Patrick H. Tolan Ph.D., Director of Youth-Nex is Professor in the Department of Human Services, Curry School of Education and in the Department of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences, School of Medicine. In the 10 years prior to assuming his role as director of Youth-Nex in 2010, Dr. Tolan directed the University of Illinois’ Institute for Juvenile Research, a multidisciplinary center of over 50 faculty, focusing on child mental health and adolescent behavior problems. He has been the Principal Investigator on multiple National Institute of Health (NIH) and other funded projects and has authored over 160 publications. He is a frequent consultant to agencies, government groups, and foundations advising and presenting at hearings and institutions around the country. For the past 25 years he has conducted research with multiple collaborators on the development of youth within inner-city communities, supported family efforts to assist and protect healthy development in high risk communities, and promoted the use of empirically tested approaches to reduce youth and family risk. His extensive research has focused on problems affecting adolescence; tested prevention efforts to lower rates of these problems; and worked to increase reliance on scientifically tested prevention efforts by government, funders, and communities. Dr. Tolan is co-editor of a special issue of Child Development (2011)—the flagship journal for child development research. His writings include “Children's mental health as a primary care and concern: A system for comprehensive support and service,” published in 2005 in American Psychologist. Dr. Tolan was chair of the American Psychological Association’s Working Group on Children’s Mental Health (1999-2001) and is a member of several commissions and boards related to youth development including the Blueprints for Violence Prevention, a project of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado.
Youth-Nex is a trans-disciplinary center devoted to promoting healthy youth development through focused research, training and service. Residing within the Curry School of Education, the cross-University center’s work encompasses a wide range of areas including health management, civic engagement, education and social responsibility. Youth-Nex also focuses on preventing youth problems such as violence; physical and mental health issues; substance abuse and school failure.

**MISSION STATEMENT**

The mission of Youth-Nex is to promote healthy youth development and reduce developmental risk through focused research, training and service. Youth-Nex works across diverse areas to bring a holistic understanding of youth development to enhance the individual’s potential to become healthy, productive citizens.

**A NEXUS OF INNOVATION**

By recruiting faculty from across the University, Youth-Nex utilizes multi-disciplinary approaches, multiple methods and a coalescence of perspectives across diverse areas right at the “center of the center”—its research programs. This cross-pollination from one area of center study to another creates an intellectual nexus, providing a new understanding of youth development—allowing direct translation from research to practice; connection of training to research; and bridging the gaps between academia, practice and policy.

**UNIQUE IN SCOPE**

Youth-Nex is the only center in the country accommodating work on diverse aspects of youth development. Areas include mental health, educational functioning, citizenship, social functioning and physical health. The engagement of scholars with diverse skills and interests leads to fresh approaches and creates better alignment of research to “real world” needs. This structure also provides greater sophistication and depth of understanding on topics related to promoting more effective youth development.

**A NATIONAL RESOURCE**

We expect the center to become a regional, state and national resource for scientific knowledge promoting positive youth development and problem prevention; as well as a resource for technical assistance in the implementation of evidence based practices related to these matters. We also expect center faculty and staff to increase national understanding of the issues surrounding youth development and to contribute regularly to public policy supporting youth in this country. Youth-Nex will provide substantial direct training of center pre-doctoral and post-doctoral students; visiting faculty or professional fellows; and other professionals working in areas closely related to the center’s mission.

*Altria*

The Youth-Nex research center is supported by a grant from Philip Morris USA, an Altria Company. We gratefully acknowledge this important support. The work of Youth-Nex is solely determined by itself and Youth-Nex does not represent the official views of the sponsor.
**Faculty and Staff**

**Judy Beenhakker | Senior Research Coordinator**

Beenhakker coordinates and manages research operations within the center with primary duties related to grant preparation and documentation, and data collection. She also supervises research staff and represents the center in collaborations with local and national partners. Beenhakker earned her BS in Psychology from Randolph-Macon Woman's College and her MS in Child Clinical Psychology from MCP Hahnemann University. Before coming to Youth-Nex, she was Research Coordinator at Stanford University's Child and Adolescent Eating Disorders Program and Research Coordinator in the Pediatric Bipolar Disorders Program. She brings additional experience in the mental health field with positions at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania Mood and Anxiety Disorders Clinic. She has published papers on primate endocrinology with implications for human brain function, and on adolescent eating disorders.

**Ellen Daniels | Assistant Director of Center Communications**

Daniels is responsible for center communications including writing, graphic design and media relations and marketing. She has worked in U.Va. communications since 2007 at the Law School and in the Office of the Vice President of Human Resources. Daniels moved to Charlottesville from New York City where she managed design studios and large-scale communications projects in advertising, graphic design, photography and finance. She is a graduate of the University of Minnesota School of Journalism and an alumnus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She studied Photography at Harvard University and Graphic Design at the Parsons School of Design in New York City. She is a graduate of the Institute of Integrative Nutrition and a holistic health counselor certified by the Columbia University Teacher’s College.

**Nancy Deutsch | Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Foundations**

Deutsch is affiliated with the Research, Statistics & Evaluation and Applied Developmental Science programs. Her research examines the socio-ecological contexts of development, particularly on issues of adolescence, identity, gender, race, and class. She has focused on the role of after-school programs in the lives of youth deemed “at-risk.” She received her BA from Vassar College in 1993 and completed her Ph.D. in Human Development and Social Policy at Northwestern University in 2004. Nancy’s recent book, Pride in the Projects: Teens building identities in urban contexts, a four year study of teens at an inner-city youth organization, was published by NYU Press in July, 2008. She is collaborating on a second book about adult-youth relationships and organizational practices at urban youth organizations to be published by Cambridge University Press. She is currently conducting research on the Young Women Leaders' Program, a combined one-on-one and group mentoring program for middle school girls. The project examines the potential of mentoring groups as developmental settings that may foster positive psychosocial and identity processes as well as support the development and maintenance of one-on-one mentoring relationships. The study includes a longitudinal evaluation of program effects, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, as well as an embedded ethnographic study of the mentoring groups funded by the William T. Grant Foundation. In 2009, Nancy received the first annual “Emerging Scholar Award” from the Out-of-School-Time Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association.
Valerie Futch | Postdoctoral Fellow

Futch is a postdoctoral fellow studying adolescent identity development, youth-adult relationships in out-of-school programs, and emerging adulthood. She received her BS in Psychology from Stetson University in 2002. Prior to joining Youth-Nex, Futch was a student in Social-Personality Psychology at The Graduate Center, City University of New York. Her dissertation documented the developmental impact of participation in a peer-education teen-theatre program called The SOURCE, located in Sarasota, FL. While at CUNY she was also an Instructional Technology Fellow, a Writing in the Disciplines (WID/WAC) Fellow, and a Graduate Teaching Fellow. She is currently involved in The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) and an active member of the Public Science Project.

Nikki Godine | Research Technician

Godine is responsible for providing support and assistance on research project implementation and data maintenance. She conducts direct data collection and assists with the logistics of Youth-Nex conferences, events, and research projects, in addition to other duties and responsibilities. Godine received her BA in Psychology and Classics from the University of Virginia in 2010 and her MS in Counseling Psychology from Loyola University Maryland in 2012. Before coming to Youth-Nex in 2012, Nikki was a research assistant in the Child Anxiety Prevention Study at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. She has also held research assistantships in the Cognitive Aging Lab and the Early Development lab at the University of Virginia.

Crystal Haislip | Center Administrator and Assistant to the Director

Haislip brings savvy and a keen eye for detail to her role as Center Administrator and Assistant to the Director. Previously, as the Annual Fund and Events Coordinator for the Curry School Foundation, she served as an administrator in several diverse areas including event planning, annual fund administration and donor relations. Before coming to the Curry School, she honed her analytical skills at U.Va.’s University Development Office and the Darden School of Business.

Ross Larsen | Research Scientist

Larsen joined Youth-Nex in 2012 and conducts research on methodology, specifically monte carlo-simulations, bayesian statistics, multilevel modeling, and missing data technique. He has a masters degree in Statistics from Brigham Young University and Educational Psychology from Texas A & M. He has studied social-emotional learning interventions at CASTL at U.Va.
Peter Lovegrove | Postdoctoral Fellow

Lovegrove joined Youth-Nex as a postdoctoral fellow in August, 2010. He recently completed his Ph.D. in the Department of Sociology at the University of Colorado - Boulder. While completing his degree, he was a research assistant at the Problem Behavior Program and the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the Institute of Behavioral Science at the University of Colorado - Boulder. He has also worked as a research assistant with the Rochester Intergenerational Study. Lovegrove has expertise in quantitative research techniques to understand developmental and intergenerational etiologies of childhood delinquency, violence and drug use. He will be working under the mentorship of Patrick Tolan on multi-level modeling of risk and protective factors and prevention impact.

Maryfrances Porter | Research Scientist

Porter is the program director for the Engaged Citizenship research area, one of four trans-disciplinary programs at the heart of the center. She also conducts community-based research and manages evaluation contracts at the local and state level on youth development-related projects. A member of Youth-Nex since June 2011, Porter brings with her a wealth of research-oriented community engagement experience, and dedication to community-University partnerships. She received her Bachelor’s degree in psychology from Emory University in 1996 and completed her Ph.D. in clinical psychology with an emphasis on community psychology at U.Va. in 2005. Porter’s research focus is on child development and adolescence, publishing numerous local public policy reports in the children’s services arena.

John Sirard | Assistant Professor

Sirard joined Youth-Nex in September, 2010. He will focus on schools and physical activity. He was previously at the University of Minnesota where he pursued his research interests including the assessment of physical activity and the role of physical activity in the prevention and treatment of obesity in children and adolescents. He completed his Ph.D. in Exercise Physiology at the University of South Carolina in 2007 following completion of an M.S. in Exercise Physiology at the University of Massachusetts and a B.S. in Marketing at the University of Massachusetts.
The youth-nex advisory board is a distinguished group of experts from a vast array of disciplines whose work includes emphases on youth—including law, medicine and pediatrics, exercise science brain biology, psychiatry and psychology. The advisory board plays a critical role in the center’s focus and mission to promote healthy youth development.

Advisory Board Members:

Richard Bonnie | Harrison Foundation Professor of Medicine and Law; Hunton & Williams Professor of Law; Professor of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences; Director, Institute of Law, Psychiatry and Public Policy; Professor of Public Policy, Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy; University of Virginia

Bonnie is an expert in the fields of criminal law and procedure, mental health and drug law, public health law and bioethics and has been actively involved in public service throughout his academic career. He served as a member of the National Advisory Council on Drug Abuse (1975-1980) and from 1979-1985 he was Chairman of Virginia’s State Human Rights Committee, which is responsible for protecting the rights of residents and clients of Virginia’s public mental health and mental retardation services system. Bonnie served from 1981-1988 on the Advisory Board for the American Bar Association’s Criminal Justice Mental Health Standards Project, from 2004-2007 on the ABA Task Force on Mental Illness and the Death Penalty, and from 1988-1996 on the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Mental Health and the Law. He is currently chairing the Commonwealth of Virginia Commission of Mental Health Law Reform established by the Supreme Court of Virginia in 2006. He is also currently participating in the MacArthur Foundation’s Research Network on Mandated Community Treatment as well as the Foundation’s new Initiative on Law and Neuroscience. Throughout his career, Bonnie has been deeply interested in issues involving psychiatry and human rights. He has received numerous awards, including the American Psychiatric Association’s Isaac Ray Award in 1998 for his “contributions to forensic psychiatry and the psychiatric aspects of jurisprudence” and a Special Presidential Commendation from the APA in 2003. He received the Thomas Jefferson Award, the University of Virginia’s highest honor, in 2007. (cont’d on next page)
Mark Greenberg | Edna Peterson Bennett Endowed Chair in Prevention Research; Director, Prevention Research Center; Professor of Human Development and Psychology Research; Pennsylvania State University

Dr. Greenberg is Director of The Prevention Research Center for the Promotion of Human Development at Penn State. He is also a member of the leadership team of CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. Dr. Greenberg is the author of more than 100 articles and chapters on development and understanding aggression, violence and externalizing disorders. Since 1981, he has been examining the effectiveness of school-based curricula (The PATHS Curriculum) to improve the social, emotional and cognitive competence of elementary-aged children. Since 1990, he has served as an investigator in Fast Track, a comprehensive program that aims to prevent violence and delinquency in families.

Anne Holton | Consultant, Child Welfare Strategy Group, Annie E. Casey Foundation; Former First Lady of Virginia; Former Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court Judge

Anne Holton has devoted her career to serving as an advocate for Virginia’s families and children. She joined the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Child Welfare Strategy Group as a consultant in January 2010. She has assisted engagement teams in various states particularly around issues relating to the judiciary and right-sizing congregate care, and has led a strategy workgroup exploring promising practices to prevent unnecessary out-of-home placements of teens due to complex behavior issues. Holton spent her prior professional career advocating for children and families in her home state of Virginia. From 1998-2005 she served as a juvenile and domestic relations district court judge. While on the bench, she founded and led a cross-agency collaboration to improve child welfare practice in her jurisdiction and served on the advisory committee to the state’s Court Improvement Program for child welfare. From 2006-2010 she served as the First Lady of Virginia, upon the election of her husband Tim Kaine as Virginia’s Governor. She launched her signature initiative in January of 2007, “For Keeps: Families for all Virginia Teens”, which focused on helping Virginia find and strengthen permanent families, particularly for older children in foster care or at risk of entering care. This work led her to a leadership role in the Children’s Services Transformation upon which Virginia embarked in late 2007, with the assistance of AECF’s Casey Strategic Consulting Group. This effort resulted in a dramatic increase in successfully placing and/or keeping at-risk children in permanent families. She practiced law for many years at the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society including serving as lead counsel in several successful nationwide and statewide class actions. She has a B.A. in economics from the Woodrow Wilson School for Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and a law degree from Harvard University. Holton received the Annie E. Casey Foundation Families for Life Award of Distinction in 2008.

Sharon Hostler | The McLemore Birdsong Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Virginia School of Medicine

Dr. Sharon Hostler is the McLemore Birdsong Professor of Pediatrics, Senior Associate Dean at the School of Medicine and Vice Provost for Faculty Development for the University of Virginia. Hostler joined the faculty in 1970 where her career as a clinician educator has focused on: children with cancer; outreach to rural underserved children (Medical Director of the Children and Youth Project); transition tasks of adolescents with chronic illness and developmental disabilities (Division Chief of Developmental Pediatrics); outcomes of adolescents with severe head injury and spinal cord injury (Medical Director of the Kluge Children’s Rehabilitation Center); the status of women students, house staff and faculty (Chair of the Committee on Women); the implementation of Family Centered Care in academic medical centers; and development of men and women faculty (Chair of the School of Medicine Promotion and Tenure Committee, Faculty Leadership Programs). She has served as Visiting Professor at schools throughout the United States, Canada, Israel, Costa Rica and Italy has been recognized for her work in Developmental Pediatrics throughout the world. In 2008, Hostler received the coveted Thomas Jefferson Award—the highest award given by the University of Virginia.

(cont’d on next page)
Laurence Steinberg | Distinguished University Professor and Laura H. Carnell Professor of Psychology Temple University; Advisory Board Member, The Allstate Foundation Teen Driving Program

Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D., is the Distinguished University Professor and Laura H. Carnell Professor of Psychology at Temple University, joining the faculty there in 1988. Steinberg taught previously at Cornell University, the University of California at Irvine, and the University of Wisconsin at Madison. He is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and is currently Director of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice. Steinberg is President of the Division of Developmental Psychology of the American Psychological Association and Past-President of the Society for Research on Adolescence. He has been the recipient of numerous honors, including lifetime achievement awards from the Society for Research on Adolescence and the American Psychological Association. In 2009, he was named the first recipient of the Klaus J. Jacobs Research Prize, one of the largest prizes ever awarded to a social scientist, for his contributions to improving the lives of young people and their families.
Youth-Nex focuses on four main areas of youth development. These programs are multi-investigator, cross-disciplinary systematic research efforts led by a U.Va. faculty member possessing substantial experience and expertise. It is our goal to generate new understanding about the most useful practices and appropriate policies in youth development.

**Youth-Nex Programs**

Youth-Nex is focusing on how peer relationships and parents influence at-risk youth and on how these youth influence social norms and groups. For example, while the negative affects of peer influence is well-recognized, there is much less acknowledgement of the positive role that others can play in the lives of youth. Under-appreciated parental influence on values and behavior remains critical throughout adolescence, even though this time is marked by the primacy of peer relationships. The center also focuses on the affects and uses of social media with an emphasis on positive youth influences.

**Avoiding Risk**

**Program Leaders:** Dewey Cornell, Daniel Cox, Patrick Tolan

Youth-Nex is utilizing sophisticated models of multi-factor influences to identify what puts adolescents at risk. The program builds upon work Drs. Tolan, Cornell, and Cox have conducted over the past twenty-five years to prevent development of serious behavior problems, engagement in violence, smoking, alcohol, and other drug use. The center is also implementing programs to prevent adolescent injury and death by examining the role of distracted driving and driver risk-taking. Valuable in and of itself, the work could teach us more about risk-taking in general. Youth-Nex provides guidance at the local and national levels working to improve community, state, and national efforts for monitoring and decision-making about these issues. This effort will also integrate threat assessment (for schools and communities) with evidence-based practices to reduce youth antisocial behavior and sophisticated economic analyses of service delivery systems.

**Healthy Lifestyles**

**Program Leader:** Arthur Weltman

Health management has become a critical area for effective youth functioning as sedate lifestyles, growing dependence on technology and easy access to unhealthy food have negatively impacted our young people.

Youth-Nex is providing needed scientific basis for health promotion including exploration of the rates of obesity and concomitant disorders. Bringing together faculty from Kinesiology, Pediatrics, Public Health, Education, and other areas of the University and experts from the community, this effort will provide needed scientific basis for health promotion efforts that can be effective in aiding parents and youth in health management and in reducing the rates of obesity and other health problems.

**Supportive Relationships**

**Program Leader:** Joseph Allen

Youth-Nex is focusing on how peer relationships and parents influence at-risk youth and on how these youth influence social norms and groups. For example, while the negative affects of peer influence is well-recognized, there is much less acknowledgement of the positive role that others can play in the lives of youth. Under-appreciated parental influence on values and behavior remains critical throughout adolescence, even though this time is marked by the primacy of peer relationships. The center also focuses on the affects and uses of social media with an emphasis on positive youth influences.
Youth-Nex Programs (continued)

Engaged Citizenship
Program Leader: TBD
The health and security of our society is dependent on the personal and social development of our youth. Youth-Nex recognizes our youth as an often untapped resource, with the potential to lead, create and contribute to the world in countless ways. The center is working to support opportunities for youth to connect to their communities and to promote their capacity for leadership and civic life now and into adulthood. Program leader to be announced.

Methods
Program Leader: Nancy Deutsch
To facilitate and enhance their scientific work, Youth-Nex provides the methodological and statistical analysis support necessary for researchers working in connection with the center. Center staff provide researchers with methods support, data management and access to experts in data analysis. Of particular importance is the emphasis on both qualitative and quantitative methods, and their complementary uses.

Program Evaluation and Community Consultation
Program Leader: Maryfrances Porter
At Youth-Nex, we use Program Evaluation and Community Consultation to collaborate with local, state, and federal partners to promote youth development by translating research into policy and practice in the areas of mental health, educational functioning, citizenship, social functioning, and physical health. One way we do this is by collaborating with partners in the assessment and evaluation of programs, policies, and practices promoting youth development. Building on the existing strengths residing within communities, Youth-Nex rigorously tests effectiveness of programming, policies, and practices to improve implementation and create sustainable change. Program evaluation includes assessment of the implementation and impact of initiatives and activities. Our evaluation team is dedicated to collaborating with organizations to develop high-quality, culturally-competent evaluations, which are conducted with minimal disruption to organizational efficiency. Our team is responsive and flexible to changing conditions, and provides succinct, easy-to-understand deliverables with direct, actionable value. The center is also a resource for needs and strengths analyses; the facilitation of data-driven, action-oriented planning; best practices for serving youth; and other technical assistance.
Current Research

SAFE Children Effectiveness Trial (SAFE-E)
Schools and Families Educating Children, or SAFE Children, is an intervention that focuses on enhancing parent and child orientation to school, providing academic tutoring, promoting self-control and social competence in the child, reducing aggression, and improving parenting and family functioning. The present study is being conducted to determine the effects of the intervention in situations that more closely approximate “real-world” conditions—those of typical service provision using community mental health workers and 7th and 8th-grade tutors. First grade students and their parents will participate in 4 waves of interviews and half of the families will be randomized to receive the intervention (i.e., tutoring and family groups). In addition, teachers of the first grade participants will complete surveys about the participating children and 7th/8th grade students will serve as tutors to the first graders randomized to receive treatment.

Developmental Evaluation of Prevention Effects of the SAFE Children Intervention (SAFE-III)
As the roster of efficacious preventive interventions for drug abuse risk grows, prevention researchers have become increasingly interested in refining and elaborating their understanding of intervention effects. These include: 1) how effects vary for subgroups with different levels of personal, familial and environmental risk; 2) how well initial effects last into long term benefits; and 3) what interim conditions curtail or enhance initial benefits. The SAFE Children study extends the initial findings of academic and social benefits in the early elementary grades to evaluate its long-term impact (to age 16). The SAFE Children program focuses on families residing in high risk (inner-city) communities, with a child entering elementary school. Results will help identify the ultimate promise of this approach and what contributes to sustaining effects on loss of benefits over time. Such studies are critical to learn what to take to scale.

Middle School Mentoring
Development of a Mentoring-Coping Intervention to Improve Academic Outcomes for Low-Income Urban Youth
The middle school years are a critical period for preventing academic disengagement, school failure, and dropout for low-income urban youth, and for preventing increases in delinquency, substance use, and depression that further contribute to academic problems. The purpose of this project is to develop and pilot a coping curriculum that supports low-income urban adolescents through mentoring relationships and through connections that link them and their school to community partners. The goals of the intervention are to promote effective and contextually-relevant coping for engaging and succeeding in school, and managing the severe and chronic stressors in these low-income urban areas that impede learning.

Driving Evaluating and Enhancing Driving Skills of Individuals with Asperger's and High Functioning Autism
This work explores the use of virtual reality driving simulators to train and evaluate driving skills of teens with Asperger’s and autism. This study explores the maturing/developing of executive functioning, driving safety and general risk taking. The simulator has already been used to effectively teach teens with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder to drive more safely.
Neighborhood Measurement of Violence Effects: A Developmental Ecological Approach

This recent award (February 2010) for a three-year study provides support to undertake a thorough review of conception and measurement of neighborhood effects on youth development, particularly as relates to risk for youth violence. From the initial work of review we have developed a cadre of measures to capture key neighborhood influences and will validate these through neighborhood sampling and then apply in a short-term study of a sample of families with young children (ages 5-6) and of families with adolescents (ages 12-13). The focus is on direct relation of neighborhood characteristics to problem behavior, but also to prosocial and effective development and through impact on parenting and family stress. Results will provide methods for measurement of recognized important processes that have been hampered by little or no measurement development, absent developmental conceptualization or inadequate validation as neighborhood indicators. Findings can help clarify the relative value of community-focused efforts to more individual focused approaches and determine how settings moderate risk and preventive efforts.

Chicago Youth Development Study: From Adolescent Youth to Fathers in High-Risk Settings

The purpose this study, which began in 1990, is to further understanding of the influences on development of young men and their parents, partners and children in economically depressed, high-crime neighborhoods; to identify risk and protection influences; and to see how functioning during adolescence affects fathering in young adulthood. In the current phase, the focus is on influences on father’s involvement with his child(ren) and the impact of involvement and parenting practices on his child(ren)’s development. As part of the present study, we completed two additional waves of data collection (total of 11 waves over 20 years) from a sample of 271 young adult males who took part in the Chicago Youth Development Study (CYDS) that began when these young men were 11-13. During the first phase of CYDS, four waves of repeated interviews were conducted with these young men and their families-of-origin. During the second phase of CYDS, two waves of data were collected with the original sample as well as their intimate partners and preliminary information about their children and parenting. During the current third phase of CYDS, two waves of data were collected from the men, their children (i.e., biological and non-biological), and the mothers of the children.

Preventing Delinquency in Girls: An Evaluation of the Young Women Leaders Program

Mentoring is one of the most popular yet least understood approaches to supporting positive youth development. Youth-Nex has fostered collaboration among U.Va. faculty to identify the components of effective mentoring. Through the Young Women’s Leadership Program (YWLP) in particular, we are studying how mentor engagement facilitates social development of college student mentees as well as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This program is also testing how training and supervision enhances mentor commitment, capability and engagement. A related effort is being developed to work with youth who are at-risk for school dropout due to community-related norms and stress. Recently, the team has focused on evaluating and enhancing a program to reduce male coercive and violent dating behavior.
2010 Seed Funding

One essential investment in the creation and development of the center is to provide seed funding for promising ideas and scholars. To that end, we have instituted an annual University-wide Request for Proposals. The RFP emphasizes the need for focus on topics related to positive youth development promotion or reduction in risk, a clear and direct plan for external funding as a result of the seed funding, and innovation in methods, collaboration or approach to youth development.

The Following Projects Have Been Funded:

Supporting Food and Exercise Counseling for Overweight and Obese Children

We will finalize and evaluate a technical solution to extend the services provided at the University of Virginia (U.Va.) Children’s Fitness Clinic (CFC) via an interactive website that includes health education, health progress and the capability to receive daily text messages from their patients. The motivation for this automation is three-fold. We hypothesize that such a system will 1) increase the patients’ interest and drive to consistently and more accurately report their daily food intake, mood and activity, 2) increase the amount of information exchange between the patients and their counselors between CFC visits, 3) shift clinician time during CFC sessions from “data gathering” activities to “counseling” activities, 4) be a feasible and useful alternative to paper logs for at least 25% of patients in the target age group, and 5) lead to longer patient retention in the CFC program.

Improving Nutrition and Exercise Competence in Obese Schoolchildren via SALUD, a Community-Based Intervention at Southwood

In addition to affecting the health and longevity of the current generation of children, obesity has significant developmental implications for children. Obese children have been found to have a lower level of competency (i.e., expectancy of success) related to physical activity and nutrition compared to normal weight children, and these issues are exacerbated among children of lower socio-economic status (SES). These are significant problems because 32 percent of children nationally and 38 percent of children in the Charlottesville area are overweight (body mass index [BMI] 85-95 percentile) or obese (BMI greater than 95 percentile)—findings that are again more common among children in lower SES, as well as in minority ethnic groups. While it is known that the family unit has critical importance for achieving weight loss in children, it is less clear what the differential roles are of parental and child beliefs and behaviors. It is our thesis that improvements in childhood overweight/obesity status will be best achieved by targeting the expectancies for success and value toward healthy behaviors of parents and children. We will undergo a community-based intervention to assess competency for physical activity and nutrition among children in the Southwood Mobile Home Park in the Charlottesville area. We aim to demonstrate efficacy in improved competence and improved weight outcomes in children living in low-income communities.
Vascular Disease in Adolescent Type 1 Diabetic (DM1) Subjects—Influence of Diet and Fitness
Life-limiting atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease begins in children with DM1 as evidenced by several types of pre-atherosclerotic vascular dysfunction. Hyperglycemia alone is unlikely to account for this accelerated atherosclerosis. It may be that activity is one protective factor that could make a vital difference. This study will pilot test whether dietary and activity behaviors contribute to the risk for early vascular dysfunction in DM1 and to begin to address whether interventions, which can be lifelong, can prevent or reverse early vascular disease.

Statutory Rape or ‘Normal’ Teen Love? Psychological Investigations of Adolescent Sexuality and the Law
The production of legal responses to try to protect youth from sexual predators has spawned vexing legal and social issues related to adolescent relationships. In many cases sexual activity between an adolescent and their near same-age partner could result in classification as a sex offender. There is dire need for illumination about the developmental and social issues that affect and are affected by the intersection of youth and sexuality in this legal context. This support provides an opportunity to shedding some light on this controversial but important issue. The planned effort seeks to address teens’ and young adults’ comprehension and perception of existing laws; to understand parents’ or guardians’ perceptions and knowledge of statutory rape laws; and adolescents’ competence to consent to sex.

Motivating Youth Through the Humanities: Pilot Study of Community-Based Model of Teaching Literature to University Students and High-Risk Youth
The humanities have been slow to respond to growing skepticism in recent decades about their value in post-secondary education. “Books Behind Bars: Life, Literature, and Community Leadership” is an innovative, 12-month-old, format of humanities education that places undergraduates from U.Va. to work through literature training with incarcerated juvenile delinquents. Because of its unique format and approach, Books Behind Bars is challenging literature students at U.Va. to learn and grow in ways that are unusual for most literature courses, and it is thought to support positive development of the college students in a number of areas:

(1) Students gain a deeper more holistic understanding of literary texts.
(2) Students recognize that their acquisition of knowledge and skills has practical, “real-world” application.
(3) Students have a greater perception that the literature and learning activities are relevant to their own lives.
(4) Students are more engaged in the class and are therefore more motivated to do well in their studies.
(5) Students have a heightened sense of civic responsibility and as a result of this class are more likely to choose courses and careers that have a community service component.
(6) Students feel a closer connection to their peers and to the residents at the partner sites, leading, in turn, to greater appreciation of the value of human connectedness in their other professional and personal relationships.

Funds will be used to conduct a pilot study of the Books Behind Bars program and will lay the necessary groundwork for funding applications seeking support for the larger-scale program and its evaluation in the near future.
In keeping with the center’s directive to support promising research studies promoting effective youth development, five teams of University faculty were awarded funding in 2011. Criteria for selection included multidisciplinary research on factors that could enhance youth development including productive citizenship, supportive relationships, risk avoidance, and healthy lifestyles; or preventing of health-related, psychological, and social risk among youth.

**THE FOLLOWING PROJECTS HAVE BEEN FUNDED FOR 2011:**

**Academic and Student Affairs Partnership for Substance Abuse Prevention: Reducing Risky Behaviors Associated With 21st Birthdays**  
Ellen J. Bass - Associate Professor, Department of Systems and Information Engineering  
This research project builds on the experience of Student Health’s Gordie Center for Substance Abuse Prevention in developing and evaluating celebratory drinking interventions. The project goal is to increase protective behaviors, and reduce alcohol consumption, estimated blood alcohol concentrations (eBAC), and negative consequences associated with 21st birthday celebrations.

**Impact of Cardiac Surgery on Executive Function**  
Daniel J. Cox - Professor, Departments of Psychiatric Medicine and Internal Medicine  
Researchers will investigate the impact of cardiac surgery on cognitive motor function that impairs driving safety, medical self-management, social functioning and quality of life, and the extent to which such impacts can be reversed with specific and specialized rehabilitation using virtual reality driving simulation.

**Languages Across Borders (LAB): Building Positive Cross-Linguistic and Cross-Cultural Networks in High Schools**  
Amanda Kibler - Assistant Professor, Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education, Curry School of Education  
Adolescent English-language learners face several challenges in high school settings. In classrooms, these students must complete “double the work” of their English-speaking peers, learning challenging subject matter while they are still acquiring the language through which this content is taught. Researchers will study the effects of an intervention to improve linguistic/academic and psychosocial outcomes for both the learners and native English-speaking students.

**Reproductive Health Among Sexual Minority Youth**  
Charlotte J. Patterson - Professor of Psychology  
Many of the problems experienced by sexual minority youth – such as family and peer-group problems, victimization and bullying – have been well-documented, but other potential problem areas are less known. Research will focus on gaining more understanding of the reproductive health of this vulnerable population. The work will provide documentation of disparities as a function of sexual orientation in sexual behavior and reproductive health among adolescents in the United States. This study will assess reproductive health among sexual minority youth, and to understand risk and protective factors for reproductive health among members of this vulnerable population.

**A Study of Positive Youth Development Among High School Students**  
Joanna Lee Williams - Assistant Professor, Curry School of Education  
This study will examine whether participation in an intergroup dialogue program during the school year enhances strengths conceptualized in the “positive youth development” paradigm and diversity-related values, and promotes ethnic identity exploration among high school students. Intergroup dialogue is a process that brings together individuals from two or more social identity groups – for instance, groups based on race, religion or gender – that have either had a history of conflicting relationships or have not had substantive opportunities to communicate. This pilot study will compare Charlottesville High School students who participate in the Youth Roundtables program with non-participants in order to examine how the program may contribute to positive youth development. Among other issues, researchers will explore whether there is increased competence, confidence, connection, character and caring/compassion when compared to non-participants.
Youth-Nex Center Awards Grants to Promote Positive Youth Development

SEPTEMBER 14, 2012 | ELLEN DANIELS

Youth-Nex, a center based at the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education that promotes effective youth development, has awarded $153,715 to four U.Va. research teams. They will study a range of youth development issues, from how innovative school architecture can combat obesity to increasing bullying awareness through student video production, to helping middle-schoolers tackle a local environmental problem, to understanding teen drivers with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Youth-Nex has seeded University faculty research promoting positive youth development for three years. Patrick Tolan, the center’s director, said the projects were also chosen because of their collaborative nature and potential for growth.

“We are already seeing external funding applications growing out of the first rounds,” he said. “We think there is great potential for similar success from this excellent set of seed grants which also represent multidisciplinary efforts across U.Va.”

The 2012 seed-funded projects are:

• “Impact of School Architecture on School Practices and Healthy Eating”

Researchers are working with architects to create a school environment that improves student well-being.

Dr. Matthew Trowbridge of U.Va.’s Department of Emergency Medicine and Terry Huang of the University of Nebraska’s College of Public Health will evaluate whether innovations such as a teaching kitchen, soil lab and nutrition resource library will impact the eating behaviors of school children at Buckingham Elementary in Dillwyn.

The researchers collaborated with VMDO Architects of Charlottesville to develop a set of healthful eating guidelines for school architecture based on public health evidence and theory. The set of specifications call for innovations like kitchens conducive to preparing fresh and organic food; design that encourages relaxation and socialization at meal times; and signage and programming that reinforce nutrition education.

“We wanted to create optimal school environments to promote healthy eating behaviors,” Trowbridge said.

“Opportunities to directly concentrate on children’s learning environments are long overdue in the fight against obesity, which has been a priority public health issue for 20 years. But prevention has met with only limited success.”

Funding will allow the researchers to evaluate application of the recommendations in a real-world environment for the first time at Buckingham Elementary this fall.

“School-based obesity prevention programs have received considerable attention, but the physical environment of the school has not,” Trowbridge said. “This also provides an opportunity to pilot the concept of linking obesity prevention to green buildings. This focus on the environment and policy-based intervention will be critical in making a significant impact on childhood obesity trends.”

To effectively implement these environmental components, the researchers and VMDO worked together as the school was rebuilt from the ground up. Maggie Thacker, VMDO’s director of marketing and business development, said that their objectives have been multifaceted. “Our goal is to embrace the whole child,” she said. “Environmental stewardship, eco-literacy, sustainable design, health and well-being, movement and activity – each of these educational opportunities are interwoven throughout the school’s interior and landscape, making a rich experience for students and teachers alike.”

Throughout the site, Thacker said, the school fosters teachable moments within the landscape, boasting walkable paths; vegetable, fruit and nut gardens; science garden labs; a composting station; and a “frog bog,” to name a few of the school’s features.

“There is a long history in developmental psychology research that the role of classroom design can impact social behaviors,” Trowbridge said. “This project takes well-established theoretical frameworks from these educational research fields and applies them to health promotion.”

Researchers hope the project will encourage teachers, staff and the community to engage more deeply in teaching children about healthful food and eating. They also hope to inspire more collaboration of this type.

“It’s an amazing building and it’s an incredibly positive statement of hope and investment for kids in this rural school district who typically haven’t received this kind of support,” Trowbridge said. “Youth-Nex has allowed for a real-world implementation and evaluation of these highly collaborative and cutting-edge guidelines.”

• “Promoting Positive Youth Development Through Homegrown Video Production”

Michael Kennedy, an assistant professor at the Curry School, will instruct and guide students in producing their own bullying prevention videos. He hopes to help students at Charlottesville-area schools to both understand themselves and to understand themselves as agents of change.

Kennedy also said he hopes the students will progress in what are known as the “5 Cs” of positive youth development – competence, confidence, connection, character and caring.

“We hypothesize that if we get that movement toward greater understanding in caring, competency and the rest of the Cs, it will be captured on video, because the medium is so powerful,” he said.

An educator and a filmmaker, Kennedy ultimately also predicts a change in the students’ understanding of bullying. “A more sophisticated video shows deeper understanding of the issue,” he said. “When students make progress in each of the 5 Cs, it can result in a sixth C – contribution.”

Kennedy, along with education professor Dewey Cornell, are co-principal investigators of this project.

• “Engaging Students in Environmental Service: Development and Early Phase Research on a Community Service Learning Intervention”

When educators Sara Rimm-Kaufman and Eileen Merritt had the realization that kids were eager to be engaged in important problems outside of school, they devised a plan to take them outdoors.

The researchers will work with a group of middle-schoolers at Albemarle County’s Community Public Charter School tackle a local environmental problem selected by the students.
In The News

Youth-Nex Center Awards Grants to Promote Positive Youth Development

"Many students do not have opportunities to spend time outdoors engaged in solving real-world problems," said Merritt, whose career has focused on helping connect students with nature.

The goal will be to increase the children's interest in science, knowledge of the environment and civic engagement through participation in a community service-learning project, Rimm-Kaufman said. Additional expertise in planning the curricula will come from Karen McGilvary, an environmental scientist in the College of Arts & Sciences.

"We want students to choose from a set of environmentally oriented projects and engage in those projects with supportive adults, and see the link between their actions and a change in their community," Rimm-Kaufman said.

One idea is to help provide a natural buffer between pollutants from an airport runway and the nearby Rivanna River.

Ashby Kinder, the principal of the charter school, and science teacher Kathryn Durkee will also collaborate.

According to Rimm-Kaufman, "This grant aligns well with the school's mission to reach students who may be disengaged from school and help them become independent thinkers, problem-solvers and active citizens."

Rimm-Kaufman is principal investigator for this project, and Merritt is co-investigator.

** "Understanding and Supporting Safe Driving of ADHD Teenagers with Auditory Feedback"**

A systems engineer and cognitive behavioral therapist are joining forces to design a tool that mitigates driving distraction through a Wii-like device that tracks eye, body and head movement.

Co-principal investigators Nathan Lau and Dr. Daniel Cox will seek to help adolescents with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder to drive safely by creating a negative feedback loop that detects driver distraction.

Lau, of the Department of Systems and Information Engineering in the School of Engineering and Applied Science, said that research in psychology, engineering and driving alone have contributed much independently, but the areas are not well integrated. There is also a lot of research being done on distraction, he said, but not much on device building. He envisions a time when these youth will not have to rely on medication.

The Youth-Nex funding continues Cox's research on ADHD and driving, adding a new engineering component with the "Wi-ike" device that displays feedback for the drivers.

"This is an opportunity to collaborate to see if you can develop a tool or refine a tool through innovation," Lau said. "We can be a bridge between what psychologists know and how engineers use technology."

According to Lau, there are alarms to help truck drivers stay alert, but there aren't tools to help youth and specifically ADHD drivers. "The trick is also not to be too intrusive or annoying," he said.

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Learning to Drive With A.D.H.D.

Jillian Serpa, 21, of Ringwood, N.J., with her mother after failing on her fourth attempt to acquire a driver's license.

By JOHN O'NEIL
Published: March 26, 2012

The first time Jillian Serpa tried to learn to drive, the family car wound up straddling a creek next to her home in Ringwood, N.J.

Ms. Serpa, then 16, had gotten flustered trying to sort out a rapid string of directions from her father while preparing to back out of their driveway. “There was a lack of communication,” she said. “I stepped on the gas instead of the brake.”

On her second attempt to learn, Ms.
Serpa recalled, she “totally freaked out” at a busy intersection. It was four years before she tried driving again. She has made great progress, but so far has still fallen short of her goal: Two weeks ago she knocked over a cone while parallel parking and failed the road test for the fourth time.

Learning to drive is hard and scary for many teenagers, and driving is far and away the most dangerous thing teenagers do. But the challenges are significantly greater for young people who, like Ms. Serpa, have attention problems.

A number of cognitive conditions can affect driving, and instructors report a recent increase in the number of teenagers with Asperger syndrome seeking licenses. But the largest group of challenged teenage drivers — and the mostly closely studied — appears to be those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. A 2007 study, by Russell A. Barkley of the Medical University of South Carolina and Daniel J. Cox of the University of Virginia Health System, concluded that young drivers with A.D.H.D. are two to four times as likely as those without the condition to have an accident — meaning that they are at a higher risk of wrecking the car than an adult who is legally drunk.

Researchers say that many teenagers with attention or other learning problems can become good drivers, but not easily or quickly, and that some will be better off not driving till they are older — or not at all.

The most obvious difficulty they face is inattention, the single leading cause of crashes among all drivers, said Bruce Simons-Morton, senior investigator at the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development in Bethesda, Md.

“When a driver takes his eyes off the road for two seconds or more, he’s doubled the risk of a crash,” he said.

Inexperienced drivers usually are distractible drivers. Dr. Simons-Morton cited a study on a closed course in which teenagers proved much more adept than adults at using cellphones while driving — and missed more stop signs.

The situation isn’t helped by how “noisy” cars have become, with cellphones, iPods and Bluetooth devices, said Lissa Robins Kapust, a social worker and coordinator of a driving program at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. “Driving is so busy on the inside and the outside of the car — it’s the most complex thing we do.”
But A.D.H.D. involves more than distractibility. Its other major trait is impulsiveness, which is often linked to high levels of risk-taking, said Dr. Barkley.

“It’s a bad combination” for young drivers, he said. “They’re more prone to crashes because of inattention, but the reason their crashes are so much worse is because they’re so often speeding.” Many drivers with A.D.H.D. overestimate their skills behind the wheel, Dr. Barkley noted.

Far better, researchers say, to have the attitude that Ms. Serpa does — not minimizing the difficulties or being daunted by them. “I am persistent,” said Ms. Serpa, now 21. “I don’t quit. And if there are people who think I am struggling with driving, I will tell them the truth.”

Ms. Serpa heads back to the road test on Thursday, with “a whole new level of confidence” after more intensive practice — plus a new string of kabbalah beads and a lucky pendant.

Fortunately, researchers and special instructors are discovering more tangible ways to help teenagers like her. The first step: deciding whether a 16-year-old is ready to learn, or really needs to drive at all.

Dr. Simons-Morton thinks that almost any reason to put off starting lessons is a good one. “If I were the parent of an A.D.H.D. or other special-needs kid, my goal would be to delay licensing,” he said. “They mature, they accommodate to their deficits and they’re more likely to take medication.”

Some instructors believe that there’s no way to judge readiness until the child gets behind the wheel. “You can’t tell from a diagnosis or first impression — you have to drive with them a while,” said Thomas Kalina, a driving rehabilitation instructor at Bryn Mawr Rehab in Malvern, Pa.

Maturity also has to be considered. If a teenager with A.D.H.D. is showing consistent poor judgment or has earned only limited independence, he may not be ready. Behavioral problems can be a red flag, regardless of whether they have to do with driving.

“If your kid is that oppositional and defiant, she shouldn’t be driving,” said Dr. Patty Huang, a pediatrician at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia.
Even before the child reaches driving age, instructors recommend preparing by making sure the child can ride a bike, or by “narrating” a parent’s driving, both of which help raise the teenager’s awareness of what’s involved in maneuvering through space and traffic.

When a child with A.D.H.D. is ready for lessons, experts say the first stop is not the driving school — it’s the doctor’s office.

Most young drivers with A.D.H.D. should be taking medication, they say; many studies have found that stimulants that help focus attention, like Ritalin and Adderall, can reduce the risk of accidents. “Medication should not really be optional,” Dr. Barkley said. He recommends considering extended-release formulations that remain effective at night, when accidents are most common.

A doctor’s exam might also uncover hidden issues. When Ms. Serpa decided to try again at age 20, for instance, an eye exam turned up a visual processing problem that may have contributed to her earlier driving difficulties.

More than most other teenagers, those with A.D.H.D. benefit from professional instruction — in some cases, with a driving rehabilitation specialist. The field developed to meet the needs of stroke patients and the elderly, but instructors now see a growing number of special-needs teenagers.

All involved should be prepared for training to take as long as is necessary for the young driver to develop competence — which may be a long time. The instructor should coach parents as well, since they oversee the bulk of practicing.

As any parent knows, it’s easy for sessions to turn acrimonious. But learning happens more quickly in a positive atmosphere. “It’s important to remind parents to work on catching your teen doing the right thing,” said Gregory A. Fabiano, a professor of psychology at the University at Buffalo.

Most states require only 40 or 50 hours of road practice before a driver is eligible for a licensing exam. Researchers generally agree that all teenagers should have more practice, and for children with learning disabilities the amount should be much greater, even if it means keeping them in the learner permit stage longer than strictly necessary.

For parents anxious about safety during practice, installing a temporary passenger-side brake can cost less than repairing a significant dent. And experts say parents may find that a child learns better in a car with a manual transmission, which gives the attention less time to wander.
In The News

Special measures may be helpful even after a teenager with A.D.H.D. earns a license. Many experts recommend that parents adopt a ramped-up version of the graduated licensing common in most states. Dr. Barkley encourages parents to carry out a strict program of monitoring that is relaxed bit by bit. Sign a contract on safe driving practices. Set up a logbook that teenagers can use to record medication, sign cars in and out and list where they’re going and who with. Cellphones should be strictly forbidden. The household contract can be tougher than the law, he said: “Tell them that even if the state doesn’t take their license away, we’re going to.”

It isn’t easy, but with these techniques children with A.D.H.D. are learning to drive, and safely. Indeed, sometimes they are their own best instructors. When he was learning, Josh Nabours, 21, a student with A.D.H.D. in Phoenix, found that his mind wandered whenever he waited at a red light.

“If I’m not doing anything, my mind starts going five times as fast,” he said. His solution? Turning on the radio, which provides just enough engagement to keep him rooted in the present.

These days, Mr. Nabours drives himself to classes at a community college, and he has never been in an accident or received a ticket.

OCTOBER 11, 2012 | ELLEN DANIELS

Dewey Cornell, a clinical psychologist and professor at the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education, is heading a research team that will develop a standard model for school climate and safety assessment in Virginia middle and high schools, thanks to a four-year, $500,000 U.S. Department of Justice grant he received through Youth-Nex, U.Va.’s center to promote effective youth development.

“Developing standards is critical,” Cornell said. “Schools need standard measures of school climate and safety so that they can identify areas for improvement and make informed decisions about the most effective practices to maintain a safe and orderly school. Our previous studies demonstrated that a positive school climate was linked to safer schools, as well as higher student achievement.”

The grant is designed to identify the most useful and valid measures and incorporate them into a standard process for school assessment and improvement. The project will build on Cornell’s studies in Virginia and collective research in other states. Project co-investigators include Curry School professor Tim Konold and senior scientist Francis Huang, and Youth-Nex postdoctoral fellow Peter Lovegrove.

In addition, representatives from the Virginia Department of Education and the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services will support the implementation of the grant.

“Many states already have statewide surveys to assess some aspects of school climate,” Cornell said. “So this is an important step for Virginia schools.”

The new surveys will be incorporated into the Virginia School Safety Audit program, which has largely relied on surveys of school principals since its beginning in 1997.

In 2007, the Virginia High School Safety Study, also conducted by Cornell, demonstrated the value of adding student and teacher surveys to the examination of school safety conditions.

Cornell will begin this latest study by assessing school climate and safety conditions, including the prevalence of bullying, in Virginia’s 327 middle schools next spring and in the state’s 311 high schools the following year.

The assessments will include online surveys of students and teachers to report on key features of school climate, such as perceptions that rules are strictly and fairly enforced and that students feel comfortable seeking help from teachers.

The safety component of the survey will assess how frequently students experience various forms of bullying, as well as other forms of teasing and aggression. Teachers will also be asked how frequently they experience student misbehavior that is disrespectful or threatening.

“This is the first time all Virginia secondary schools will receive a standard report of their school climate and safety conditions,” Cornell said.

Reports will be prepared on an alternating-year basis, with middle schools receiving a report in spring 2013 and 2015, and high schools in spring 2014 and 2016. The reports will permit schools to compare their results to state norms disaggregated by region, size of school and student demographics.

Cornell said the study is also designed to be part of a nationwide effort to reduce discipline problems in schools and boost graduation rates. The National School Discipline Consensus Project is part of the Council of State Governments’ Justice Center, a national nonprofit organization that aims to improve public safety.

“A critical problem is the widespread use of school suspension as a disciplinary consequence, especially among minority students,” Cornell said. “Many studies have questioned the effectiveness of school suspension, especially when it is an automatic, zero-tolerance policy.”

The Consensus Project is concerned with identifying best practices and establishing national standards for school discipline. Cornell’s work emphasizes disciplinary structure and support for students. His research has shown that “like good parents, schools should strive for a balance of both firm disciplinary structure and an understanding and supportive approach with students,” he said.
U.Va.'s Youth-Nex Center Team Player on Federal Grant Awarded to 'City of Promise' Initiative

February 22, 2012 — The Charlottesville City of Promise, an initiative involving area neighbors, schools, organizations and the University of Virginia's Youth-Nex Center, has received a $470,259 federal grant to spend a year planning how to ensure children’s academic achievement, healthy development and college and career success.

The City of Promise is among 15 initiatives – selected from a pool of more than 200 applicants in 45 states and the American Samoa and Puerto Rico – chosen to receive a U.S. Department of Education “Promise Neighborhoods” grant.

“Promise Neighborhoods recognizes that children need to be surrounded by systems of support inside and outside of the classroom to help them be successful in school and beyond,” Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said in a release announcing the awards.

For the past two years, Charlottesville’s City of Promise Steering Committee has been gathering information and planning to build community as the foundation for lasting change. This grant, awarded Dec. 19, provides funding to continue these efforts, as well as membership in a national network of communities working on similar initiatives.

“The City of Promise is focusing on changing the game in the neighborhood,” said Quinton Harrell, steering committee member and co-chair of the Dialogue on Race’s City of Promise Action Team. “Building a cradle-to-career-end-college pathway for kids toward life success is the primary objective.”

Harrell described the City of Promise initiative, which will initially focus on Charlottesville’s Westhaven, 10th & Page and Starr Hill neighborhoods, as “a high-powered engine being built by the community to propel all our children to excellence. Parents and neighbors will be the necessary fuel as we develop new builders of the engine within our neighborhoods.”

Unlike past efforts, Harrell said this initiative focuses on lasting change coming from within the neighborhoods. “Residents will possess the opportunity to help shape and guide the creation of the City of Promise.”

Through a combination of organizing, small group meetings and community engagement, “we plan to accomplish paradigm-shifting work with civic innovation as the guiding force,” Harrell said. “We have an opportunity to change lives for generations to come. That’s inspirational.”

Rosie Parker, a parent on the steering committee, sees the initiative both as a boon and a charge. “The importance of this opportunity is that City of Promise has come into our communities to help our children and their parents reach their potential. Our youth are bound for greatness. As parents, we must uphold our responsibility to make sure our children get to where they need to be: successful.”

Youth-Nex, whose aim is to promote effective youth development, is the evaluator for the initiative and has played a role since November 2010. Manyfrances Porter, Youth-Nex director for program evaluation and community consultation and member of the City of Promise Steering Committee said the grant will allow Youth-Nex to provide expertise that ensures the pathway is built according to the wishes of parents and youth, and that it is successful.

“The first step is to just talk with folks – find out what is important to them, hear their story and what they want for their kids, and to give people more information about the City of Promise. Parents, youth and neighbors are the leaders of this team – this movement,” Porter said. “Children will be the winners when every single one of them goes to college or enters the career of their choice.”

Charlottesville Vice Mayor Kristin Szekos, another member of the City of Promise Steering Committee, pointed out that the grant also pays for all three neighborhoods to have Internet connectivity by the end of 2012, which she said “is critical in the neighborhood so students can take advantage of the new tablets provided by city schools. We’ll also be working with area nonprofits to get computers into the hands of families who don’t have them.”

While the grant initially focuses on three Charlottesville neighborhoods, organizers hope to scale up the initiative to serve the broader community in the future.

~ By Ellen Daniels
City of Promise seeks to break the cycle of poverty

Making good in the 'hood

BY GRAELYN BRASHEAR

City of Promise director Sarad Davenport has come home to 10th and Page, the first neighborhood he can remember, to guide a project he believes will ultimately hand local kids a road map out of poverty. (Photo by John Robinson)

This city has a way of drawing home its native sons. It’s something of an old saw: Grow up in Charlottesville, and even if you strike out for distant horizons, chances are good you’ll end up here again.

For Sarad Davenport, getting out was no joke. His family’s first home was in Westhaven, the city’s oldest public housing complex. He came up through the city school system, succeeded in college, got a master’s degree, and dove into a career in education in Washington, D.C.

And now he’s back.
The city hired 32-year-old Davenport last month to head the City of Promise initiative, a federally funded, from-the-ground-up project that aims to guide underprivileged kids in Westhaven, the surrounding 10th and Page and Starr Hill neighborhoods and ultimately all of Charlottesville through life from birth to adulthood. The city was one of 15 communities nationwide selected for a Promise Neighborhoods grant at the end of last year, and Davenport is tasked with shepherding the project through to implementation stage, with help from a coalition of contributing agencies. For him, it’s personal.

“Had it not been for my connection to the Westhaven and the 10th and Page community, and my passion for the people here, I wouldn’t have taken this position,” Davenport said. “I wanted to see people do better on a broader scale.”

Promise Neighborhoods is a Department of Education-funded program designed to create networks of support services for kids in underserved communities. The approach is modeled after the one taken by the Harlem Children’s Zone, a 42-year-old nonprofit that offers families access to free health and educational resources throughout a child’s life.

Charlottesville’s Children, Youth & Family Services was tapped to administer a more than $470,000 planning grant last December, and started exploring how a similar “cradle-to-college-and-career” approach could help kids in Westhaven and the historically black neighborhoods that surround it.

There are a lot of players contributing to the project. Besides CYFS, nearly a dozen nonprofits and government agencies are on board, and the initiative’s steering committee is co-chaired by Vice Mayor Kristin Szakos and includes representatives from the city school district, the Charlottesville Redevelopment and Housing Authority, the health department and the Dialogue on Race.

At the helm is Davenport, now focused on rallying the stakeholders and answering the question at hand: What will break the cycle of poverty in Charlottesville? Educational programs for parents, all-day preschool, structured after-school programs, health clinics—it’s all on the table.

Davenport has chops, but maybe more importantly, he has history here.

“My earliest memories are of Westhaven,” he said, flicking a faded Polaroid across his desk in an office at CYFS’s High Street headquarters. In it, his father holds a toddler version of him outside one of the development’s two-story brick buildings. His grandmother’s apartment was his family’s home in the early 1980s, up to around the time Davenport started kindergarten.

“824H,” he said. “I go see it all the time now.” His parents moved out to the county and then back into the city over the next couple of years before divorcing, Davenport said. But life still revolved around Westhaven.

“That was always the hub,” he said. “That was home for me, the community I grew up in.” With aunts and uncles all over the neighborhood, there was always somebody keeping a watchful eye on him. It was a safe childhood, he said, and an upbringing where everyone had high expectations of him.

His history is his passport in a neighborhood where residents are wary of yet another newcomer pushing social reform. Talking about his past flips a switch for a lot of people.

“First, they’re off,” he said. “You’re just another person—what are you selling this time? But when I tell them my story, it changes the current. They light up. They listen.”
In The News

But for now, Davenport wants them to do the talking. The grant awarded a few months ago funds a year-long planning period, during which City of Promise is gathering data—from truancy and teen pregnancy rates to the percentage of parents who read to their kids—and gauging public opinion. They’ll use what they find to craft a plan for a social support network for kids and families in 10th and Page, and then they’ll try for a Promise Neighborhoods Implementation grant. Last year, the DOE awarded only five nationwide, for up to $6 million.

For Davenport, phase one translates to a lot of mornings at the Westhaven school bus stop talking to parents, and many meetings with the initiative’s long list of partners.

“People already have passionate concerns about their community,” Davenport said. “And you need to listen to those, authentically listen, and allow them to be heard.”

Parts of his personal history could be a template for success.

Learning started early for him, he said. His parents sent him to preschool at Westminster Presbyterian Church on Rugby Road, and he was reading by the time he started public school. “From the time I was born, they strategically planned my life curriculum,” Davenport said. His youth was spent in city schools, and he graduated from Charlottesville High School in 1997.

Davenport studied communications at Old Dominion University, where he met his future wife, Cortney, and landed an internship with an internal communications publication for the New York Times in Norfolk. After graduation in 2001, he worked for Charlottesville’s CFA Institute designing web-based informational programs.

He liked his job, and he was good at it. But it didn’t move him. “I knew I needed to work more with people and less with things,” he said.

Davenport describes himself as a man of faith. He’d attended Mount Zion Baptist Church since childhood, and was teaching Sunday school there and working with local youth. At one point he realized he cared far more deeply about his off-hours efforts. “There was a shift where I knew I needed to make this my life’s work,” he said.

He entered the master’s degree program at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Richmond’s Virginia Union University, with an aim to end up in education. A heavy course load and a conviction that he’d switched to the right track led him to quit his job at CFA in 2007.

“It was risky,” he said. “I had to kind of step out on faith.”

But things fell into place. Within weeks, he got a job with Region Ten, a local social services agency, offering counseling services to kids struggling in school. A little over two years later, degree in hand, he was working as a preschool teacher for the Knowledge Is Power Program, an acclaimed charter school network in Washington, D.C.

He learned the nuts and bolts of community engagement on the job. Mandatory home visits with his school’s students—most of them from underserved areas of the city’s Southeast quadrant—helped him understand the scope of the kids’ needs.

When a friend called him last summer and told him City of Promise was looking for a director, he didn’t immediately jump at the idea.


Still, the idea of returning to the neighborhood as an agent of change appealed. Davenport applied, and when the city asked him to join the project, he said yes. And he bought in. He, his wife and their three children—ages 9, 5 and 3—are settling into a home on Page Street, just blocks from where he spent his early years.

Not every kid in the neighborhood is going to go to college. Not everybody who succeeds will do it the way he did it. This he knows. But he’s working to give as many kids as possible a fair start. Some days it’s frustrating, because for now, everything exists as an outline of an idea. But he knows the dream has to come before the reality. “It’s work,” he said. “But it’s good work.”
Why A Teen Who Talks Back May Have A Bright Future

by PATI NEIGHMORD

If you're the parent of a teenager, you likely find yourself routinely embroiled in disputes with your child. Those disputes are the symbol of teen developmental separation from parents.

It's a vital part of growing up, but it can be extraordinarily wearing on parents. Now researchers suggest that those spats can be tamed and, in the process, provide a lifelong benefit to children.

Researchers from the University of Virginia recently published their findings in the journal Child Development. Psychologist Joseph P. Allen headed the study.

Allen says almost all parents and teenagers argue. But it's the quality of the arguments that makes all the difference.

"We tell parents to think of those arguments not as nuisance but as a critical training ground," he says. Such arguments, he says, are actually life lessons in how to disagree — a necessary skill later on in life with partners, friends and colleagues on the job.

Teens should be rewarded when arguing calmly and persuasively and not when they indulge in yelling, whining, threats or insults, he says.

In Allen's study, 157 13-year-olds were videotaped describing their biggest disagreement with their parents. The most common arguments were over grades, chores, money and friends. The tape was then played for both parent and teen.

"Parents reacted in a whole variety of ways. Some of them laughed uncomfortably; some rolled their eyes; and a number of them dove right in and said, 'OK, let's talk about this,'" he says.

It was the parents who said wanted to talk who were on the right track, says Allen. "We found that what a teen learned in handling these kinds of disagreements with their parents was exactly what they took into their peer world," with all its pressures to conform to risky behavior like drugs and alcohol.

Allen interviewed the teens again at ages 15 and 16. "The teens who learned to be calm and confident and persuasive with their parents acted the same way when they were with their peers," he says. They were able to confidently disagree, saying 'no' when offered alcohol or drugs. In fact, they were 40 percent more likely to say 'no' than kids who didn't argue with their parents.

For other kids, it was an entirely different story. "They would back down right away," says Allen, saying they felt it pointless to argue with their parents. This kind of passivity was taken directly into peer groups, where these teens were more likely to acquiesce when offered drugs or alcohol. "These were the teens we worried about," he says.

Bottom line: Effective arguing acted as something of an inoculation against negative peer pressure. Kids who felt confident to express themselves to their parents also felt confident being honest with their friends.

So, ironically the best thing parents can do is help their teenager argue more effectively. For this, Allen offers one word: listen.

In the study, when parents listened to their kids, their kids listened back. They didn't necessarily always agree, he says. But if one or the other made a good point, they would acknowledge that point. "They weren't just trying to fight each other at every step and wear each other down. They were really trying to persuade the other person." Acceptable argument might go something like this: 'How about if my curfew's a half hour later but I agree that I'll text you or I'll agree that I'll stay in certain places and you'll know where I'll be or how about I prove to you I can handle it for three weeks before we make a final decision about it.'

Again, parents won't necessarily agree. But they'll get across the message that they take their kids point of view seriously and honestly consider what they have to say," Allen says.

Child psychologist Richard Weissbourd says the findings bolster earlier research that finds that "parents who really respect their kids' thinking and their kids' input are much more likely to have kids who end up being independent thinkers and who are able to resist peer groups."

Weissbourd points to one dramatic study that analyzed parental relationships of Dutch citizens who ended up protecting Jews during World War II. They were parents who encouraged independent thinking, even if it differed from their own.

So the next time your teenager huffs and puffs and starts to argue, you might just step back for a minute, take a breath yourself, and try to listen. It may be one of the best lessons you teach your child.
Teens Who Have Dogs Are More Active, U.Va. Study Finds

April 11, 2011 — The University of Virginia professor whose well-publicized study found that teens whose families own dogs get more exercise than those in dog-less households admits that his 6-year-old daughter had to beg him to buy a dog of their own.

“We caved, but I'm glad we did,” said kinesiologist John Sirard of the Curry School of Education, whose study appeared in the March issue of the American Journal of Preventive Medicine and has been picked up by news outlets from India to Los Angeles.

Sirard's research found that teens in dog-owning families get an average of three minutes more activity each day than teens in dog-less households.

“People love dogs,” said Sirard, who has a joint appointment with the Department of Kinesiology and Youth-Nex, a Curry School-based research center promoting healthy youth development. “We have a long history of having these companion animals.”

The research also builds upon something that many already know. Elderly people who own dogs have improved mental and physical health, Sirard said. “So it's building off of that, looking at kids instead,” he said.

Future work may look into why there is more physical activity, and the effects of breed, dog size and the environment on how much teens walk or play with their dogs. “There are other nuances we need to try and pull out if we are going to fully understand this,” he said.

Sirard's academic career wasn't launched because of his passion for exercise or even his love of the outdoors -- but because of doughnuts.

With a marketing degree under his belt, a two-year stint managing a doughnut shop brought what he calls a “trifecta” of bad habits to his attention and changed his career path.

“They were pretty scary,” he said of his seemingly not-so-healthy clientele who were regularly consuming doughnuts, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee with cream and sugar.

Sirard thought about going into medicine, but chose to pursue a Ph.D. in exercise physiology instead. “I wanted to focus on the prevention of chronic disease rather than treatment of problems,” he said.

He joined the Curry School of Education faculty in August 2010 from the University of Minnesota, where he studied physical activity in children, particularly how environment affects behavior. The position in kinesiology, a field focusing on human movement, is a natural fit for him; the joint appointment with Youth-Nex focusing on effective youth development, encompassing many more aspects of youth health, is now but welcome.

“It has broadened the scope of my work beyond just physical activity,” Sirard said. “If we can get kids more engaged in physical activity, get them off the couch, that might also improve academic performance and then also keep them busy enough so they don’t have time to do risky behaviors.”

Youth-Nex director Patrick Tolon is enthusiastic about having Sirard on board. “He's looking at the future of the role of physical activity and the new challenges for our youth in these changing times,” Tolon said.

Sirard said that many questions remain about solving the problems of inactivity and obesity, but he said for teens, “Dog ownership is one piece to the puzzle. And, if you don't own a dog, find some other ways to fit physical activity into your day. Make it something you enjoy and can sustain.”

— By Ellen Daniels
Safe Schools initiative assesses bullying problem in local schools; hot button issue sparks national debate

Army of one

BY SUSAN SORENSEN

Thirteen-year-old Alexis is a talented singer who reads at an 11th grade level. She says she wants to go to college and then law school, so she can become a lawyer and "defend people who can't defend themselves." Her mother, Samantha, makes sure she frequently tells her daughter that she is both smart and beautiful. But Alexis, a seventh-grader at Buford Middle School, pays more attention to what others say about her. And lots of it is ugly.

"This year has been really hard," her mom said. "One of the kids' favorite things to call her is 'blackneck' because the pigmentation on her neck is dark. Some nights, Alexis scrubs her neck so hard in the shower that it turns beet red, even though I tell her, 'That's your skin tone. You can't wash that off.'"

According to Samantha, Alexis has been kicked, pushed, and hit while at school. Other students have splashed her with water in the bathroom and many have called her names. After Alexis' father died in November, the "dead daddy" jokes started, she said, and haven't stopped.

Were it not for a Buford guidance counselor—"a godsend," Samantha calls her—who has an open-door policy and is available to Alexis whenever she needs to talk, Samantha's not sure how her daughter would make it through the school day.

"Being part of the choir has helped a little bit because she gets complimented about her voice. But Alexis is really defensive a lot of the time; she thinks nobody likes her...She has a couple friends, and sometimes they take up for her [when the taunting starts], but a lot of times they are quiet. Or they join in. And then they're nice to her the next day."

I'll be 50 years old this summer, and I still haven't entirely recovered from a pack of middle school mean girls who made me doubt everything from the brand of jeans I wore to the grape jelly I smeared on my daily PB&J sandwich. Thirty-eight years later, I remember the names of every one of those girls. What I don't recall, is a single newspaper article or television report about the repercussions of bullying. Nobody talked about a Phoebe Prince or a Tyler Clemente or a Lexi Pilkington, students who have made headlines in recent years when they killed themselves after being pushed to the brink by the brutality of others. In 1974, President Ford was more interested in promoting his "Whip Inflation Now" campaign than in hosting a conference on bullying prevention like the one introduced at the White House in early March by President and Mrs. Obama.
"We want our students to want to come to school," said Victoria Haggstrom, a teacher and the anti-bullying coordinator at Jack Jouett. (Photo by John Robinson)

Bully pulpit

"Have you heard about the group of girls who are being so awful to everyone?" a mother asked me during a sixth-grade volleyball game last month. At a dinner party the following week, a teacher told me that the behavior in an elementary school class had so deteriorated that a high school coach was called in to speak to the students about the importance of working together, about cheering for one another and not rooting for others to fail.

In his review of Bully—a just-released and much-hyped film—New York Times critic A. O. Scott said the "moving and troubling documentary about the misery some children inflict upon others, arrives at a moment when bullying, long tolerated as a fact of life, is being redefined as a social problem." Yet a March 12 Time magazine article claimed "as painful as bullying can be, and as horrible as its victims' scars may be, research suggests that the talk of an epidemic may be exaggerated."

Who's right? Do we all need to take a deep breath, calm down, and just let "kids be kids"? Or are we really in the thick of a bullying epidemic?

To help figure this out, Albemarle-Charlottesville Safe Schools/Healthy Students administers an annual Peer Support Survey, which allows students in grades four through 12 to anonymously write down the names of those who are possible bullying victims. Counselors talk to children whose names appear multiple times, in hopes of determining if intervention or assistance is needed. By conducting this survey in the fall, "the schools and SS/HS hope to identify students in any potentially harmful situations before [too much of] the school year has gone by," said Lois Wallenhorst, project coordinator for Safe Schools.

Each spring, the organization also "seeks information about many factors that can affect students' school performance," including school safety, relationships with peers, substance abuse, and other risk behaviors, Wallenhorst said. Bullying, according to the survey, is "the use of one's strength or popularity to injure, threaten, or embarrass another person. Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social. It is not bullying when two students of the same strength argue or fight."

After reading that definition, students are asked whether they have been bullied in the past month "never," "once or twice," "about once per week" or "several times per week." In addition, they are questioned about physical, verbal, social, and cyber bullying, as well as where bullying takes place and whether they have reported it to anyone.

June Jenkins, Albemarle-Charlottesville project director for Safe Schools, said bullying peaks in the late elementary and early middle school years because "as kids mature and develop, anything that's different can become a target. Size, shape, clothes, mannerisms...anything." One of the best ways to combat it is for parents to "have a conversation with your children before it happens," and to be on the lookout for "changes like a drop in grades; a change in attitude; not wanting to do things they used to enjoy; a refusal to ride the school bus. Talk to them. Ask them specific questions...who they sit with at lunch, who they played with during recess."

According to Jenkins, grown-up supervision should be increased at this age since "typically, bullying happens when adults aren't around," which means it often falls to other children to report the abuse. Friends are important because they are frequently the ones who ask for help, and kids need to be taught the difference between snitching and seeking assistance. Self-confidence is another key to bullying prevention. It is "a great shield," Jenkins added. Confident students are "very comfortable with themselves," which is unappealing to bullies. Those children are also often "the bystanders who will stand up and defend others; they will know that they should do something to help and protect" a child who is being picked on.

Ignoring a bully may work too because bullies "look for an audience," Jenkins said. If kids walk away, they aren't giving the bully the attention or the satisfaction. It's no longer cool.

The anti-bullying initiatives of organizations like Safe Schools, which was started in 2005 with a four-year, $5.8 million government grant, combined with heightened attention in schools, homes, and the media, may explain a SS/HS report that showed over a two-year period (spring 2009 to spring 2011) the number of students who claim they were bullied at least once in the past 30 days dropped 22 percent in high schools, 16 percent in middle schools, and 8 percent in elementary schools. But the report also indicated that 34 percent of elementary school students, 26 percent of middle school students, and 18 percent of high school students said they had been bullied.

Net flicks

It's an unseasonably warm Monday in March, and Jack Jouett Middle School principal Kathryn Baylor is pissed off. A fight broke out earlier in the afternoon, and Baylor has just finished an impromptu meeting with the irate mother of one of the children involved in the contretemps. But it's not the fight—or even a livid, shouting parent—that's rattled Baylor. She's angry with the students who didn't look for an adult to intervene and put a stop to the bust-up. Instead, they watched, cheered, and recorded the incident on their cell phones. And then, quicker than anyone could say "Friend me," they posted it on Facebook, where it immediately received dozens of "Likes."
According to Jack Jouett Middle School Assistant Principal Steve Saunders, bullying is often "seen," but not always as obvious as other behaviors, which "can be a tough thing for an 11-year-old to figure out." (Photo by John Robinson)

Baylor demanded that the episode be removed from Facebook, which, to her relief, it was. "These are good kids, but all the internet stuff has taken up more of our worlds now," she said, looking down at her new silver Apple computer that she admitted she's still figuring out. According to a recent Associated Press-MTV poll on Internet behavior, more than half of 1,359 teenagers and young adults surveyed (56 percent) said they've been harassed or bullied online. That's up from 50 percent in 2009.

"The tools are so different now," Jenkins admitted. "When we were kids we could get away from it. Now it can follow children into their homes and their bedrooms." Added Wallenhorst: "Those situations can have a lasting impact on kids' feelings about school, their self-esteem and worth, not to mention their ability to achieve and be successful at school."

As part of the It Gets Better Project, a nationwide anti-bullying campaign, the University of Virginia's Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) Resource Center is using the Internet in a positive way with a four-and-a-half minute video in which older students and UVA faculty remind younger kids that their lives really will improve. "High school and middle school are pretty tough to deal with for pretty much everybody," University of Virginia freshman Joe Leonard says on the video. "But it's even harder if you're a member of the LGBT community...You think [the abuse] is going to go on forever, but it's not" he promised, thanks to the resources at places like UVA, and the awareness of its faculty, staff, and students.

"The older we get, the better and the stronger we get," said Ed Warwick, coordinator of the University's LGBT Resource Center, which has help panels at Charlottesville, Fluvanna, and Tandem schools, among others, aimed at helping teachers and guidance counselors be "supportive of people on their journey of development." Warwick admitted that the It Gets Better video may not change everyone's life, "but if a high school student finds it, and she feels better on a bad night" then it's done its job. Bullying isn't just being pushed or called a name, and it doesn't go away—even when you're an adult, he said. "But it's important to not feel afraid to ask for help. If folks aren't reporting these things, then how can we help? We all have the responsibility to make things better.

**Point of access**

"My nightmare scenario is one in which we don't get to a student in time after we've heard about a suspected bullying incident, and then the bullying continues, and the student ends up feeling less empowered," said Steve Saunders, Jack Jouett Middle School assistant principal. "The student had a voice, he or she tried to get help from an adult, but then nothing happened. That's a devastating scenario."

The key to preventing this, Saunders said, is "multiple access points," meaning a student might feel comfortable first talking to the school nurse or a bus driver or a teacher or a coach. Somebody who will then give that information to administrators and/or school counselors who are trained to deal with the problem, and who can pursue it further and work with both the victim and the bully. "This is particularly important with suspected incidents of bullying because it allows [school officials] to track patterns of behavior," he said. But "discipline in middle school is often gray," Saunders added. "Bullying can sometimes be very overt, but sometimes it is not as obvious as other behaviors." Hiring someone "is certainly mean—and unacceptable—but it may not necessarily be bullying. That can be a tough thing for an 11-year-old to figure out. At the end of the day, our job is to teach students the skills to handle these situations responsibly."

Victoria Megginson, a language arts teacher and Jouett's anti-bullying coordinator, recalled a recent effective and eye-opening moment when Deputy Commonwealth's Attorney Darby Lowe spoke to students about the legal consequences of bullying. Students learned from Lowe that some of the actions they think are just a joke—threatening language or texts or e-mails—could land them in a heap of trouble.

Jack Jouett Middle School is "a good place to be," Megginson said. "We as teachers are happy to be here, and, for the most part, the kids are too. But we're always looking for things we can do to make our kids feel comfortable. We want them to want to come to school."

"We're not perfect," Saunders added. "You can have all of the structure in place and be proactive, but you certainly can't predict or control everything. Sometimes, "we miss things and we make mistakes. But if a really reticent sixth-grader is being bullied and he knows he can trust somebody, that there's somebody at school who will help him, and we encourage him to share with an adult what is happening...then we can work with him and we can address the problem in an appropriate way. After that, usually the bullying will stop, and the victim knows that he stood up for himself."

Seventh-grade Alexis tries to stand up for herself every day, according to her mother, who said she has no idea why her daughter first became a target a couple years ago, while a student at Walker Upper Elementary School. Samantha initially "thought this was a phase, and it would stop, but it hasn't. I've gone through a lot of guilt about not doing enough to help my daughter. I've cried because I don't know how to help her."

Alexis said she struggles to understand why some of her peers "think it is O.K. to pick other people apart. They go home and forget about the mean things they say and do, but I think about them all night and dread the next day and what's to come." But like the students in the UVA video, Alexis said she knows "it will get better."

Maybe as soon as next fall, when she'll attend a different middle school. In the meantime, her mother continues to "constantly remind her that you can't let [the bullies] win. I tell her to focus on her school work; that someday she will be someone, and that will be the best revenge."
In The News

Is ‘zero tolerance’ good for schools?

U. VIRGINIA (US) —
Automatic expulsions for students who threaten or commit acts of school violence may be politically popular, but research raises questions about the policy’s effectiveness.

The widely used practice of automatic suspension increases the risk for academic failure and does not seem to improve student behavior, a new study finds. By contrast, schools using threat assessment strategies showed a 79 percent reduction in bullying infractions and a 52 percent reduction in long-term suspensions. (Credit: iStockphoto)

University of Virginia professor Dewey Cornell finds that careful assessment and measured action is a more effective response to school violence than a one-size-fits-all, zero-tolerance approach.

Cornell says the study reveals students in schools that used a strategy to evaluate the seriousness of school violence, instead of automatic expulsion, are more likely to receive more appropriate responses for their actions, such as mental health counseling or parent conferences. The students also are less likely to receive long-term suspensions or transfers to other schools.

Straight from the Source

Read the original study

Although threat assessment is a widely recommended practice to prevent school violence—as well as workplace violence—according to Cornell, “to my knowledge, it is the first randomized, controlled trial of threat assessment of any kind.” he adds.

Cornell’s research, published in the March issue of School Psychology Review, tested his Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines, which offer a roadmap for school professionals to evaluate the seriousness of threats of violence made in schools.

“Threat assessment allows school administrators to return to the philosophy that the punishment should fit the crime, and that the school’s response to a student should be based on the seriousness of the threat, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach that you see with ‘zero tolerance,’” Cornell says.
Threat assessment

According to Cornell, director of the Virginia Youth Violence Project, severe acts of violence in school are relatively rare, but threats of violence are much more common and pose a serious problem for schools in the United States.

The widely used practice of automatic suspension increases the risk for academic failure and does not seem to improve student behavior, Cornell adds.

“Our research has shown that schools which rely the most on suspension have the highest dropout rates,” he says. “We know that suspension has deleterious effects or students and is counterproductive to our goal of helping them complete their education.”

Threat assessment can actually help identify underlying problems, such as bullying or conflicts in friendships and romantic relationships, Cornell notes. In other cases, there are disputes with teachers, learning problems or other difficulties that need attention.

“Schools using threat assessment showed a 79 percent reduction in bullying infractions and a 52 percent reduction in long-term suspensions,” Cornell says.

“Sometimes this kind of student behavior may point to stressful circumstances leading to emotional distress, anger and depression. As a result, one goal of threat assessment is to initiate appropriate mental health counseling services for the student.”

The study was conducted in 40 elementary, middle, and high schools in Newport News, Virginia. Schools that received staff training in threat assessment showed large changes in staff understanding of the risk of student violence as well as changes in their attitudes toward zero tolerance and the use of suspension.

The schools were then followed for one school year. During this time, school authorities identified 201 students as making a threat of violence. Those students who were in schools using the Virginia Guidelines were four times more likely to receive counseling services and 2.5 times more likely to have a parent conference to resolve the problem or conflict associated with the student’s threat.

Students in the control group—in schools that had only a zero-tolerance policy, with automatic suspensions—were almost three times more likely to receive a long-term suspension and seven times more likely to be placed in an alternative school than students in schools using the Virginia Guidelines.

Risk and reward

But does keeping a troublesome student in school jeopardize others’ safety?

“Certainly there are a small number of students who are more safely educated in an alternative setting,” Cornell says, “but there is no evidence to indicate that a policy of keeping most students in school impairs the safety of others.

“Schools that use zero tolerance are not safer schools. The guidelines permit short-term suspensions for safety purposes in clearly specified cases, but almost all students are able to return to school.”

Cornell says these guidelines are now being used in more than 1,000 Virginia schools as well as schools across the U.S. and in several other countries.

More news from the University of Virginia: www.virginia.edu/uvatoday
Youth-Nex Grants Fund Projects Involving Childhood Obesity, Russian Literature, Teen Sex

December 6, 2010 — Youth-Nex, the new University of Virginia research center to promote effective youth development, has awarded five grants to U.Va. faculty to study topics that range from reducing childhood obesity in Charlottesville, to teaching Russian literature to jailed youth, to surveying attitudes about adolescent sexual behavior.

The awards, totaling $145,000, are the first in what will be an annual request for proposals sponsored by the Curry School of Education-based research center.

"We were looking to support work that promotes research understanding of youth health and reducing developmental risk," center director Patrick Tolan said, "but most also will provide practical help, including interventions within the Charlottesville and surrounding communities."

Affiliation with a community organization was one of the priorities for selection, he said, but another important aspect of the grants is that they be collaborative and interdisciplinary.

"This is one of the hallmarks of the center," Tolan said, "to be a scholarly nexus – both a core and a connector – on Grounds. We scientists can forget kids have lots of facets to their lives. The center is meant to bring that into focus."

The seed funding brings together several University areas, including the Department of Systems Engineering in the School of Engineering and Applied Science; the School of Medicine; the departments of Slavic Languages and Literatures and of Psychology in the College and Graduate School of Arts & Sciences; and the Curry School.

A rundown of the projects that were funded:

• One study couples human-centered systems design expertise with the U.Va. Health System to improve the health of obese children.

Stephanie Guerlain, associate professor of systems and information engineering, plans to launch a website with a social networking component to replace paper logs at the Children's Fitness Center, a program at U.Va.’s Kluge Children’s Rehabilitation Center.

The Children's Fitness Center matches children with medical, fitness and nutrition counselors who collect data about the children via a paper log that the children keep — a less-than-ideal arrangement, Guerlain said. “Often kids aren’t compliant, they don’t do it or they forget to bring them.”

With the new "CFC GetFit Program," 10- to 18-year-olds will use a series of drop-down menus to record things like food intake, activity levels and mood. The participants will not only be able to communicate anonymously with one another, but they’ll be able to communicate with their counselors and even text information to the site, Guerlain said.

Guerlain hopes the participants will be motivated by the new system and that retention will be improved. "If so, it will be useful for the Children's Fitness Center as standard protocol, and offered to other sites," she said.

• Award recipient Andrew Kaufman, lecturer and academic community engagement faculty fellow with the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, has created a course in which U.Va. undergraduate students teach masterpieces of Russian literature to incarcerated youth.

(continued on next page)
In The News

Building on 13 months of research at the Jefferson Trail Treatment Center for Children in Charlottesville and Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Center in Powhatan County, his newly funded "Books Behind Bars" program is unique in that it will look at the program's effects on the U.Va. students, rather than just the jailed youth, he said.

While Kaufman said the initial intent of the program was to offer a unique educational opportunity to incarcerated youth, what he found was that the teaching model was having a profound impact on the students.

"When students teach within the stark physical reality of a juvenile correctional facility, discussions about freedom, social alienation, finding one's place in the world become more than academic debates," Kaufman said. "Students discover in an immediate way that these are real issues with significant consequences for peoples' lives."

"Students in the class are more intrinsically motivated, gain a deeper understanding of the literature and are more likely to choose careers that have a community service component," he said.

The texts also provide opportunities for the jailed youth, Kaufman said. "They help incarcerated youth grapple with some of life's biggest questions. What makes for a 'successful' life? How can I be true to myself? What is my responsibility to others? Given that I will die, how should I live?"

Researchers Diane Whaley from the Curry School, Mark DeBoer from the Medical School's Department of Pediatrics and Amy Bolton from the School of Nursing will use tennis and nutritional training to improve health and prevent obesity at the Southwood Mobile Home Park in Albemarle County.

In six 3½-hour monthly sessions, children of the largely Latino community will get a Nef tennis workout and nutritional instruction; while parents participate in a parental counseling session focused on teaching their children healthy choices. Afterward they all share in a healthy dinner.

The dinner is important for teaching healthy habits, Whaley said. During the meal, the researchers provide the recipes, discuss portions and share about healthy eating.

"Here we have an innovative application of a promising approach for a population that is particularly at risk for a sedentary lifestyle and limited exercise and obesity," Tolan said.

Another important component is the way parents and children interact within the community, Whaley said.

"Families also influence each other," Whaley said. "So the more we can teach the children, the more they're likely to positively influence the parents, and the more the parents are likely to influence the children."

Although the program will collect data on only the 8- to 11-year-old children in the family, Whaley said the whole family is welcome. The work is much more than just research, Whaley said. "It's a true community partnership and community engagement study," she said.

Her goal is for people in Southwood to benefit over the longer term. "Our hope is that they'll go out and behaviors will stay with them."

Arthur Weltman from Curry's Department of Human Services (Kinesiology) and Eugene Barrett of the Medical School's Department of Medicine, Endocrinology and Metabolism are collaborating on a study to determine whether low fitness levels are associated with impaired vascular function in 12- to 18-year-olds with Type I diabetes.

"The risk of heart attack or stroke is eight to 20 times greater than in non-diabetics," with the lower rate representing risk for males and the higher rate representing risk for females, Weltman said.

The team will implement a 12-week exercise program, including healthy dietary recommendations, for children from local communities to determine if a regular fitness routine can mitigate the complications of the disease.

"With diabetes increasing in prevalence, management of the disease becomes important for a larger group of youth," Tolan said. "This is an attempt to see how the physical activity of kids might be promoted to help kids with this serious disease."

Dick Reppucci has spent more than 20 years studying teen competence in areas such as medical decision-making and competence to stand trial. The Youth-Nex grant will allow him to study competence to consent to sexual activity; specifically, what both teens and adults know about Virginia's statutory rape laws.

"By the time kids finish high school, 65 to 70 percent of girls have already had sexual intercourse, and somewhere between 80 to 90 percent of boys have," said Reppucci, a psychology professor in the College.
Rappucci has found that most U.Va undergraduates have little idea about statutory rape laws and many, he said, could have been prosecuted.

"And these are the best and the brightest, so one wonders what others out there know and when should they be making decisions," he said.

The law becomes less clear if the individuals involved are under 18.

In Virginia, there is no law of sexual consent and any sexual conduct with a person under 18 is a crime in some form, according to the assistant Commonwealth's Attorney, Elizabeth Killeen. Sexual activity between minors 14 and under is even more complicated with varying rules and degrees of punishment.

But Reppucci says that most violations of the statutory code involve people between 18 and 24 years old – "Not the dirty old man you're thinking of," he said. So he feels it's important for young adults to know the law.

Reppucci is also concerned with the treatment of youth due to misperceptions or discrimination by Virginia legislators and judges who often treat teens and adolescents as adults.

"You're not competent to make a decision until you are 18 years old to have a tattoo," he said. "However, you are competent to get life without possibility of parole if you kill someone when you're 14."

Reppucci said that instead of being physically on target, society alters the law according to its values.

Reppucci will study three groups within the greater Albemarle-Charlottesville area: 18- to 24-year-olds, parents of teens and the teenagers themselves.

For study abstracts, follow the links below.

**Supporting Food and Exercise Counseling for Overweight and Obese Children**
Stephanie Guerlain

**Motivating Youth Through the Humanities: Pilot Study of Community-Based Model of Teaching Literature to University Students and High-Risk Youth**
Andrew Kaufman

**Improving Nutrition and Exercise Competence in Obese Schoolchildren via SALUD, a Community-Based Intervention at Southwood**
Diane Whaley, Amy Boitnott, Mark DeBoer

**Vascular Disease in Adolescent Type 1 Diabetic (DM1) Subjects: Influence of Diet and Fitness**
Arthur Weltman and Eugene Barrett

**Statutory Rape or 'Normal' Teen Love? Psychological Investigations of Adolescent Sexuality and the Law**
N. Dicken Reppucci

— By Ellen Daniels
Latino families get help from UVa on healthy habits

By TASHA KATES
Published: February 13, 2011

The little girl's palms were already filled with green beans, meat and other healty meal components in toy form, but when she was still hungry, Angie Hasemann asked the other children sitting in the circle.

Hasemann, a dietician with the University of Virginia Children's Fitness Clinic, reached into a bag and plunked a banana into the girl's outstretched hands.
The children giggled at the fruity addition, which made the meal look like a feast.

"Our balanced meals should always be smiling at us," Hasemann told the group before they started creating their own healthy meals.

Hasemann's presentation on Sunday was part of the most recent session of Salud, a UVa-based program that is trying to improve the nutrition and exercise habits of children who live in the largely Latino community of Southwood Mobile Home Park. Parents, children in the study group and the rest of the families have been spending about three hours once a month learning how to live a healthy, active life.

The project got started with the help of seed money from Youth-Nex, a UVa center focused on healthy youth development. Diane Whaley, a UVa professor who focuses on exercise psychology, said she didn't know nursing professor Amy Bolinetti and pediatrics professor Dr. Mark DeBoer until Youth-Nex's call for proposals. Ellen Daniels, Youth-Nex spokeswoman, said Salud was chosen for funding in part because of its collaborative nature.

Salud invites children ages 8 to 11 and their families to six monthly sessions. The parents and study subjects fill out surveys at the beginning and end of the study. Parents are weighed and measured to determine their body mass index at the beginning and end, while children involved in the study are weighed and measured during each session.

Children who aren't being tracked in the study play in the large entryway of the school while their parents learn and discuss healthy choices for their families. In an adjacent gymnasium, the children in the study group learn about nutrition, play related games and get some exercise through QuickStart Tennis.

At the end of the sessions, the families join together in the cafeteria to eat a well-balanced meal in healthy proportions.

Sunday's session was the fourth at The Covenant School's upper campus. While children who weren't in the study battled a beach ball around the foyer or colored, the study subjects learned about portion sizes and giggled as they tried to keep soft red-and-yellow balls bouncing on their tennis rackets in an obstacle course or over a net.

All of the activities run smoothly with the help of dozens of volunteers from UVa, who do everything from playing with the children to making them dinner. Sarah Wilson, part of a volunteer duo with Karen Root that Whaley calls the sessions' "lifesavers," said the parents and children have become more comfortable as they attend more sessions.

"It really starts with the parents," Wilson said, "How well parents respond to this will determine how these kids will grow up."
Underage Drinking Forum Held to Discuss Pervasive Problem

A community discussion of underage drinking combines the perspectives of parents, kids, and counselors to deal with a pervasive problem.

The forum provided information on the social and emotional effects of teen alcohol consumption, and the legal consequences kids and parents can face. It also pointed participants to community resources for prevention.

June Jenkins with Safe Schools, Healthy Students said, “We just want our kids to be smart. How do they say no? What strategies, what do they need in order to make those good decisions if they’re provided that opportunity?”

The Safe Schools/Healthy Students program teamed up with University of Virginia teen health departments to sponsor the event at the Boar’s Head Inn.
Anti-bullying efforts ramp up

Psychologist-designed anti-bullying programs take on the problem from the perspective of the bully, the victim and the school community.

BY CHRISTOPHER MUNSEY
Monitor staff

"With bullying, you need education and training from the administrators down to the students, a shared understanding of what bullying is and why it's wrong, and a concerted effort to identify victims of bullying and reach out to help them," Cornell says.

Interventions for bullies
It may sound counterintuitive, but bullies need help, too. Teens and even younger children who victimize others tend to have poor social skills and emotional regulation, which can contribute to their bullying behavior, says Susan Swearer, PhD, a psychologist and bullying researcher at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Whether it takes the form of hallway shouting or threatening text messages, bullying is surprisingly common. Nearly one in three students experienced bullying in the 2007-08 school year, and administrators at one in four schools described bullying as a daily occurrence, according to the federal report Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2010.

Such harassment isn't just a case of kids being kids, psychologists say. For perpetrators, bullying can begin a trajectory of trouble, including conduct disorders, substance abuse, truancy and crime. Victims suffer physical and emotional pain, and consequences can extend into adulthood. Among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) victims, bullying, motivated by their LGBT status (or perceived status) may lead to an increased risk of depression and suicide, according to a May 2011 study in the Journal of School Health.

Even students who aren't directly involved in bullying are affected by it — a climate of fear and distraction making learning harder for everyone, says Catherine Bradshaw, PhD, associate director of the Johns Hopkins Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence.

"That's why I consider it more a public health problem, rather than just an individual experience, or an individual problem, because it does pose significant concerns for the overall school environment," Bradshaw says.

With help from President Barack Obama — who hosted a bullying prevention conference at the White House last year, attended by APA CEO Norman B. Anderson, PhD — psychologist-designed interventions are finally getting attention on the national stage. And, rather than focusing only on educator training, these interventions are taking a multifaceted approach, addressing the underpinnings of bullying, understanding how much bullying is taking place and where, creating school cultures where bullying is not tolerated, and helping victims find their voice, Bradshaw says.

A comprehensive approach is the best strategy for reducing bullying, says Dewey Cornell, PhD, a clinical psychologist and education professor at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education.
In The News

Help for victims

Though some 40 percent of teachers report observing bullying once or more, according to a 2010 survey by the National Education Association, plenty of harassment happens outside of school officials’ sights. To identify the hidden victims of bullying, Cornell and his colleagues helped staff at the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Alternatives in Charlottesville, Virginia. The project uses anonymous surveys that ask students to list classmates who are regularly bullied.

“`What we’ve found in a number of schools is students who get listed 10 or 15 or 20 or more times. Almost invariably, these are students who are in serious trouble, and often not known to be victims by guidance counselors,” he says.

School counselors use this information to help victims by learning what type of bullying is taking place and investigating possible sources of conflict. They often identify perpetrators and may discipline them. School counselors also talk to bystanders and encourage them to intervene on behalf of the victim and not go on the bully, he says.

According to the project’s annual report, published in August, the number of high school students who reported experiencing bullying droped by 22 percent and the number of middle school students increased by almost 16 percent since the project started in 2009.

School-wide change

Perhaps the most effective way to reduce bullying is to build students together against bullying. One such program, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program developed by Norwegian psychologist Dan Olweus, PhD, and Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports are being tested by Bradshaw through a $13.3 million study of 52 public high schools in Maryland. The study is funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Safe and Supportive School grant program.

The Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports program works by asking students to discuss and adopt positive behavioral goals, such as being “ready, responsible and respectful” in their interactions with peers and teachers, Bradshaw says. In the classroom, respecting yourself can mean doing your best, being honest and using appropriate language, while being responsible can mean being on time to class, coming prepared and completing assignments, Bradshaw says.

Students who behave positively are eligible for rewards such as a ticket to a special school dance or permission to wear the school uniform for a day, she says.

Although the results of the high school study aren’t yet in, another random-ized trial of PBIS in 37 Maryland elementary schools showed that it resulted in less bullying and lower levels of social rejection (In press, Archives of Child and Adolescent Medicine).

Another effective way to galvanize students against bullying is to teach them ways they can intervene as bystanders, says developmental psychologist Ben Sliby, PhD, a senior scientist with the Development and Embargo Center Inc., a nonprofit organization based in Newton, Mass., that develops programs for education, health and economic opportunity. Empowering students to speak out and stand up for victims and helping them greatly reduces bullying, according to research on Sliby’s Aggression, Violence and Bystanders curriculum.

An expert panel that reviewed Aggression, Violence and Bystanders for a 2001 U.S. Department of Education report and students who received the curriculum showed significant decreases in their belief that violence is OK.

The program teaches students to stop and size up a bullying situation and to try to intervene if possible—perhaps by defusing the situation by taking a fairer or blocking the bully. If it’s not safe to intervene, students are encouraged to report bullying to an adult and to console a bullied peer afterward and say something supportive.

“A friendly response from a peer, for a kid who’s falling into despair, can be extremely effective,” Sliby says. Doing nothing, and saying nothing, only encourages continued bullying.

While evidence-based program schools use, the most important thing is that, as a society, we are finally taking bullying seriously, says Cornell. “The attention to bullying is going to be highly beneficial for the millions of students who experience it, and for that proportion of students on whom it’s a very serious problem,” he says. ■

To see APA’s resources on bullying, go to www.apa.org/education/k12/bullying.aspx.
**Youth-Nex Center: Learning More About How Kids Develop**

Posted: Jul 22, 2011 10:37 AM Friday, July 22, 2011 10:37 AM EST

The Youth-Nex Center at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education is helping young adults live a healthier, more productive life. It’s doing that by learning more about how kids develop. Patrick Tolan Ph.D. is Director of Youth-Nex and said adolescence isn't always an easy period in a person's life. There are major biological and social changes.

“Kids are out more, they have more freedom and more responsibility and they're moving toward adulthood and how do you make that big important shift and go through all of those changes and do that while navigating all the potential threats,” Tolan said.

Robert Pianta is Dean of the Curry School and said the Youth-Nex Center is working to better understand how children and young adults develop. “We’re very, very interested in the ways in which we cast the development of adolescence in a positive light,” Pianta said.

Youth-Nex connects and coordinates departments within the university. “For example, we've helped get a program together that has computer scientists working with pediatricians to help children manage their weight better,” Tolan said.

Youth-Nex also conducts research to better understand why kids act the way they do.

“We have ongoing studies where we work with schools and with families on the kinds of support and information and skills that might help them be able to give children the emotional support but also the supervision and the management that help them develop in a fully productive way,” Tolan said. The center also awards grants to UVA faculty to study topics including childhood obesity.
Keep your friends close: BFF calms kids' stress

New study suggests a positive side to peer pressure

By Linda Carroll
TODAY.com contributor
updated 5/19/2011 9:03:46 AM ET

Parents are always obsessing about peer pressure. And why not? It seems that everywhere we look, there are warnings that kids’ friends can lead them into mischief.

But a new study suggests that the opposite may also be true. Researchers have found that a child’s BFF can provide such a strong calming influence that there is actually a measurable effect on stress hormones during tense times.

And that, some experts say, might just lead to cooler heads and better decision making for tweens and teens — a very good thing from the perspective of nervous parents.

“One of the interesting things about these findings is that it’s not just any friend,” said the study’s lead author Ryan Adams, an assistant professor of pediatrics at the Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center. “It’s the best friend.”

What that might mean, Adams said, is that the intimacy between best friends is what is buffering them from the stress of upsetting events and experiences. “So with a best friend you might be more inclined to talk about issues that you’d be too embarrassed to talk about with someone who is just a friend,” he explained.

To look at the impact of friendship, Adams and his colleagues rounded up 103 fifth and sixth graders who had a best buddy to hang out with. For each of four school days, the kids were asked to fill out a diary five times. The mission: rate how they felt about what they’d experienced in the previous 20 minutes on a scale that ranged from 1 (very positive) to 7 (very negative).

They were also asked to fill out a questionnaire designed to give researchers a sense of how good the kids felt about themselves at that moment and if they’d been alone or with parents, siblings, a best friend, a boy or girl friend, classmates, strangers, teachers or some other person.
Along with the diary entries, the children were asked to spit into a vial. The resulting sample was then analyzed for the level of cortisol, a potent stress hormone.

While it might not surprise anyone to find that kids were happier in the company of a BFF, it was remarkable to see how the presence of a friend could buffer the physical effects of a negative experience: kids didn’t produce as much cortisol in response to an unpleasant experience when in the company of a best friend.

And, they tended to feel better about themselves overall.

When no friend was around during stressful times, cortisol shot up and self-worth plummeted.

The new findings may prompt parents to look at their children’s chums in a different way, said Patrick Tolan, director of Youth-Nex: The University of Virginia Center to Promote Effective Youth Development.

“This may be showing us that we could look at friends as a positive peer pressure,” Tolan said. “The presence of a friend might help children negotiate stressful situations better.”

The whole idea that peer pressure could be a positive force is a new one, Tolan said.

“This is not recognized,” he added. “Right now the focus is on how peer pressure from other kids might get you to take risks or to engage in impulses that might with more maturity be seen as unwise.”

If you’ve got a best friend when things seem dark in your life, you’ve got someone to talk to, Tolan said. And that friend might be a good sounding board with some sensible advice.

“So you might have a kid who feels his parents are hassling him so much that he’s ready to take off. Or one who doesn’t think it’s worth trying any more at school. Or a kid who thinks, I’m going to tell my dad what I really think of him and have it out.”

In cases like these, a friend in a cooler state of mind might provide a calming influence and sensible suggestions for how to proceed.

“There might be ways to promote that pro-social influence between peers,” Tolan said. “You might suggest that kids ask a friend before they act, for example.”

In other words, there might be an upside to peer pressure.
Bullying Top Concern for High School Students

**UVA TODAY**: **BULLYING IN SCHOOL**

For this week’s segment of UVA Today, Peter Lovegrove, of the Youth-Nex Center, joined CBS19’s Jim Hanchett to discuss bullying in schools.

The two discussed the finding that bullying is a top concern not only among elementary and middle school children, but of high school children as well. They also talked about prevention programs and whether or not they work; and what parents and students who are concerned about bullying should do about it.

**Youth-Nex Study:** **Bullying may affect test scores**

Virginia schools are fighting bullies in an attempt to boost test scores. A new study from the University of Virginia uncovers a direct connection between bullying and scores on standardized tests. It followed thousands of Virginia students through high school over the past four years and recommends that schools battle bullies to improve test scores. “Schools with more perceived bullying had lower test scores on SOL exams,” stated Anna Lacey, a doctoral student at UVA. UVA education researchers tracked passing rates on algebra, earth science, and world history Standards of Learning test scores, and compared those scores to the results of surveys asking students and teachers how bad the bullying was in their schools. “On different SOL test scores, between 3 and 6 percent lower scores on schools that had higher bullying,” Lacey said.

Dewey Cornell, a UVA professor of education said, “It is a significant problem that can have a substantial impact on the school’s academic performance.” Researchers say bully prevention programs could help schools that are under pressure to raise standardized test scores. “Bullying needs to be treated as a school wide problem rather than an individual problem, because the entire school - their academic achievement at the school level - is negatively affected by more bullying in the school,” added Lacey. These results are just part of the on-going Virginia High School Safety Study. Researchers still have another year’s worth of surveys and scores to sift through in the battle against bullies. “When you have a school climate where students feel intimidated, where they see their peers being teased or harassed, they become less engaged in school,” explained Cornell. Right now, researchers are collecting surveys from principals in every K-12 school in Virginia. They include new questions about what bully prevention programs are in place and how effective they are. The results of that study will be available in the fall.
Regular time with dad is key to kids’ happiness: study

BY ROSEMARY BLACK
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER
Friday, June 18th 2010, 1:17 PM

“There are now studies showing that the so-called rough and tumble play supports healthy exploration later on in life,” Harvard Medical School associate clinical professor William Pollack told Manbo.com. “People used to worry that it might increase aggression in boys, but there’s plenty of data out there to show that it can lead them to be more empathetic.”

Studies also show that dads often empower their children and encourage them to explore and meet new people, according to Manbo.com. And dads tend to be more in charge of playtime than the mother, too.

“Mothers help children feel connected, anticipated and wanted,” said Patrick Toian, professor at the Curry School at the University of Virginia, according to Manbo.com. “Fathers teach them how to interact with others and how to control themselves when they feel their needs aren’t being met.”

One study from the Université de Montréal School of Psychoeducation observed parents interacting with their toddlers while the children were put into “risky” situations. For one experiment, a stranger approached the kids and in another, the kids saw boys placed at the top of a flight of stairs. While the moms stayed closer, dads followed their kids at a greater distance, which researchers said encouraged kids to explore.

“We found that fathers are more inclined than mothers to activate exploratory behavior by being less protective,” lead study author Daniel Paquette told Manbo.com. And as any independent-minded child knows, the chance to explore without a helicopter mom on board leads to even more happiness.

Most dads are kings of playtime, not serious chats, according to a recent British study - but every minute counts towards kids’ happiness.

The key to childhood happiness might be more face time with Dad. Kids who chat regularly with their father are happier than kids who don’t, according to new research.

Children who converse with their father “most days” rated themselves 87 out of 100 on a happiness scale, while those who rarely talk to their dads scored a 79. The study results, released by the Children’s Society in Great Britain just in time for Father’s Day, called the findings “highly significant” because research has demonstrated that a person’s well-being later in life has a lot to do with their relationship with both parents during the teen years.

Of the 1,200 children in the study, who were 11 to 15, nearly 50% said they “hardly ever” talk to their dads about important subjects, as compared with just 26% who report rarely discussing important subjects with their moms.

Dads may not have as many meaningful conversations with their kids, but they lead to roughhouse with them more than moms do, and research indicates that’s important for kids’ development, too.

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Heavy girls likelier to have sex early

They're also less prone to use birth control, study shows

By Linda Carroll
msnbc.com
updated 8:19 a.m. ET May 24, 2010

Parents concerned about their daughters putting on extra pounds may have a new reason to worry. Overweight girls are more likely to start having sex early, to have multiple partners during their teen years, and to eschew condoms compared to thinner teens, a new study shows. And the situation worsens as the number of excess pounds goes up.

South Carolina researchers found that obese girls were almost three times as likely as others to have had sex before age 13 and 30 percent more likely to have had sex with more than three partners during their teen years, according to the study presented this month at the annual meeting of the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

Girls who were simply overweight had a lower, but still significant, risk of starting sex early. Compared to normal-weight teens, they were 60 percent more likely to begin sex before age 13 and 30 percent more likely to have had sex with more than three partners.

The study found that 6 percent of normal-weight teens had sex before age 13, as compared with 11 percent of overweight teens and 15 percent of obese teens. And 39 percent of normal-weight teens reported having sex with more than three partners as compared with 45 percent of overweight teens and 47 percent of obese teens.

Making matters worse, obese and overweight girls were also less likely to use condoms and other birth control. The study found that girls with weight issues were almost 20 percent less likely to use condoms than thinner girls, and more than 30 percent less likely to use other methods of contraception.

The magnitude of the findings surprised even the researchers, said Dr. Margaret Villers, the study's lead author. "We didn't realize what a strong predictor body weight would be," added Villers, an assistant professor at the Medical University of South Carolina.

Villers and her colleague analyzed data from 21,773 teenage girls who had taken part in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Survey. The survey is given to students at a broad range of middle schools and high schools across the nation every other year.

Overweight girls tend to hit puberty earlier

One possible explanation for the findings may be the impact excess pounds have on girls' bodies.Overweight and obese girls tend to hit puberty earlier than those of normal weight.

"They develop sooner," Villers explained. "They look like women sooner. And maybe that's why they are more likely to be pressured by their boyfriends to have sex at a younger age."

Another factor could be low self-esteem and poor body image, which have been correlated with obesity in other studies.

"It may be harder for girls who don't feel good about themselves to say 'no,' or even to stop a partner long enough to say they need to use a condom," Villers said.

She said she decided to look at the relationship between weight and sexual activity in teens because of the high rate of obesity in South Carolina, where she practices, and the exploding rate of sexually transmitted diseases in her area. She had noticed in her own practice that overweight girls seemed to start having sex earlier.

Villers said the rate of pregnancy and STDs in heavy girls haven't been studied yet.

Low self-esteem

She says she isn't sure how to stop heavy girls from having sex early, but suspects that efforts to build self-esteem might help. Further, she said, young women need to be taught how to stand up for themselves. "It's hard to say 'no,' if you feel badly about yourself and someone is validating you, saying 'you're attractive, and I want to have sex with you,'" she said.

Parents can play a big role in helping their daughters not only to eat right, but also to develop the social skills needed to ward off sexual advances, said Patrick Tolan, a professor in the department of psychiatry and neurobehavorial sciences at the University of Virginia and director of Youth-Nex: The University of Virginia Center to Promote Effective Youth Development.

But, Tolan allowed, it can be a tough line for parents to straddle. As they try to encourage weight loss through healthy diet and exercise, parents also need to be protecting their daughters' self image, Tolan said.

Because of society's emphasis on thinness, overweight girls may feel so unattractive that they start having sex as a way to hang on to a partner: "Parents need to find a way to help their daughters feel good about themselves," he said.

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Prescription drug use by children rising
Parents don't think their teens are having sex

Pesticides in kids linked to ADHD, study finds

Though the results are convincing, parents shouldn't overreact, said Dr. Lauren Chernick, a researcher in pediatric medicine at Columbia University Medical Center.

"It's not as though every overweight girl is having sex just because she's overweight," Chernick added. "And, of course, the flip side of that is that parents shouldn't assume that they don't have to worry if their daughters are normal weight."

What researchers do know is that girls who start having sex early and with many different partners are more likely to become pregnant, Chernick said.

"The conversations parents have with a daughter should be the same whether or not the girl is overweight," she added. "Parents need to talk about sex and about how girls can protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy."

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New UVa center takes holistic approach to youth problems

A new University of Virginia center is aiming to take a new, broader approach to risky behavior in youth.

The program is formally known as Youth-Nex: The UVa Center to Promote Effective Youth Development, and was made possible by a $4 million grant from Philip Morris.

“The Curry School is proud to take a leadership role in advancing the university’s effort to develop effective programs for youth and to assist communities and the commonwealth through the collaborative and multi-disciplinary work happening at Youth-Nex,” said Bob Pianta, dean of the Curry School of Education at UVa.

At the head of the new project is professor Patrick Tolan. His job is to find ways to coordinate experts across university departmental lines to help find better ways to reach children.

He said the broad, “holistic” approach is part of why he left Chicago, where he worked for the University of Illinois, for Charlottesville, to lead the project.

The center doesn’t directly administer programs, Tolan said. Instead, it focuses on the academics behind such programs.

Tolan explained that children don’t make bad decisions in a vacuum. Often, several problems can be interrelated. Most programs working to help youth today are aimed at one particular type of problem, he said.

He said he’s been excited to meet people both at UVa and around the area who are working on similar issues. He added that he’s been impressed by many of the people he’s run into.

His job now will be to help those people interact, he said. He’s hoping that new conversations will lead people to look at old questions in a new light.

The gift is in line with Altria’s philanthropic priorities, said Ken Garcia, spokesman for Altria, Phillip Morris’ parent company.

He said the gift isn’t linked in any way to the decision of UVa’s former president, John T. Casteen III, to join Altria’s board of directors just before he left the university.
ADHD meds help, but many parents still against them

Survey: Switching child to another school or hiring a tutor also get good marks

by Linda Carroll

Medication may be the most effective treatment for kids with ADHD but it’s not a cure-all, a new Consumer Reports survey shows.

Parents surveyed by the magazine reported using a variety of strategies to improve their kids’ symptoms, such as hiring tutors, switching schools, modifying diets, and changing the way they spoke to their children.

The results are good news, says Dr. Orly Avtazar, a neurologist and medical advisor to the magazine. Kids improve the most when medication is coupled with complementary approaches, such as behavioral therapy and strategies to help with academics.

Consumer Reports interviewed 935 parents of children with ADHD, asking about a variety of topics, ranging from the impact of medications to the effect of complementary strategies, to which physicians provided the most help.

Most families — 84 percent — tried medication at some point, with 67 percent reporting that the drugs helped “a lot.” In general, kids who got a prescription for ADHD were older. The average age of children who had tried medication was 13.

Another strategy that got good marks was switching a child to a school that was better suited to handle ADHD. A full 45 percent of the parents who tried this approach said the switch helped “a lot.” A similar strategy, hiring a tutor, got thumbs up from 37 percent of the parents who tried it.

Parents also reported changing the way they interacted with their children. Some started giving their kids only one instruction at a time — that helped “a lot” for 39 percent of the parents who tried it.

Dietary Link?

Other parents tried tweaking their child’s nutrition. Adding a vitamin supplement and paying more attention to what a child was eating helped “a lot” in 17 percent of families, while the addition of fish oil supplements got the highest marks from 12 percent of those who tried them.

Parents who suspect that diet has an impact on their children’s symptoms may have gotten some validation from a study published this month in the Journal of Attention Disorders. The study, which followed 1,799 kids from birth to age 14, found that kids had more than twice the risk of developing ADHD if they ate a “Western diet” that consisted of energy dense, heavily processed foods that were rich in saturated fat, salt and sugars and low in omega-3 fatty acids, fiber and folate.

There is some evidence that certain dietary factors — such as omega-3 fatty acids — may play a role in symptoms, says Patrick Tolan, a professor in the Curry School at the University of Virginia and director of Youth-Nex: The UVA Center to Promote Effective Youth Development. But it’s possible that studies that show a connection between ADHD and a bad diet may simply reflect other lifestyle factors, like parents who are very busy.

Tolan isn’t surprised to see parents searching for complementary strategies. “With medication, the child isn’t as distracted, and that makes it easier to learn,” Tolan says. “But it's not going to teach the child problem-solving skills or give him the ability to stop and think things through like other kids do.”

“Those are the kinds of skills a kid will get out of behavioral training and social skills training,” Tolan says.

What was surprising about the new survey was how dissatisfied parents were with medications even while reporting that the ADHD drugs were very effective. Only 52 percent of parents agreed strongly that if they had to do it all over again, they would have their kids take medication. And 44 percent said they wished there was another way to help their child.

Those findings may have something to do with side effects, which were reported by 84 percent of the parents. That may be a sign that doctors aren’t spending enough time adjusting medications to get the least amount of side effects while maintaining effectiveness, says Avtazar.

“It’s not like you can just give the child a pill and you’re finished,” she explains. “There’s a lot more to it in terms of management.”

Some parents may just not like the idea of their kids being on a medication, says Alan Kazdin, the John M. Master Professor of Psychology and Child Psychiatry at Yale University and director of the Yale Parenting Center.

“They think of it as a Band-Aid or a crutch,” Kazdin says. “But, I’ve heard from many, many children who couldn’t believe how well the medication worked, who were amazed at how they were now able to pay attention in class.”
In The News

Letting teen drink under parent's watch backfires
Those who drank with supervision more prone to problems than those told to wait, study says

By Linda Carroll

msnbc.com contributor
updated 4/20/2011 8:37:51 AM ET

As prom night approaches and parents begin to worry about what might happen during after hour parties, some might be tempted to try to teach their high schoolers to drink responsibly — by allowing them to consume alcohol under supervision.

That approach, scientists now say, is dead wrong.

A new study shows that teens who drink with an adult supervising are more likely to develop problems with alcohol than kids who aren't allowed to touch the stuff till they hit age 21.

“The study makes it clear that you shouldn’t be drinking with your kids,” said Barbara J. McMorris, lead author and a senior research associate at the School of Nursing at the University of Minnesota.

An American Medical Association study reported in 2005 that 25 percent of teens acknowledged they had been at a party where underage drinking was occurring in the presence of a parent. Those are the parents McMorris and her colleagues are hoping the study will reach and teach.

For the new study, she and her colleagues rounded up 1,945 seventh graders and then tracked them for three years. Half of the teens were from Victoria, Australia, the other half from Washington State.

Each year the kids were given questionnaires that asked about their experiences with alcohol and about their relationships with their parents. The teens were asked how often they'd consumed more than a few sips of any alcoholic beverage each time they were surveyed.

When they hit the eighth grade, the teens were asked how many times in the past year they'd consumed alcohol “at dinner, or on a special occasion or holiday, with adult supervision” or “at parties with adult supervision.” Researchers didn't specifically ask teens if the adults were drinking with them or were just present. They were also asked how many times they'd experienced harmful consequences, such as “not able to stop once you had started,” “became violent and got into fight,” “got injured or had an accident,” “got so drunk you were sick or passed out,” “had sex with someone you later regretted,” or “were unable to remember the night before because you had been drinking.”
In The News

Australian teens were more likely than their American counterparts to be drinking with adult supervision by eighth grade — 66 percent versus 35 percent — and they were more likely to have experienced harmful consequences from their drinking — 36 percent compared to 21 percent.

No matter which continent kids and parents came from, it was clear that the strategy to teach teens responsible drinking habits through supervised consumption was backfiring.

That finding didn’t surprise the experts.

“I think the study says something pretty important,” said Patrick Tolan, director of Youth-Nex: The University of Virginia Center to Promote Effective Youth Development. “Parents need to make it clear that it’s not OK for kids to drink until they reach the legal drinking age – a line has to be drawn.”

Still, many parents seem to have a particularly difficult time drawing lines when it comes to alcohol, said Mary O’Connor, a professor in the department of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at the University of California—Los Angeles. “There are people I know who are very responsible parents in many ways who think that this is part of being a responsible parent,” O’Connor said.

TODAY Moms: Should parents lock up their liquor?

That may be related to our own mixed feelings about a substance that is actually a legal, mind-altering drug.

What parents tend to forget is that teens are not just smaller versions of us. Their brains have not finished developing and studies have shown that alcohol has a very different effect on the unfinished brain, O’Connor said.

“We know from both animal and human studies that alcohol affects brain development,” O’Connor said. “The teenage brain is much more vulnerable to begin with and we now know that repeated drinking can lead to long term deficits in learning and memory.”
Parents should model moderation

Beyond this, there’s mounting data showing that it can be dangerous to start drinking young, said Dr. Brian Primack, an assistant professor of medicine and pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. Studies have shown that kids are four times more likely to become alcoholics if they start drinking before age 15, Primack said. So, is it enough to simply draw the line and tell your kids they can’t touch a drop till they’re 21? Will that glass of wine with dinner — made all the more necessary by rebellious teens you live with — encourage them to drink too much?

Not necessarily, experts say.

“You want to model moderation,” Tolan explained. “You don’t want to be drinking a lot in front of them — or inviting them to parties where your friends will be drinking a lot. That will confuse them and lead them to think that it’s OK to drink a lot.”

You don’t have to lock down the liquor cabinet, he added, but “that said, you should remember that kids experiment.”

Parents should know know exactly what and how much alcohol they’ve got, O’Connor said. “And you want to taste it periodically to make sure it’s not been diluted,” she added.

That’s well and good for when your kids are at home. But what about that prom night situation?

The solution might be a simple one — let your teen host the party at your house. “I think alcohol free parties are a great idea,” McMorris said.
Dads empower kids to take chances

by Linda Carroll

In the evenings after work, Mike King can often be found crouched down on all fours in the living room playing bucking bronco with his kids. Squealing with excitement, 5-year-old Wyatt and 3-year-old Ella will claw their way onto his back and hang on for as long as they can while King mimics the movements of a rodeo bull. Once the kids have been bucked off, the game generally dissolves into a raucous bout of wrestling and tickling.

It's a lot of fun for King and his children. But the 37-year-old truck driver suspects that beyond the roughhousing, they're also learning self-confidence and how to handle their young bodies as they wrestle, tumble and fall. It also helps them learn how to interact with others, to develop empathy and to rein in their aggression, says the Morgan Hill, Calif., dad.

"My son has learned he can't play as rough with his little sister as he can be with me," King says. "He's learned how to calm himself down."

As it turns out, King is right about dad-power. Over the past decade or so, researchers have begun to focus on the special role dads take in child-rearing. Their role extends far beyond rough-and-tumble play, experts say. Studies have shown that dads empower their kids, giving them the impetus to go out to explore the world, to meet new people and to take chances.

It's not that moms never do that; it's that dads do it more often, says Patrick Tolan, a professor at the Curry School at the University of Virginia and director of Youth-Nex, The University of Virginia Center to Promote Effective Youth Development. Moms tend to develop a more empathetic and emotional relationship with their children, Tolan says. They also tend to be more supportive in play, allowing the child to take the lead. Dads tend to direct playtime and encourage their kids to take risks.

"Mothers help children feel connected, anticipated and wanted," Tolan says. "Fathers teach them how to interact with others and how to control themselves when they feel their needs aren't being met."

A study published earlier this year in Early Child Development and Care shows the impact of these two approaches. Researchers from the Universite de Montreal School of Psychoeducation observed as moms and dads interacted with their toddlers while the kids, aged 12 to 18 months, were exposed to "risky" situations. In one experiment, a stranger came close. In another, toys were placed at the top of a flight of stairs.
Youth-Nex Director’s Work Leads to Briefing

May 3, 2010—Work by Patrick Tolan of the Curry School of Education’s Youth-Nex and others, over the past five years, has led to a May 3 congressional briefing to inform national policy on children’s mental health.

Youth-Nex is Curry’s newly created Center to Promote Effective Youth Development.

Tolan’s 2005 American Psychologist article about children’s mental health and leadership of an American Psychological Association workgroup provided the framework for a 2009 Denver conference “A Summit on Young Children’s Mental Health,” which led directly to the upcoming briefing.

“We know much about how to improve children’s mental health and the value of services, whether preventive or as treatment, said Tolan. “But still only 20% of those in need get services. Tolan sees the summit and the briefing as important steps to link public awareness to the sound scientific research. “We hope this will lead to action to affect what is one of the most harmful and costly health problems in our country,” he said.”

Tolan hopes the briefing will lead to new legislation that will provide funding and education for support for healthy development, including prevention efforts for those at-risk and access to sound treatment for those in need.

“We haven’t been good about making the public aware of causes, potential treatments and prevention,” Tolan said about children’s mental illness. Although children’s mental health is the top one or two children’s health care costs in this country, he said “it’s still not recognized as a central part of healthy development and function of our society.”

This is because there is still misunderstanding and stigma associated with mental health issues.

For example, many children suffer from School Phobia, a paralyzing fear that causes children to feel as if they will die or be completely humiliated if they go into the school. “It feels like standing on a cliff and having someone yell at you to keep moving forward,” he said. There is the misunderstanding that it’s just a problem of personal strength of character that the child needs to “get over it” or “buck up” or that it will go away if adults do not give the child attention about this problem. But we know it is a matter of neurochemistry, that the fear level is generated and feels real” said Tolan. “It is something we have effective treatment for but these may not be accessible or used due to continuing stigmatization and incorrect beliefs”.

The briefing coincides with National Children’s Mental Health Awareness Day on May 6.

According to Tolan, the day and the briefing are both meant to increase awareness of the importance of mental health in helping all children achieve their fullest potential.
Preventing Risky Youth Behavior

Posted March 2010

Smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, obesity, gangs, bullying, eating disorders, sex, school dropout, speeding—the prevention of risky adolescent behaviors like these is the objective of the new Center for Positive Youth Development at the Curry School.

Established with a $4 million commitment from a major corporation last year, the aim for this multidisciplinary center is to become a national beacon on adolescence, both promoting healthy development and preventing major psychological and social problems. As a research and development nexus, the center will bring together faculty and programs from across the Grounds to work on these issues.

At the helm of this ambitious undertaking is Patrick Tolan, professor in the Department of Human Services, who was recruited to Curry last fall. Tolan brings twenty-five years of research and practice experience, including ten years as director of the Institute for Juvenile Research and professor of psychiatry and of public health at the University of Illinois in Chicago. He is an internationally recognized authority on adolescence, families, violence, and prevention.

Tolan acknowledges that this is not the first or only effort to address adolescent issues. “A lot of capable people with good hearts and strong minds have developed ideas about and efforts to help youth with these problems,” he says. “But in many cases these good ideas and intentions didn’t really make a difference or couldn’t be scaled up to be useful. We need to do better.”

This is one reason the center will focus on scientifically evaluating the effectiveness of existing youth programs locally and nationally, as well as developing innovative efforts for Virginia. Tolan noted that his initial task has been to explore the considerable capability in the Curry School and across Grounds to identify areas of existing interest and capacity for research related to adolescents. He is also hoping to recruit additional expertise.

The Curry School itself has a long history of working to address adolescent well-being, with programs such as Young Woman Leaders Program, the Virginia Youth Violence Project, and the M3 (Math, Men, Mission) program. Other research projects addressing in-school learning and community afterschool programs are ongoing, as well.

“I’m trying to understand both the potential of our existing capacity,” said Tolan, “and the problems the center should address, which are rarely simple.”

Because the issues of concern to the center are related not only to youth but to families, communities, and school environments, Tolan is meeting with and listening to people in the local and regional areas who work with youth. He is learning about what they perceive to be the most pressing issues, what resources are available or might be promoted, and what the center can do to help.

Tolan noted that by the end of this academic year there will be a request for seed fund proposals from U.Va. faculty, meetings on planned studies, and extensions of his current externally funded research programs. One such study will engage 2,700 three- to five-year-olds and their caregivers to map the complex interplay of individual characteristics, family relationships, and community factors influencing development of youth problem behaviors. The goal of the research is help identify more-effective interventions.
Youth-Nex Director, Patrick Tolan, briefed members of the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services in Washington, D.C. on March 21 about the benefits of social and emotional learning.

The briefing was prompted by Tolan's work on a special issue of Child Development—the flagship journal on child development research. The publication focuses on raising healthy children and features scientific research about prevention and risk that have implications for promoting healthy development.

“Social and emotional skills,” said Tolan, “such as self control, understanding another person’s point of view, engaging meaningfully with others, can be as important as intellectual capability in school achievement and other life situations.”

Research bears out the importance for youth. Along with leading faculty at Harvard, Duke and the University of Illinois, Tolan summarized the scientific basis for emphasizing social and emotional development in schools and elsewhere. According to the research, said Tolan, programs focusing on these abilities have been shown to benefit youth by curbing drug use and violence, reducing school suspensions and absenteeism; impeding risky driving; and improving mental health into adulthood, to name a few positive outcomes. A follow-up briefing was also held in Washington on June 6.
Youth-NEX funded research brings Russian lit to local incarcerated youth.

University of Virginia senior, Bayly Buck, of Chevy Chase, MD. works with youths at the Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Center.

By FRANK GREEN
Published: April 25, 2011
Beaumont, since 1918 the home for some of the state's most dangerous youths, this year hosted a University of Virginia Russian literature class attended by 14 U.Va. students and 21 high- and medium-security offenders.

The classic 19th-century stories served as vehicles for conversation about contemporary issues for two groups of students who at first glance appear to be peers in age only, said Andrew Kaufman, the instructor.

"Even though the common ground here is the discussion about literature, what makes the conversation so interesting is that they're really conversations about life," Kaufman said. "I think they're discovering that great literature can be, and is, relevant, personally, to an unusually wide range of people."

Surrounded by tall fences topped with razor wire, Beaumont sits in a pastoral stretch of Powhatan County overlooking the James River.

Every Thursday, Kaufman and his students — most of them women — passed through chain-link gates and reinforced, electrically operated security doors to get to the classroom in a counseling center.

The visitors arrived with ballpoint pens and spiral notebooks. Staff members supplied the residents with stubby golf pencils and bound composition books because pens and wire bindings can be fashioned into weapons.

They sat at tables mixed with the male Beaumont residents who wear polo shirts embroidered with "DJJ," for Department of Juvenile Justice. Scars, jailhouse tattoos and other signs of short, troubled lives also set the residents apart.

Michael S. Ito, superintendent of the 250-person facility for males up to age 20, said Beaumont's residents are there because of the seriousness of their crimes or their inability to avoid trouble in their home communities.

Ito is an enthusiastic supporter of the class. "Our students are very excited about it. I think it's a great motivator," he said.

So, too, are Kaufman's students.

"They now see that they have a responsibility not just to me, not just to themselves or their grades, but to this community of youth that they're working with," Kaufman said. "I have not had a student miss a class all semester."

He said they arrived prepared. "This is no longer just about them. It's about their responsibility, their sense of duty to those residents who they don't want to let down. These are kids who have been let down in their lives, and my students realize that they don't want to be a part of that pattern."

Kaufman, a lecturer and academic community engagement faculty fellow at U.Va., said he had long thought about ways to make the humanities more relevant. He decided to get involved with high-risk youths several years ago after giving a talk to inmates at the Virginia Beach Correctional Center about "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" by Tolstoy.

"That was an incredibly powerful experience, not just for the inmates but for me because I had read that story, I had studied it, I had written about it many times before, but there's something about being in that unfamiliar environment, talking to people who come from very different backgrounds from me that allowed me to see things in Tolstoy that I hadn't seen before and to appreciate that story in a way that I hadn't fully appreciated it."
“What I wanted to do is to create a similar experience for my students,” Kaufman said.

The university funded the course, called Books Behind Bars: Life, Literature and Community Leadership, in 2009. A pilot program was conducted last year at the Jefferson Trail Treatment Center for Children in Charlottesville.

The course, also a pilot, started in January for the U.Va. students. They spent five sessions on Russian literature, the juvenile-justice system and how they could build a relationship with the Beaumont residents they were to meet in February.

The intent wasn’t for the college students to be therapists or teachers, but friends and mentors.

Bayly Buck, a senior from Chevy Chase, Md., said she and the students were extremely curious about Beaumont.

“We spent a lot of time sort of trying to fill in the gaps about what we didn’t know and, of course, ended up being completely surprised when we got there — it was nothing like we thought it was going to be,” she said.

“These men genuinely wanted to take part in these discussions and they wanted to learn from us and I think they wanted us to learn from them,” Buck said.

An assignment for a class this month was the story "Princess Mary," one of several short stories in Mikhail Lermontov’s 1839 work, "A Hero of Our Time," in which a protagonist is a manipulative womanizer.

Buck’s discussion table included four U.Va. students and three from Beaumont. She asked each to "free write" for a few minutes about courage and love, two themes in "Princess Mary." She explained later that the idea behind the exercise was to find ways to link the story with daily life. The writing done, each person at the table talked about what they had written.

Claire Henry, a U.Va. student, said she had broken her back in high school and the recovery took months. Now, she told the group, "I worry a lot about the future." Henry said she finds it difficult to stand for long periods and is concerned about her ability to have children.

Courage, she said, is sometimes needed in small, regular doses: "Little things that you do on a day-to-day basis."

One young man held at Beaumont for the past 16 months said he was in love once but was hurt when he discovered that during a prior incarceration his girlfriend had been unfaithful.

That prompted U.Va. student Joyner Jones to say, "That really tells me love is trusting somebody. It's hard to trust people when you've been hurt... It's very courageous to take a chance." Jones said she believes the two topics, love and courage, are related.

Henry was curious if anyone felt bad for the princess, who was victimized by the womanizer. "Or, do you think she should have known?” she asked.

"She should have known," said the Beaumont resident, whose name, along with the others, was not given because of juvenile-justice policy. He said the princess turned down a man who was in love with her in favor of the cad. "I was sad for her, and then I wasn't," he said.
On the other hand, Henry said, the womanizer did not want the princess until she left his life.

"You ever been in one of those awful make-up/break-up relationships?" asked Henry.

"Nah," said another Beaumont resident.

"That's good, stay away from those," she chuckled.

Later in the class, the same Beaumont resident asked the U.Va. students what they were expecting. He admitted, "I thought you all were going to be, like, stuck up ... arrogant."

The women thought that was a fair expectation. "Your first meeting decides whether you believe those preconceived notions or you reject those preconceived notions," Buck said.

As for their expectations about the Beaumont residents, Buck said, "we really had no idea." The young women said that once at Beaumont they were pleasantly surprised. "We didn't know you all were going to be so polite," Jones said.

All four women said the residents were far less superficial and more respectful to them than many male U.Va. students.

The discussion wandered, touching back and forth on the Russian story as the youths talked about their parents and siblings. Henry complained that as she grew older, she realized her mother was right about more things.

"If you have a certain relationship with your father, it will color all the other relationships with other men in your life," Buck said. My dad was awesome, my dad was a big hero ... I'll never find someone as great as my dad, which is a different kind of problem."

After an hour and 15 minutes, Kaufman wrapped things up. The Beaumont residents, accompanied by staff, left the counseling center. The U.Va. students remained for an additional 50 minutes for debriefing.

The last class this semester was Thursday. Kaufman and Ito want it to continue and to make it available to as many students and residents as possible.

"The U.Va. students have learned how simple interactions with teenagers can have such an impact on creating optimism in their future and how they themselves can learn from high-risk youths on how to make better decisions about their own lives," Ito said.

Buck, who is studying psychology and history, said the Beaumont youths come from unfortunate, even toxic, backgrounds. Still, she said, they show optimism.

"They have such interesting personalities and they shared with us openly about their lives at Beaumont and even outside of Beaumont. They all are just so full of life and hopes," Buck said.

"They see themselves beyond the walls of the detention center," she said. "It just shows me how easy it is for young persons to make the wrong decisions when they're put in a bad environment."

Buck is now considering working with troubled youths, perhaps assisting released offenders to help younger brothers, sisters or neighbors make good decisions.
She was uncertain how to classify the relationships she and her classmates have established at Beaumont. "They really did sort of become like friends. I'm not really sure. We still haven't exactly pegged who we are to them," she said.

For the young man who opened up to the students about his lost love, the future is uncertain as to whether he'll return to his family, a halfway house or some other program — much less college.

He has a GED and would like to become an electrician. He said he loved the Russian literature class and getting to know people he would likely have never met on the outside.

But, he said, "if I go to college, I don't know what I'm going to go for. I'd like to, but it's not a high priority."

College work is doable at Beaumont, he said. "On the street, it'd be different."