Teenagers really cannot become alcoholics, especially if they only drink beer," 16-year-old Yevgeny states with conviction. Most of his friends nod in agreement. "Yes, that's true," 15-year-old Juliet concurs, explaining, "It is only vodka and other hard liquor that can turn someone into an alcoholic." Nastya, 15, shakes her head in disagreement, saying, "I think beer can make a person become an alcoholic. It starts with taking a drink from time to time with friends, but then it can lead people to drink more and more." The group grows silent as they contemplate her statement. Olga Komar, a folk theater producer who lives in Korsakov, Russia, listens closely to this exchange before pointing out that one of the biggest challenges when working with teens is that they are all so sure that bad things won't happen to them.

"For a teenager, the bad habits they pick up—smoking, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, or unsafe sexual behaviors, for example—color how they view their lives and the world around them. In fact, these habits become such a part of their lives that, unless they make a conscious decision to change, they will almost always revert to these tendencies," explains Komar. Her goal, she says, is to make sure the young people in her community clearly understand the potential long-term effects of such unhealthy lifestyle choices. She works toward accomplishing this by inviting local youth to participate in a variety of discussion groups and other activities sponsored by Korsakov's Crisis Center for Adolescents, which she heads.

Helping Teens Take Responsibility for Their Own Health

When the Sakhalin/Houston partners began their collaboration in January 2000, they decided that one of their areas of focus would be children's and adolescent health. One of their first steps was to conduct a community health assessment to determine the specific needs of the area's young population by discovering more about their risk behaviors and health concerns (See "Assessing the Health Needs of Children and Young Adults," page 12). The following July, a multidisciplinary community advisory board was formed with the ambitious
Opening a Dialogue with Teens on the Edge

As the mother of three children ranging in age from 18 to 23, Komar knows all too well how difficult it can be to get teens to discuss their lives—especially with their parents or other adults. But, she insists, talking is the key to teaching them to respect the value of their own health. "We are concentrating our efforts on promoting healthy lifestyles among our young people and, to this end, we have begun working with the mass media, various civic groups, businesses, and healthcare professionals, as well as with the adolescents themselves to educate them about wellness issues."

The Crisis Center is one of the vehicles the foundation uses to reach out to teens, but the name is a bit misleading because the Center sponsors three teen groups, established by Komar. One group is for those who have substance abuse problems, another is for those who are at risk—meaning they have tried alcohol or drugs, but are not yet addicted—and a third is for teenagers who aren’t at risk, but want a place where they can discuss problems related to their age. At times these groups come together, as witnessed in the exchange at the beginning of this article, and not surprisingly, the myths they believe—such as that drinking beer cannot lead to alcoholism—pervade all three.

"...one of the biggest challenges when working with teens is that they are all so sure that bad things won’t happen to them."

Sergei, a 17-year-old who recently started coming to meetings of the high-risk group at the Center after a few of his friends invited him, explains, "I started drinking because I felt unhappy and alone, but mostly because it made me feel grown up." Sergei says that talking about why he felt the need to start drinking has helped him to realize that alcohol is not the answer to his problems. Other members of the group seem to agree. "One of the things we talk about is how to find our place in life, to determine what we want to accomplish and who we really are," states 18-year-old Aidin. "I used to smoke marijuana, but after I came to the Crisis Center a few times I began to ask myself why this was necessary. After thinking seriously about it, I realized that it wasn’t."

The "Golden Fund"

With so many teens falling prey to the siren song of a lifestyle that embraces alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and violence, youth who have so far managed to avoid these common pitfalls of adolescence often
Although most of the children in this particular group lead extremely busy lives—in addition to their normal studies, many also attend special academies during the summer months and are active in other clubs and organizations throughout the year—Komar says they asked to hold their meetings twice a week. “We call these children our ‘golden fund’ and we try to teach them ways of expressing themselves, avoiding conflict, and achieving their goals in life.” For 15-year-old Olga, the group provides an opportunity to explore a wide variety of activities and interests and to learn how to communicate better with others. “Being a member of the group has also helped me to understand that I can accomplish anything I want as long as I work hard at it. Since I started coming here, I’ve even decided that I’d like to become a psychologist,” she says, explaining that many of her friends come to her when they want to talk about a particular problem they are having.

Many of the group’s activities have a broader reach than the individual members, Komar notes, explaining that the group produces a newspaper called “Be Healthy” that focuses on wellness topics of concern to children and young adults. “We discuss each issue of the newspaper among ourselves, then decide who will write articles on various subjects such as drugs, the influence of smoking and alcohol on the human body, STIs, and the diseases that are carried by ticks,” states 17-year-old Vasi, the paper’s editor-in-chief. “We all pick a topic that is most interesting to us, do the research, and write the stories,” he explains, noting that one of the articles written by Olga and another 15-year-old named Oksana was even published in the local newspaper. “We never considered that these children might have problems and questions that needed answering,” Komar says. “The reality is that all children need information, support, and direction. Offering this kind of help to young people may not be glamorous, but nothing could be more important.”

**Every Child is Worth It**

Readily acknowledging that the Russia she grew up in is a very different place for the children of today, Komar states, “Sometimes it is hard for the generations to understand one another. Through our work with the teenagers, we have come to realize that if a child smokes, drinks, or steals, it is usually because he or she does not feel loved and supported, so working with parents is necessary as well.” Other adults in the community can also contribute to the feelings of isolation that trouble so many teens, she concludes. “When we first started working with students at a local technical school—many of the members of our high-risk group go there—the teachers told us not to waste our time, that the children were already lost. It took time and patience, but as soon as the teens from this school started to ask questions, I knew our efforts were paying off. If adolescents are asking questions, they are beginning to think.”

Olga Komar, director of the Korsakov Crisis Center for Adolescents, prepares and distributes a number of educational brochures geared toward helping young people successfully navigate the often difficult teenage years. "The reality is that all children need information, support, and direction. Of course, most of the children in this group have problems—they are having. "We discuss each issue of the newspaper among ourselves, then decide who will write articles on various subjects such as drugs, the influence of smoking and alcohol on the human body, STIs, and the diseases that are carried by ticks," states 17-year-old Vasi, the paper's editor-in-chief. "We all pick a topic that is most interesting to us, do the research, and write the stories," he explains, noting that one of the articles written by Olga and another 15-year-old named Oksana was even published in the local newspaper. "We never considered that these children might have problems and questions that needed answering," Komar says. "The reality is that all children need information, support, and direction. Offering this kind of help to young people may not be glamorous, but nothing could be more important."

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