



## If it Takes a Village to Raise a Child, How Many Children Does it Take to Raise the Village?

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**T**he National Research Council proclaimed recently that 75 percent of American youth are doing quite well, but a quarter of our young people are missing some or all of their protective factors and lack critical developmental assets. As a result these young people are deemed seriously “at risk.” For these young people, at least, the “village” has not lived up to its commitment.

Studies have shown that when young people are connected to their families, schools, and communities they are often protected from harm. Protective factors are an important ingredient in keeping young people on the road to a successful transition to adulthood. For the past several decades our government has targeted nurturing support and rescue efforts to the very youngest children of our society; providing early childhood services to preschool-age children and even prenatal services to give babies a healthy start. Honorable as these efforts have been, the focus has been much less on services to older youth.

Perhaps this is because there has historically been less confidence in the promise of positive outcomes in programs serving older youth. Programs and strategies for older kids quickly devolve into the suppression of the negative rather than the promotion of the positive. And yet, scientists have recently confirmed that the human brain develops far beyond the age of five and offers developmental windows of opportunity with pre-teens and older youth.

Therefore, the call to the village is to provide supportive, developmentally appropriate services for youth across all age groups. Among these kids are the Research Council's 25 percent or the neediest kids in the community—vulnerable youth in disadvantaged situations. These are tough kids to connect with, but when connections are made, they have the largest appetite for purpose and belonging. It is precisely the experience of these kids living in the gaps that makes them the best resource for community planning and development.

In communities, schools, and local governments across the nation, young people are becoming actively engaged in defining their own villages. New technologies have enabled youth to not only connect in real time, but more importantly to think globally and act locally. Connectivity is driving young people to become more than the passive players of just a decade ago. These young “millennials” are not content to wait until adulthood to make significant contributions; they want their lives to have meaning long before they assimilate into the adult world.

How much do youth already contribute to our society? Judging by economics alone, quite a lot! It is estimated that youth account for 141 billion dollars in discretionary spending each calendar year. In February 2005 the Harris Interactive Poll did a study of American youth in relation to the Tsunami relief effort. The poll found that one-third of American youth between 8 and 18 years of age contributed an average of \$63 to the relief effort. American youth raised nearly a billion dollars toward the effort. These personal efforts amounted to more relief than any single government committed and more than any private relief agency collected. In 2001 the

President asked that all young Americans send a dollar to help the children of Afghanistan; a month later the White House had received 242,000 pieces of mail with well over 1.5 million single dollars enclosed.

We should not be surprised when most kids ask, “Whose village is it anyway?” A recent report showed that young people in the mid-west were becoming disengaged and walking away from their farming communities. In response, several states have instituted measures to try to keep their young people from leaving. Iowa offered young adults a tax break, Nebraska and North Dakota offered small business loans, and Kansas has even offered free land to young people as inducements to stick around. Yet these worthy efforts ignored the stickiest factor of all: Young people, more than anything else, want to belong to something bigger than themselves. Financial inducements are not enough. When youth are civically engaged they gain a sense that what they do matters, that they belong in their community, and their community belongs to them. If a young person is involved in planning the community park they might stay around to see their own kids use it. If they help on a school district strategic plan they might be proud enough to want their own kids to attend. When youth are connected in meaningful ways to their communities, they become the best of citizens. They see themselves in the everyday life of the village, and they feel that they can make a difference—that their actions matter to others.

Recently there has been a quiet movement in the federal government to utilize youth as project advisors, policy analysts, and grant reviewers. When agencies take the time to involve youth at this level, they find that everything changes. Talking with (and not about) youth is a powerful tool in creating successful youth policy and programs. What better way to engage youth both as consumers of services and also as consultants than as the experts on youth-targeted service delivery systems?

Youth engagement strategies offer these young people a glimpse of public service and the possibilities of a civil service career. College students report that serving as grant reviewers not only opens their minds to how different communities think about issues; it also enriches their studies when they return to school. One elderly professor related to me after a grant review that, at first, she was skeptical about working with youth on her review panel. She soon found, however, that they added a new energy and expert dimension of analysis. She said, “I have old and tired eyes, these young people see everything with fresh eyes.” (It’s noteworthy that, according to estimates, between 50 and 60 percent of federal employees are currently eligible to retire.)

Could it be that a proposal with a solid theoretical base, good organizational structure, and great community partnerships might miss the boat

completely on methodology? By not considering how youth might connect to a program, policymakers and program managers make a critical mistake.

When I was a young youth worker I met Dr. Henry Maier (master youth worker) who told me something I've never forgotten: If adults work to be in sync with the young people they work with, to walk next to them and become part of a joint rhythm, they have the potential of being “in tune” with them. This point will mark a turning point in which children and adults will share moments of moving ahead together.

The synchronization of adults and youth is key to young people's involvement at any level. If adults fail to affirm the significance of youth by providing access, support, and safe opportunities for honest participation, they miss the chance to be part of a “joint rhythm” and youth contributions will be no more than an appearance. It is not enough to invite them into the room; if young people merely occupy space those moments of “moving ahead” will be lost. Once the decision is made to involve youth it takes perceptive adults and due diligence on every detail regarding young people and their expectations to create a successful connection. Organizations may find it expensive and time consuming to prepare for strategic planning meetings that involve youth, but the results are well worth months of preparation when they see the fruits of a rich, rewarding exchange of ideas.

Working with youth adds a higher level of accountability. Adults often commit to action only to find excuses about why projects do not move quickly enough, or fail to be executed. But covenants are formed when working with young people and they are not to be taken lightly. It is imperative that when young people are brought to the table that adults work to keep them inspired, informed, and involved. Following through on their suggestions is the signal that what they say has been honored.

When the elders welcome young people, accept their fresh perspectives, and tap into their abundant energy, they create a much stronger village. In these enlightened communities young people are celebrated for their citizenship and see themselves as the collective hope for the future. At the end of the day the village and the child are indispensable to one another, are in tune with each other, and will share lifetimes of moving ahead together.

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