

Associated Content

TeenScreen: Are our Teens depressed or suicidal

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By Liz Copeland

La'Sarah Motley's article, "Overmedicated Youth" , got me thinking about this TeenScreen program. I found a lot of websites opposed to it, and while I read them, I was also reading the TeenScreen website.

I admit, I'm happily a conspiracy theorist at heart, though I rarely discuss my theories without some serious hard evidence...I'm a busy woman, after all. This TeenScreen sent up my mom warning flags.

TeenScreen is a program that sets out to screen children, particularly teenagers, who are enrolled in public school. TeenScreen has taken a lot of heat for offering rewards to children who participate, subverting parental consent, and lining up with the pharmaceutical companies.

Granted, that sounds pretty alarming, so I did some more research. While I can't say that my research is the best because I haven't had a lot of time with this issue, some of these things are either a given or are well explained on their website.

1. Pharmaceutical companies sponsoring this program – This I take as a given. Of course pharmaceutical companies are going to support a program that screens our teenagers. Though their intentions aren't that trustworthy, TeenScreen would need funding and they have it. Should TeenScreen, which was founded and is run by mental health professionals who work with pharmaceutical companies on a regular basis, shun the massive amount of funding that can come from these corporations?

I'd be hard pressed to find psychologists or psychiatrists that would turn down funding from a pharmaceutical company for what they view as a worthy cause.

2. Is TeenScreen subverting parental consent? Opponents to the TeenScreen program allege that TeenScreen is subverting parental consent by notifying parents after the screen is done that their child has been screened. This may well have happened in the past. I don't know, honestly. I will say that they've taken quite a bit of heat from it and I would hope, for their sake, that they have stopped doing this. They don't admit that it has happened and state that they require parental consent (which is true, by law). I don't know whether they're following this law. Opponents say they're not.

3. Is TeenScreen offering rewards to children who complete their 10 minute survey? TeenScreen says no. Sometimes rewards are given for the child taking the form home and returning it to school with permission or not, according to

TeenScreen, but the rewards aren't for getting permission.

This part concerns me. How many of us as teenagers have forged their parents' signatures? Plenty. But...if a teen needs help, would it be better if they get it? That would be the point of some. However, I disagree with this because we should have the right to consent to these types of tests on our children. As I discussed in my Article about mandatory seat belt laws, I don't believe in the government just doing what they want and trying to shove our citizens into some type of reward/punishment scenario. Teenagers are impressionable, otherwise peer pressure and depression wouldn't be such issues in the teenage years.

Is depression a real issue in the teenage years? Definitely. Not only are there the statistics (that TeenScreen uses to justify why they're pushing so hard for screening), which are, according to TeenScreen and other sources, 750,000 teens suffer from depression. The question is, are we pathologizing growing pains?

Suicide among teens is serious business. About 1,700 teenagers complete a suicide attempt per year, according to reports, and 9% of all teens report a prior suicide attempt. 17% of teens think about suicide.

Is it really a big deal? That's the point of contention. It isn't just 'old school' parents who have a problem with the mentality of screening perfectly healthy persons to find some sort of impairment. Even if it's to treat the impairment...if you go digging around for something labelled common, you're likely to find it.

TeenScreen says that it takes 2 positive results to rule out the false positive results, but if the teen answers the questions again the same way, what does that mean? What does it mean to parents who get a form or a phone call saying there is something 'wrong' with their child?

It's dependent upon the parent at that point to decide how to handle it. On the one hand, they may be glad to be tipped off. On the other hand, they may feel that psychiatry is more an art than a science, and that their child was used as a guinea pig.

This is a tough one for me. It seems that neither option is the best. I'm a mother, so I worry about these things, but the biggest part of me doesn't say that TeenScreen is the answer for the 'mental health crisis' we're dealing with period, much less in the volatile teenage years. The biggest part of me instead says "spend time with your child and you'll know if something is wrong."

That may be the wrong opinion, but for myself and my family, so far it has served me well.

What do you all think about TeenScreen?

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