

Strength in Action: Supporting Our Nation's Most Vulnerable Youth Podcast Series

Episode: The Power of Peer Mentoring

[John Bollenbacher:] Welcome to Strength in Action: Supporting Our Nation's Most Vulnerable Youth, a podcast series by the Family and Youth Services Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This series is produced by FYSB's Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program, as part of The Exchange. I'm John Bollenbacher, a producer for The Exchange. Here in the podcast we talk with people implementing programs that prevent teen pregnancy and help prepare teens for adulthood. While overall teen birth rates are decreasing, we're not done yet. Teen births remain high among vulnerable youth. Today we're joined by Elycia Cook, and Elycia, why don't you tell us a little bit about the work that you're doing in Denver?

[Elycia Cook:] My name is Elycia Cook, and I'm the Executive Director of the nonprofit called Friends First. Friends First empowers and helps teens to have positive relationships and develop healthy life choices. Our main program is a peer-to-peer mentoring program called STARS, and STARS stands for Students Teaching About Relationships and Success. So basically, our staff mentors high school students using the curriculum STARS, and then, together, our staff and those high school students mentor lower-classmen in sixth to ninth grade. The core elements of STARS, is self-awareness, mentor life, and future focus. Self-awareness is knowing who you are, it's knowing your talents, your strengths. Future focus is understanding that everything you do, good or bad, has an impact on your future. And mentor life, you're always being mentored, and in return, you always mentor or give to someone else.

[John Bollenbacher:] So your mentoring component is a little unique compared to some of the other programs that we've been talking to. Can you tell us a little bit about why you decided to incorporate that into your programming?

[Elycia Cook:] There's a lot of evidence-based research about the power of peer mentoring. There are a lot of adult mentoring programs out there, but even in Colorado alone, there are over 1,300 kids waiting for a mentor, and that adult matching is difficult. People are getting more busy, there's less people qualified. I think I went to a mentoring conference last year, and even with some of the best background search and checking, over 7,000 people who applied to mentor didn't make the qualification. And for us, we saw an open door. Students want to give. The community service piece, you are having dual impact when you're using an older youth to a younger youth. They are available, they're around the same age, they understand the technology, they tend to connect better. And we also do more of a group mentoring approach, so it's usually our facilitator and then one high school student to every one to three middle school students, so it's not just one person's idea, you have a chance to connect with multiple people.

[John Bollenbacher:] I think the one thing that people don't understand is the impact it actually has on the mentors to do that kind of work. Can you speak a little bit around your experience about what kind of impact mentoring has on the people who are actually doing the mentoring?

[Elycia Cook:] Well, you know, what is it?—I don't know if it's an adage or something people say, but if you want to remember something, first you hear it, then you write it, then you learn it, then you do it yourself. And so, when the students themselves are going through those lessons, it's really becoming a part of who they are. That's probably where you see the most impact. A lot of our students go from mentee to mentor. So they can be with us as long as six years doing that, as well as they have their peer group—a real strong influence on them. They don't want to disappoint you. They are in our program for multiple years, and it's just a really strong connection, and honestly, that's where we see the most growth.

[John Bollenbacher:] So, listening to your description, it seems like positive youth development is a big part of your program. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

[Elycia Cook:] Well, we do a lot of things. We don't focus on the "what you should not be doing," we focus on the "what you should be doing." We do community service, we have our kids create PSA announcements, based on whatever, whatever the funding resources are, if it's abstinence funding, then the PSA announcement is around that. If it's drug and alcohol prevention, because we do have some of those grants, we talk about making positive career choices, we do a lot of college readiness, or if you don't want to go to college, other opportunities. There's a lesson that we do with healthy relationships. And we just really stay focused on the positive. We look at our kids from an asset-based model and not as a deficit-based. We don't focus on all the stats of becoming a teen mom, or a teen dad, and how terrible your life is going to be, we try to focus on how great your life can be, and how it's important to be a part—a giving part of our society and community.

[John Bollenbacher:] Yeah, and that's one of the things that we're trying to communicate in this new campaign, is that traditional pregnancy prevention is incredibly important, but we can also do other types of adult preparation programming, and it seems like you're doing that. Can you talk a little bit why you think it's so important to show the youth this kind of positive pathway forward and a positive future for themselves?

[Elycia Cook:] Well, if you were raised like me, I was raised in the inner city of Detroit. My mom was a teen mom when I was born—very, very poor area—and you don't see it around you. You can't be what you don't see, so for us we try to make sure our kids have lots of experiences. We try to take them out of our neighborhoods. It's interesting, we do a huge conference, a mentor training conference, and we do it on a college campus purposely. We started doing a local campus that's right in our city—how many students didn't even know was there, have never been outside of their neighborhood. So it is very important for us to paint a vision of what their future can be like. And not the ones they see on TV—a vision of working, normal people who are doing great things and are leading great lives.

[John Bollenbacher:] Can you drill down a little bit and tell us some more specifics about some of these programs that you've incorporated to show them a positive path forward, like financial literacy, or career in education, counseling?

[Elycia Cook:] Well, we have another teen pregnancy prevention grant, and we use Project AIM, it stands for Adult Identity Mentoring, and being able to see your positive future self, and that's with seventh graders. So in that lesson we do career exploration, where, you know, they try to match their career, and for the purpose of that lesson we make them choose one, and then we talk about what it takes to get there. In that lesson of AIM you have to plan a trip, and do a budget, and how to fit whatever trip

they plan to the career that they chose, the budget that they made, how they live their lifestyle, things like that. And once they choose that career, we help them make business cards, we do interviews with them, we write letters of recommendations for them.

[John Bollenbacher:] So the AIM program sounds really fascinating, and it must be great to be in that kind of a program. I'm sure you must've seen some youth that have really had life-changing experiences, or a lightbulb turn on.

[Elycia Cook:] Well, I'll tell you one story. We received a grant, oh, almost 5 years ago, and I taught a class about four years ago. This one student in particular, we did the class, it was great, she connected well, she connected with her career, and I was in a Walmart, oh, a little less than a year ago, and I knew this girl but I didn't know from where, so I went up and approached her, and she told me that that I taught her AIM class. She was in seventh grade then, she was in 11th grade now. I taught her AIM class, and we talked about it, and she said that was one of her best experiences in school, and she still remembers, she still remembers us. And we talked, and I began to walk away, and she said, "Hey Ms. Elycia." She called me out, and I walked back to her and she reached in her back pocket, and she still had those business cards in her back pocket. And she said besides her school ID, that's the only thing she really has that's professional with her name on it, and she really liked that, and enjoys seeing that. I talked about "I really want you to see this career come to fruition", and she—it was nursing she wanted to go into, so she's now taking some prep classes to go into nursing, but it really allowed her to zero in, and she's in 11th grade now.

[John Bollenbacher:] So, can you help me out, and for the folks at home, maybe connect the dots, between the work you're doing and these positive life choices? I think a lot of people think of just a teenage pregnancy prevention as sex ed, but clearly, as this story shows, there's a lot of other things going on and factors that help the youth make these positive choices and have a more positive future.

[Elycia Cook:] Yeah, I often talk to people, tell them what I do, and right away they go, "Oh, so you give out condoms." No, that's not what I do. And I had one person say to me, "Well you should. They should just have a busload and just throw 'em into the neighborhoods, because these kids are not going to stop." And I think it's really sad that we have such low expectation for our kids. I think it's really sad that you don't believe in them. They have self-control, we have self-control, as humans we are more than capable of focusing and making good decisions, and it's just really sad to me sometimes what I hear people say about teenagers—they're spoiled, we hear a lot about the brain development, and how it's delayed nowadays, and I mean, I know from the science factors some of that is true, but I feel very strongly that teens will only reach a level if you set a high standard. Kids need to feel believed in. Kids need to know that the community cares about them. If they know the community cares about them, they will care about the community. Most parents love their children dearly, and they want a better life for their kids than they had themselves. They just don't know how to do it. And they can't do it if they haven't seen it a good example, so we do try to do a lot of parent engagement as well.

[John Bollenbacher:] You know, if you look at the statistics overall, it seems like teen pregnancy is going way down, we're at historic lows, but we know that for the vulnerable population were working with, it's still much higher. Can you briefly talk about the disconnect about between maybe the what the public is perceiving with teen pregnancy, and what's really happening in the field?

[Elycia Cook:] Well, first of all, particularly in Colorado, we have a very large Latino population, and you know that with our Latino population in particular, this AIM curriculum has the most impact, I think, on our Latino girls because they're still seeing in their home the mothers either choosing to stay at home, which is fine to stay at home, sometimes I wish I could [laughs], but they don't get to see women in careers, and—not on television, not in the media, you know. In the AIM curriculum we do a lesson called *What's Your Legacy?* And we have this legacy poster of different people and the legacy they've created, and we changed it to fit our demographic—more Latinos on it, more local leaders, and that your legacy doesn't have to be as big as theirs. A lot of times people don't understand, especially when you're looking at a minority population, that we *need* to see people who look like us, to have vision to say, "If she can do it, I can do it."

[John Bollenbacher:] So, last question, why do you feel like, and personally why do you feel like for society it's really important, to continue to engage in this kind of work?

[Elycia Cook:] Well, first of all, I think mentoring programs in general, is extremely important in general as parents get more busy, as kids are relying more on social media, losing that human—adults losing that human connection. There is nothing like one-on-one human connection, nothing like "I believe in you." Our kids need to learn how to talk to strangers, how to interact with strangers. I think it's really, this work is really important, especially in the area of teen pregnancy prevention, and there's a lot of controversy— does poverty cause teen pregnancy or incarceration, or does teen pregnancy prevention and incarceration cause poverty, you know, a lot of work, a lot of controversy on that, but either/or, those are some of the number one ways to live a life of generational poverty or to never get out of poverty, and so even from a taxpayer perspective, it costs so much less to give \$30, \$40 million to a teen pregnancy prevention program than the cost of, really the community or government raising a child and everything associated with that—the STD rate, it costs so much less to invest in a program, invest in this child, and now are you going to get them all, no, not now, but the ones you get, the cost comparison, and not only that, it's investing in our kids, you always want to leave this earth better than when you came into it. So, you know, I tell my kids, investing in children, community service, and volunteer work, is the rent we pay for life on this planet.

[John Bollenbacher:] Elycia, thanks so much for sitting down and talking with us and telling us about your program. And I want to thank our audience for listening to this Family and Youth Services broadcast. Please check out all of our other videos and podcasts on our website.

Thank you for tuning in. As you heard, our work isn't done. It will take more leaders like Elycia Cook to prep teens for the future.

Be encouraged, and get connected, at The Exchange. Go to teenpregnancy.acf.hhs.gov.

This podcast series is produced by the Family and Youth Services Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. FYSB is committed to a future in which all our nation's youth, individuals, and families can live healthy, productive, and violence-free lives.