need community support.**

Community leaders recognize that youth today face a variety of challenges much earlier in life than past generations did. Mass media, more unsupervised time and the fast pace of life lead youth to experience more things and make more complex decisions than youth have had to in the past. Community leaders believe the community can play a role in supporting youth to meet these challenges, and in fact must play a role with youth whose families may be unstable or have limited resources.



**Community leaders don't believe there is adequate investment in youth.** Many community leaders cite the lack of adequate numbers of interventionists and counselors in the high schools as evidence of inadequate investments to support youth. Other examples include prohibitive costs to participate in some programs in the community and recent cutbacks in youth employment programs and service learning opportunities for youth.



◆  
**Youth who are connected to something have a better chance of thriving than youth who are isolated.** A variety of community leaders say that youth who participate in meaningful activities such as sports, drama, service learning, youth groups, volunteer activities, etc. are less likely to engage in risk behaviors because they have a responsibility to something larger than themselves, and a connection to a peer group and to caring adults. Finding a way to connect all youth to some area of interest or program is critical to helping youth thrive.

◆  
**Families are the most critical support system for youth.** Community leaders believe that the first line of support for a young person should be their family, and that community investments should aim to support families and bridge divides between youth and families. Some leaders acknowledge that not all youth feel they can get support from their families and may need mentors and other avenues for support, but efforts should still be made to strengthen the family unit when possible.

## Community Leader Ideas for Building Connections

---

Community leaders identified five ideas for ways to build connections in the community to support youth and their families.

**Align actions and investments with how much we say we value youth.** Many community leaders identified a lack of alignment between the community rhetoric about how much the community values youth and the reality of the investments made by the community to support youth. Community leaders agree that more investments can and should be made to support youth and their families.

◆  
**Equip parents and youth with resources and communication skills for key issues.** Community leaders believe that many parents and other community members are unaware of the experiences of youth in our community, and that efforts must be made to increase awareness even though it may be difficult for some to accept that youth in our community are struggling. Following increased awareness, the community

can work to equip parents and youth with resources and communication skills to talk about key youth health issues.



**Support programs and places where youth can safely express themselves, be part of something meaningful, and build relationships with peers and caring adults.**

A connection to something can be the critical factor in helping a young person thrive and avoid some of the challenges of adolescence. The community should focus on making sure that all youth have the chance to find a connection with a program, a place, a team, or something positive. As one community leader aptly stated, youth need “space, projects and mentors.”



**Develop a coordinated strategy for early identification and prevention plans for youth deemed to be at a high risk of developing substance abuse issues or facing mental health challenges.**

Community leaders believe youth are well-served by the network of available municipal, county and community resources. However, there is a need for more early identification and prevention services for youth that are at particularly high risk of addiction or mental health issues.



**Support youth and families earlier.**

Community leaders agree with the sentiments of other sectors in the community that support for youth and families should start when youth are pre-teens. Community leaders recognize that many services fade away for youth and families around this time and that the feelings of isolation and disconnectedness begin.

# Strategic Priorities

When asked, “How can the community better support youth and families?” three strategic priorities for greater support emerged. Youth, parents, providers and community leaders believe that the risk behaviors of young people in the community are interconnected, and are related to underlying feelings of isolation and detachment among some youth and families in the Boulder Valley. The three strategies are linked by the goal of building stronger connections between youth, between youth and their families, and between families within the community.

## Shift Community Values

The first type of strategic priority identified through the community engagement process is the need to shift the community values of the Boulder Valley to really demonstrate that in the Boulder Valley:

- ▶ **We value youth as a positive and contributing force in our community.** **Some examples include:** Young people are explicitly included in community-wide needs assessments and planning processes. Specific efforts are made to incorporate youth input in the design of youth programs. Youth are given structured opportunities to lend their skills and insights for community benefit.
- ▶ **Our resource investments align with how much we say we value youth.** For example, ample funding is available for youth programs. Programs are well-staffed by adults who are invested in building authentic relationships with young people.
- ▶ **Our community structures and habits support healthy relationships with and between our youth.** This could range from people of all ages making eye contact with youth they encounter throughout the day, to businesses hiring young people and treating

their youth employees with proactive interest and respect, to ensuring that youth are explicitly included in community-wide events.

These broad community changes were identified as key factors to making a long-term difference in the happiness, health and safety of the youth in the community. These efforts will take time and will require changes in community priorities and how some community institutions operate. All government entities, the school district and community providers should strive to incorporate these values into their mission and core activities.

## Address Priority Focal Areas

The second set of strategic priorities is actions that can be taken now to improve the happiness, health and safety of youth in the Boulder Valley. The five identified strategies are:

- ▶ Make sure all youth have access to meaningful programs and activities.
- ▶ Create support networks and discussion forums for parents.
- ▶ Build communication about and appreciation of youth depression and suicide.
- ▶ Reduce the impact of substance abuse on youth and on the community.
- ▶ Strengthen the support for families during the middle school years.
- ▶ During the Community Summit, participants divided into workgroups to develop action ideas for each of these key strategies. Each group consisted of youth, community members, and community leaders as well as a professional in the field that will provide general support to the group over time.

Below are the initial action ideas from each of the workgroups.

## **Make Sure All Youth Have Access to Meaningful Programs and Activities**

- ▶ “Survey” youth to better understand the types of programs and activities they would like to have access to.
- ▶ Spread the word about the need for meaningful programs for youth.
- ▶ Learn from existing successful programs.
- ▶ Educate youth about existing programs and opportunities.
- ▶ Address issues of access to programs, especially related to cost and transportation and stratification.

## **Create Support Networks and Discussion Forums for Parents**

- ▶ Design an interactive web space for parents to network and access resources.
- ▶ Develop a branding/social marketing campaign to motivate parents to more actively engage their children about their happiness, health and safety.
- ▶ Expand the Parent Engagement Network.
- ▶ Support parent connections at the individual school level.
- ▶ Encourage city and county government to take a lead role in supporting parents.
- ▶ Support local business to develop family-friendly normative business practices.

## **Build Community Awareness About and Appreciation of Youth Depression and Suicide and other “Taboo” Topics**

- ▶ Raise public awareness about teen mental health.

- ▶ Recruit and train groups of non-judgmental adults who can talk with teenagers about their stress, their sadness and their depression.
- ▶ Implement the “Breaking Down the Walls” program in the entire community.
- ▶ Enhance the focus on mental health issues in the schools.
- ▶ Improve the sensitivity and understanding about sexual identity among all providers that interact with youth.

## **Reduce the Impact of Substance Abuse on Youth and on the Community**

- ▶ Create more substance-free venues where youth can gather and youth and families can gather to recreate and spend quality time together.
- ▶ Increase parent education and discussion opportunities.
- ▶ Make alcohol harder to obtain and make the consequences of providing alcohol to minors more severe.
- ▶ Increase the focus on substance abuse in the schools.
- ▶ Identify and enlist the support of influential teen leaders.

## **Strengthen Support for Families During the Middle School Years.**

- ▶ Provide support to youth and families with the transition from elementary school to middle school.
- ▶ Strengthen the relationship and lines of communication between parents and youth.
- ▶ Connect and expand programs that serve middle school aged children and their families.
- ▶ Design an interactive web space for parents to network and access resources.

Each group will meet again before the end of summer to further hone their ideas and develop action plans for their work. To find out more about joining a workgroup contact Alice Swett or Cindy Smith at the City of Boulder Youth and Family Services, 303-441-4045.

## Incorporate Components of Effective Action

---

The third set of strategic priorities identified key components that all ideas and programs to support young people should incorporate. These include efforts to:

- ▶ Include youth in the design, implementation/management, and evaluation
- ▶ Create meaningful relationships between peers and between youth and adults
- ▶ Help youth connect to something larger than themselves

- ▶ Involve youth from diverse social and cultural groups
- ▶ Strengthen the relationship between youth and their families
- ▶ Be grounded in the reality of the lived experiences of youth

As the workgroups, government agencies, service providers and individuals strive to implement the ideas generated from the community development process it is critical to incorporate these touchstones to every project or activity



# Opportunities for Community Action: What You Can Do!

The community engagement process identified specific ways individuals and different community sectors can take action to build connections with youth and families. These ideas create the opportunity for individuals and organizations to contribute to the broader community effort to build stronger connections in the community and improve the happiness, health and safety of youth. Each idea is followed by the strategic priority set to which it relates: **1** Shift Community Values, **2** Address Priority Focal Areas, and **3** Incorporate Components of Effective Action.

### Youth

- ▶ Reach out to caring adults – talk to parents about difficult issues, reach out to the interventionist at the schools, use teachers. **1 3**
- ▶ Get involved. **1**
- ▶ Mentor younger kids. **1**
- ▶ Be safe and responsible when you participate in high risk activities. **2 3**
- ▶ Be honest with yourself about your level of involvement in risky activities and the impact they have on your life. **2**

### Peers

- ▶ Be interested in each other, don't judge, listen, get involved. **3**
- ▶ Make it ok to go to a party with alcohol and not drink. **2**
- ▶ Stand up to harassment. **3**
- ▶ Be understanding and more tolerant. **2 3**
- ▶ Make it ok to talk about sadness. **2**

### Families

- ▶ Listen, accept, keep an open mind, support and trust youth. **1 2 3**
- ▶ Provide consistent messages about substance use. **2 3**
- ▶ Have conversations with youth, not sermons. **1 2 3**
- ▶ Teach tolerance. **1 3**
- ▶ Reach out and get involved with groups like parent discussion groups, church support groups, community groups. **1 2 3**

### Schools

- ▶ Create discrimination - free environments and provide more programs about understanding each other. **1 3**
- ▶ In addition to educating students, focus on linking youth with community resources. **1 2 3**
- ▶ Seek to engage parents at every opportunity through back to school night, parent-teacher conferences, parent groups, etc. **1 2 3**
- ▶ Fully implement the health curriculum in middle school and high school with adequate time for the subject and qualified teachers. **1 2 3**
- ▶ Ensure that all students have access to school-sponsored activities, resources, and supplies regardless of their ability to pay. **1 3**
- ▶ Provide opportunities for students to interact with peers from other schools. **2 3**

## Businesses

- ▶ Underwrite specific activities and programs such as anti-depression walk-a-thons, poster contests or public awareness campaigns. ① ②
- ▶ Employ youth as part-time employees or interns. ①
- ▶ Be family-friendly with normative business practices that support families. ② ③
- ▶ Recruit employees to participate in mentoring programs for youth. ① ③
- ▶ Use the Chamber of Commerce as a link between businesses and community agencies to broaden support for youth and families. ① ②

## Faith Communities

- ▶ Strengthen families through traditional congregation activities as well as new activities designed to bring teens and parents together. ① ② ③
- ▶ Develop youth leadership through mentorship, youth groups and leadership trainings. ③
- ▶ Educate parishioners about youth health and the YRBS. ① ② ③
- ▶ Start a youth pastors network. ①
- ▶ Recruit and train more caring, non-judgmental adults to participate with youth. ① ③
- ▶ Expand outreach to parents, create successful recreation opportunities for youth and serve diverse populations. ① ② ③
- ▶ Partner with other community entities to provide programs that engage you (i.e. poetry slams, service projects, recreation events, etc). Invite all youth to come. ② ③

## Community Agencies

- ▶ Align work with the recommendations contained in the YRBS report “Building Connections, An Action Plan for the Boulder Valley to Help Teens Build Healthier, Happier Lives”. ①
- ▶ Share assets with the community – space for meetings, facilitators for groups. ① ②

- ▶ Reach out to youth and make yourself attractive and available. ① ③
- ▶ Recruit and train more caring, non-judgmental adults to participate with youth. ② ③
- ▶ Incorporate support for parents into all programs that serve youth. ② ③
- ▶ Sponsor family oriented events. ② ③
- ▶ Develop volunteer opportunities and internships for youth and adults who wish to work with youth. ③
- ▶ Be more intentional, coordinate with other agencies, avoid overlap, don’t reinvent the wheel. Focus on developing services that fill the gaps. ③

## Government

- ▶ Support parents by serving as a model for the community with family-friendly work practices and non-discrimination policies. ① ② ③
- ▶ Increase investments in successful youth and family programs, transportation to enhance access to programs, recreation and library programs that serve youth. ① ②
- ▶ Keep the health of youth and the YRBS on the public agenda. ① ②
- ▶ Disseminate information contained in the YRBS report “Building Connections, An Action Plan for the Boulder Valley to Help Teens Build Healthier, Happier Lives” to all aspects of the community reached by government services. ① ② ③
- ▶ Enforce alcohol-related regulations and laws. ②
- ▶ Continue collaborative and coordinated efforts among governmental and community partners to address youth issues. ① ②
- ▶ Provide affordable family housing to decrease the negative impacts of multiple moves on low income youth. ① ② ③