

## The Seven Project Means Hope for Teens

Written by

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Because many of us were once teenagers, we rely on those past experiences to help us understand and cope with the behavior of today's teens. That works only to a point. While many of the problems that plagued our post-pubescent years are similar to those of our children, the scope, depth, and intensity varies significantly with the times.

The times greatly contribute to the evolution of common issues that often overwhelm, confuse, and misdirect young people - more today than ever before.

Most new-millennium parents simply can't relate to some of the behaviors that now constitute a teenager's world. Suicide, sex, substance abuse, bullying, violence, and a lack of positive moral compasses have morphed into huge problems that threaten this generation in far greater numbers and with far more serious consequences.

There have been plenty of programs to try to deal with some of these issues, but the problems are so pervasive and complex that their efficacy is practically nonexistent, at least on any measurable level.

It takes a deeper understanding of the psyche of teens to reach them on their level and cause a systemic change that redirects thought processes and motivates young minds to choose a different course. At the end of the day, that is what it is all about: choices.

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Fortunately, there is a project afoot that is attempting to address the more serious teenage issues, and it appears to be making some real headway. The Seven Project is a nationwide collaborative effort between Seven presenters and school administrations to reach out to juniors and seniors via customized assemblies with information concerning 12 topics chosen by school administrators. The messages are designed to get students' attention and redirect energies toward such things as character, coping skills, self-esteem, achievement, and a renewed sense of future.

Heath Adamson, who heads the Seven Project in Iowa, is 29 years old and recalls all too well the circumstances of his own life that contribute to his understanding and need to help teens realize that nothing is unredeemable, that forgiveness is real, and that the future does not have to be dictated by past indiscretions. "When I was younger, I made a lot of really poor choices - gangs, drugs and selling drugs, alcohol abuse, gang violence," Adamson explained. "A lot of my friends are in prison or committed suicide. It all comes down to choices. One of the key messages of the Seven Project is that choices are like seeds, and sooner or later we live off the fruit of the seeds we plant. At age 17, I did a 180 [degree] turnaround. I decided that I wasn't going to let other people and what they think control my destiny.

"The Seven Project is basically a national character-education school assembly. I am focused on Iowa. I grew up in Des Moines. The name comes from the issues that we deal with. Schools can pick up to six topics that include Abstinence, Anti-Violence, Choices, Dreams, Peer Pressure, Scholastic Achievement, Self-Respect, Substance Abuse, Suicide, Integrity, Tobacco, Coping, and Moral Clarity. We offer seven solutions of hope that affirm that their past does not need to determine their future. I am a firm believer in education and the pursuit of knowledge. But knowledge isn't enough. The kids also need wisdom, and wisdom comes from the character in our hearts."

According to Adamson, "Character, wisdom, and being who you are" define the core message that Seven is trying to impart next week, April 10 and 11, during its two-day speaker-driven campaign in seven area schools, including Assumption, West High School, Smart Junior High School, Bettendorf High School, North Junior High School, North High School, and Morning Star Academy.

Seven also offers "the Seven Project Discussion Guides to culminate the Seven Project experience by creating intensified discussions about student life. The activities and discussions in these guides are designed for use in single classroom settings or as entire school or community-wide campaigns. The Seven Project offers these guides as tools for use at the

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discretion of local school educators and administrators in part or entirety," according to its Web site for administrators at ( <http://www.thesevenproject.org> ). The site also features an interactive section for teens.

Thanks to the efforts of Lisa Ploehn and other community-minded colleagues, who worked tirelessly for two years to bring the Seven Project to the Quad Cities, at least seven area schools will participate April 10 and 11.

"I want kids to realize how the choices they make affect their lives and impact their futures," Ploehn said. "Also, I think it is really important for kids to understand that how they treat each other makes such a difference in how they feel about themselves. The Seven Project focuses on these type of esteem issues, among many others."

The Seven Project includes two morning assemblies, afternoon assemblies, and one evening assembly at Bettendorf High School. The evening assembly is open to the public, and all area students are encouraged to attend. This high-tech media event promises plenty of entertainment: performances by an award-winning teen hip-hop dance troupe from Kansas City, a \$20,000 half-court basketball shot competition, school dance competition, and prizes that include six iPods, 10 \$20 iTunes cards, and one Nintendo Wii. Heath will also relate his faith story to illustrate his own journey and renewed hope for a future where he matters and can make a difference.

According to Adamson, this current generation is suffering the worst self-esteem to date. While they have values, they lack a sense of worth and hope for meaningful futures. Such deeply ingrained pathos is a terrible threat to not just young individuals' futures, but also to our national well-being. Multitudes of dysfunctional families, along with many single-parent households, often fail to provide the necessary discipline that promotes stability, security, and healthy self-esteem. Interestingly, gang affiliation fills these needs in teens' lives. Gangs are highly structured, and feature rigid, well-defined, and absolute rules of conduct with severe consequences if not precisely followed, including a hierarchy that allows for advancement. Participation in a gang includes following the rules, which results in a sense of belonging that is missing within the family dynamic.

Compound this with acts by teens that they themselves consider unforgivable, regardless of how minor or serious in the larger scheme of things, and despair settles in. The Seven Project gets to the core of these issues and the feelings that prevent teens from dreaming and

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achieving. The dialogue is honest, unpretentious, and inclusive. In other words, it isn't one way. It is about interaction and restoring a sense of individualism to each person. Along with this sense of uniqueness, the message is about taking control of your own life and that destinies are made from all the choices we make along the way.

It is a message worth considering for all of us.