



IF LIFE HAD DO OVERS: Choose Life Over Good Grades

by Tricia Baker

As parents in a highly competitive school district, we began to build our children's college resumes in kindergarten. As young parents, we heard from others, "They MUST be involved in sports for help with entrance to college." In the fall, there was soccer; in the winter, basketball; and spring segued into softball and Little League. Summer was filled with swim lessons. We were also encouraged to do after school enrichment programs to get an academic advantage. Many parents are afraid that their children will not be challenged enough in school, and therefore, will not be successful in life.

In freshman year in high school, our son, Kenny was so busy building that college resume, that he was beginning to sleep less and less. Most nights, he would sleep only 2-3 hours. I asked him, in wonderment, "How is your body not shutting down?" What I didn't realize is that it was his brain that was shutting down. Sadly, we lost Kenny to a serious and debilitating brain illness called depression.

Here are statistics from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that every parent needs to know:

- **SUICIDE** is now the **SECOND** leading cause of death of our nation's precious young people, ages 10-24. (Recently increased from the third leading cause of death).
- **SIXTEEN** percent of our youth report **SERIOUSLY** consider suicide.
- **THIRTEEN** percent of our precious young people report **HAVING A PLAN** to end their lives.
- **EIGHT** percent report **HAVING MADE AN ATTEMPT** to take their own lives.
- The US **LOSES** 11,000 college students to suicide **ANNUALLY**.

Too often, our young people respond to stress with self-medication and turn to drugs and alcohol. The CDC reports that the national rate of heroin overdose deaths has nearly **TRIPLED** since 2010. According to the CDC, the heroin crisis in New Jersey is far greater than it is in the rest of the country, with the heroin overdose rate having **TRIPLED** the rate of all other states.

The number of students who refuse to go to school each day continues to climb. Five to 28% of students will exhibit some degree of school refusal behavior at some point. School refusal is most often anxiety and stress related.



You may believe that suicidal ideation will never affect your child, but did you know that people with mental health disorders have an IQ of at least 10 points than those in the general population? Most often, it is our brightest and most talented students who are at greatest risk.

I wish that parents can see what I see when I meet with students. How students are over committed with AP classes and activities but are only trying to keep up with peers. How I wish parents would be flies on the wall, and see their children speak openly about their struggles; hear how so very many are embarrassed or afraid to ask for help, even from their parents.

As of March 2018, I have educated more than 65,000 students in seven states, and have spoken face-to-face with more than 500,000 youth across the country. The themes are the same everywhere:

- There is too much pressure and the expectations on many students are too high. (This can be an internal pressure based on their environment or external pressure.)
- Students don't want to let their parents down.
- Some students don't want to make their parents' lives more difficult.
- Students don't want to cause their parents worry.
- Students don't want to place a financial burden on their families as they understand that the cost of mental health care can be very high.

It is critical for young people to have down time. It is important that there is more relaxed family time, so that parents can see the signs and symptoms, should a mental health disorder start to rear its ugly head. Twenty five percent of our population, including our youth, will have some mental health disorder. Mental health disorders are highly treatable- the earlier you identify the illness, the more likely the success of treatment.

Encourage your student to:

- **Relax.** After a hectic day, everyone needs at least a few minutes to slow down and live in the moment. When we truly relax, the genes in our bodies, switch to a different mode. These genes counter act the chemical effects of stress.



- **Power Down.** Turn off electronics and social media. This will make your young student more productive and active.

- **Get Sufficient Sleep.** The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) states that Pre-teens, ages 6-12, require 9-12 hours per 24 hour period. Teens, ages 13 to 18, require 8-10 hours a night.



- **Get Moving.** Teens, 13 -18 should exercise for about an hour each day. It is easier to get the appropriate amount of exercise if teens work physical activity into everyday life.

- **Eat Healthy.** Remember that what affects your student's body, is also affecting their brain. Insist your student start their day with breakfast. Our cars won't function if we don't fill them with fuel. Our student's bodies won't function if not filled with fuel. Students should limit highly processed foods and snacks.



- **Hang Out.** Being with friends helps your student feel happy. Do not over schedule activities.
- **Be a Friend.** Teach your student how to listen non-judgementally. Encourage your student to always use positive talk and to BE KIND. ALWAYS.
- **Communicate.** Young people must know that they are not alone. There is always a trusted compassionate adult near by who is willing to listen and connect them to helpful resources.



School is where our youth learn how to learn. It is for developing a love of learning and preparing them to understand that to be successful in life, we must continue to learn throughout our lives. It is where our children learn failures are OK, as long as we learn from them and move forward.

There will be many who disagree, but I believe in the core of my soul, knowing what I know now, seeing what I have seen and hearing what I hear from students, that this new approach will save children's lives. You, however, may not ever realize that it was your child whose life was saved. Parents, please choose life over good grades. Grades really don't matter if your child is no longer alive.

Tricia Baker, YMHFA, CPDT-KA – Co-founder Attitudes In Reverse, Program Director AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds

After a 20 year corporate career in marketing, Tricia Baker experienced the tremendous loss of her son, Kenny, recognized the need for educating our nation's youth about good mental health, and with her family, started Attitudes In Reverse® or AIR™. AIR includes the AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds™ program, which certifies handlers and dogs to work with youth and certifies emotional support animals for people who live with disabilities. AIR is a member of the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies.

Start The Conversation • Reverse An Attitude • SAVE A LIFE!

Contact AIR for more information

Visit www.AttitudesInReverse.org • **Call** 609-945-3200 • **Write** info@AttitudesInReverse.org

PLEASE NOTE: AIR is not a counseling service. If you are in crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-Talk (1-800-273-8255).

To be used for informational purposes only and not for the purpose of providing medical or legal advice. Copyrighted ©2018 Attitudes In Reverse® All Rights Reserved.