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Adolescent well-being requires focus on inner self

Parents, teachers and therapists, nationally and in our local community, are doing much hard work to improve and empower young people to see and achieve their own unique potentials.

But teens, in their physical, psychological, spiritual and emotional health, seem to be getting worse.

For example, government figures this spring state that "more than one-third of American children are overweight," and "one out of five children is obese." And they are headed for much worse, with the percentage of adults who are overweight at 66 percent with 32 percent obese.

According to a 2003 study published in The Boston Globe, approximately 30 percent of all adolescent girls in the metropolitan Boston area "cut" themselves. Cutting occurs when (usually) adolescents (and usually girls) feel such deep and inexplicable pain that they create another physical pain to relieve the emotional pain or psychological pain within -- clearly not an attribute of well-being.

According to recent U.S. Department of Education statistics, approximately 30 percent of our children who begin their public school educations drop out and do not graduate.

In further studies, education experts put the percentage of students who have dropped out "emotionally" from their school studies at between 50 percent and 60 percent. This means that up to 90 percent of our children are not engaged and certainly not motivated to learn.

Additionally, according to two academic studies, one from Harvard University's Mind/Body Clinic authored by Joan Borysenko, approximately 75 percent of all health-care dollars go toward treating behavior based illnesses, such as smoking, obesity, alcohol and drugs. A second study by emotional intelligence expert Daniel Goleman found that in a 10-year period, all measured indicators showed a decrease in children's well-being.

What is going on?

Educated adolescents and their parents, teachers and therapists who are consciously aware of the inner self would not harm themselves and would take preventive action so as not to become a statistic.

Yet instead of asking what it takes to produce people who have an inner state of well-being, we have seen that our youth today (and their parents) are even more concerned about external measures of doing well, such as grades in schools, state standardized tests and SAT scores, the right job or how well they fit into a certain (and right) social group at school or in their communities.

Measures of intelligence and physical appearance are important, but when did these types of outward measures become more important than inner states of personal growth, well-being and character?

What should be done about creating a shift in our focus from how we appear outwardly to others, to our inner state of being well? What is our threshold of tolerance before we take action to confront these serious and growing problems, and failures in well-being?

If we can begin to focus upon emotional, psychological, spiritual and physical well-being -- what I call a shift from the outer self to the inner self -- then adolescents will be motivated and engaged in their lives to, at a minimum, be well and then maybe to see and achieve their full and unique potentials in life.

What can parents, therapists and teachers do?

Parents have bought into the idea that keeping their children busy with activities builds inner well-being; and most are involved in church groups, community service and YMCA camps, and have the talks about alcohol, drugs and sex.

Then why still so many acute and subtle problems? We have not been taught how to go inward to know ourselves at our deepest levels.

Based upon more than 20 years of working with adolescent development issues, I recommend the following:

- Encourage your child to experience a wide range of emotions and thoughts, even those that may be uncomfortable for you to hear.
- Help your child to understand that people change constantly throughout life and that they can grow and change in the direction of their dreams, and actually take action toward that end.
- Ask two essential questions: Why are you here? What are your dreams for a better world?
- Engage in conversations that deepen children's understanding of their own sense of destiny in life by perhaps talking about your own life journey to this discovery or others they admire and respect.

Research and professional experiences demonstrate that self matters. And, I would add, that the inner self matters most.

Henry Brzycki is instructor for new teacher education courses on adolescent motivation and learning for Penn State's College of Education and Outreach/Continuing Education and author of the upcoming book "Developing Champions in Life through Self-Understanding and Character Development."

The opinion of the columnist does not necessarily reflect the viewpoint of the university.