

## Program Offers Mental Health Check-ups for Teens

By SPAN-California

Each year in the United States, more teenagers become suicide victims than die from cancer, AIDS, and heart disease combined. While five percent of teens suffer from major depression, only one in three is actually diagnosed. Unrecognized or left untreated, depression is the most common cause of youth suicide.

The Columbia Teen Screen® program gives kids “an active chance to get help,” according to Tiffany Haick, program training director. The program is a mental health screening and diagnostic process that helps find kids who are at risk for suicide, but who have generally fallen through the cracks.

The Teen Screen program can be implemented at school sites or at community health centers like the Pacific Clinics in Santa Fe Springs, California. “It is a cost-effective method that enables a lay person, or even a volunteer to screen hundreds or thousands of kids, referring those who need help to a professional,” Haick notes. Ideally, this type of screening could be categorized as a mental health check-up and be performed as commonly as other school health screenings for vision, hearing, and scoliosis.

Teens respond to a carefully designed series of non-threatening questions in a written questionnaire or they can complete a more comprehensive online survey. Those who show elevated levels of suicide risk are referred to a professional to determine if further evaluation or treatment is necessary.

The non-judgmental format of the online and written surveys is one of the program’s strengths. Most young people find it difficult to reveal honest feelings even to the best-trained therapist, but they interface with a computer with ease. Students must obtain a parent’s permission before completing either survey format, and results are shared with parents.

Dr. David Shaffer, Chief of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Columbia University, developed the program with the intent of finding a methodology that would significantly reduce teen suicide. Teen Screen is currently being implemented at 66 sites across the country, and approximately 10,000 teens have been screened to date. The program is fully underwritten. Materials and training can be provided at no cost. To learn more, call 866-TEENSCREEN (866-833-6727) or go to [www.teenscreen.org](http://www.teenscreen.org).

SPAN-California is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization of concerned citizens and professionals dedicated to the prevention of suicide through statewide and community partnerships.

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