Caring Adults Support the Healthy Development of Youth

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The powerful influence of caring adults in the lives of children and young people has been a hallmark of youth-serving organizations since the early 20th century. Youth organizations depend on the talents, leadership, and dedication of their adult volunteers and staff. To guide the recruitment, training, and retention of adult volunteers and youth program staff, it is important to look at the roles and characteristics of the adults working with young people.

Studies reinforce the importance of caring adults in the lives of young people. Resilient children, the ones who thrive despite obstacles, typically have caring adults present and active in their lives (Garmezy, 1985; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992; Masten & Garmezy, 1985). The presence of caring adults is a protective factor for youth in high-risk settings (Jessor, 1993) just as persistent, caring relationships are fundamental to student learning (Hansen, Walker, & Flom, 1995). High levels of parental absence, age segregation in society, adult silence about boundaries and values, and isolation of people of all ages within neighborhoods are cited as impediments to the healthy development of young people (Benson, 1996).

In community-based youth development programs, local people teach and guide children and youth as they grow and explore. Caring adults from the community provide essential support and lend new perspectives to youth seeking ways to be more autonomous and yet more interdependent in their relationships.

Caring Adults

In a longitudinal study of six urban youth programs, McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman (1994) interviewed young people and youth workers to identify the traits of Wizards, those magical, talented adults who reached out to youth and made a difference in their lives. The research team concluded that adults motivated by loving agendas and positive purposes stood apart from those who came with an aim of controlling young people and moderating the impact of the youth problem on society. Five specific characteristics of Wizards emerged. The caring adults most trusted and respected by young people:

1. made it clear they saw the potential, not the pathology, in the young people they encountered;
2. made the young person, not the activity, their priority;
3. conveyed a sense of power and purpose for themselves and for the young people around them;
4. were described as authentic–real, not phony, with a genuine interest and concern for young people;
5. were motivated to give back to the communities, neighborhoods, families, or organizations in return for the good things they received from caring adults when they were young.

Motivations Make a Difference

Two interesting reports identify the most effective roles for caring adults in youth-serving organizations. Morrow and Styles (1995) study strategies

for building relationships with young people in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters organization. Camino (1992) explores the roles of kinship-builder and rescuer in the lives of youth of color. Both point to the power of adults who work in partnership with young people, who see themselves as supportive friends and advocates in contrast to adults motivated to save, reform, or rescue young people from their circumstances.

According to these studies, adults who participate in youth programs generally fall into three categories: developmental, prescriptive, and counterproductive.

Developmental

Developmental volunteers and staff engage youth where they are and help them go where they want to go (Morrow & Styles, 1995). They approach young people as supportive friends and companions, respectful of their interests, tastes, and preferences. They concentrate on developing trust in relationships and are careful not to impose their own ideas and values as a condition of friendship or participation. Developmental adults establish relationships that transcend ordinary day-to-day interactions, relationships that are family-like, positive, and available. Their relationship resembles the extended family ties of older siblings or other kinship bonds.

Prescriptive

Prescriptive volunteers and staff see their task as shaping young people in the direction the adults have decided is appropriate (Morrow & Styles, 1995). This attitude is one of the rescuer, the reformer motivated by a desire to improve and reeducate the child (Camino, 1992). Prescriptive adults characteristically do not seek the youths' input into decisions and may push children into activities determined to be "good for them." They commonly ignore requests by young people, pressure youth into conversations they are reluctant to pursue, and misinterpret reticence as a challenge to authority.

Counterproductive

Counterproductive volunteers and staff regularly cast negative influences in the lives of children through their biases and prejudices (Camino, 1992). Through words and actions, they convey a message of not caring. They assert their personal biases and prejudices in their work, and they often come across as judgmental, belittling authority figures. They do not nurture. If they are involved in an agency or program, they are best suited to roles that don't directly interact with young people.

Youth development organizations need to understand the special contributions developmental volunteers and staff can make in their programs. Dean & Yost (1991) studied youth development work in congregational settings. They observed that adults who come to youth work with their whole person were more successful than those adults who came to teach skills to youth. The desire to give of oneself appears to have more power than the willingness to share knowledge or teach lessons.

Caring adults can teach and guide youth as they grow and explore.

Kunjufu (1985) speaks from personal experience when he describes the power of adults operating out of deep personal motivation and the desire to give back to the community. He describes a high school coach who inspired him to achieve athletically at a time when he was failing courses in school. The coach's trust and confidence in him built his own confidence and gave him strength to accomplish.

Ferguson (1990) notes that in most of the programs he visited, staffers described their relationships with regular program participants as family-like. Camino (1992) calls this extended family-like relationship a *fictive kinship* because it is created by people voluntarily engaged in relationships rather than those established by birth. Fictive kinship can provide mutual friendship, assistance, and nurturing

Enhancing Developmental Role Models

Agencies and organizations can promote the developmental stance among volunteers if they are explicit about their goals and expectations.

- *Be clear.* Articulating the mission and anticipated outcomes is a fundamental starting point for programs determined to engage and nurture the developmental model of involvement with youth. Define expectations during recruitment and organizational training to illustrate preferred strategies to promote the healthy development of young people in the program.

- *Discuss philosophy.* If the organization is unclear about whether the adult job is to reform or befriend, the volunteers may demonstrate mixed behaviors. If the purpose of the organization is to support young people in their growth and provide opportunities for them to learn and grow, this must be public and explicit. Address issues such as the value of competition and cooperation directly. Youth-serving organizations with long histories and traditions cannot assume that current volunteers or staff know and understand priorities and procedures.

- *Recruit carefully.* Many adults who work successfully with youth talk about their abilities as something natural or instinctive, something they know how to do without instruction. People who value differences, who enjoy shared decision making, who are confident about their own worth, and who know the community or neighborhood in question have some natural advantages as caring adult leaders or staff.

- *Model leadership.* Shared leadership and mutual respect should be constants in the organization. Discuss the difference between terms such as *guide* and *coach* and terms such as *leader* and *adviser*. Think about ways to build teams and to rotate leadership roles. Articulate the importance of leadership through service to others as well as through leadership of positional power. The challenge is to nurture the budding leadership skills of all young people.

- *Provide training.* Program staff asked to identify techniques for building successful adult-child relationships commonly cite both formal training and first-hand learning through personal experiences. Formal training includes such things as active listening and mirroring body language. Personal experiences include a willingness to get personally involved in the lives of children and few firmly preconceived limits to that involvement. Respect for children and parents is critical, combined with a gentle firmness that does not condone breaches of reasonable and clearly defined norms of behavior (Ferguson, 1990). Dependability and the ability to practice what one preaches are also key.

between generations. Young people interviewed (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994) commented on the family-like environment of their favorite neighborhood youth organizations, noting the welcoming feeling, the safety, and the acceptance they found there.

Challenging Questions

There is debate about the degree to which caring adults need to be like the child or children with whom they work. This is raised in many different contexts. Can women be good Boy Scout leaders? Do African-American boys need African-American men as role models? Do girls working in clubs or specially targeted girl programs need women as their primary coaches? Can adults who live in the suburbs work successfully with young people in inner-city neighborhoods? Can "the suits" take off their jackets and develop good relationships with street kids? In general, researchers and program practitioners suggest that the answers depend on the particular goals of the program and needs of individual children.

Kunjufu (1985) argues that a part of the African-American culture should be the successful transition from boyhood to manhood. One measure of cultural success can be defined as a high ratio of boys making the transition to adulthood in productive, health-promoting ways. The black community must develop strategies to achieve this objective and commit the time and energy to make it happen. Ferguson (1990) advocates programs that match African-American mentors and boys to foster one-to-one relationships. Ascher (1992) recognizes the strength of rites of passage programs grounded in the culture, ethnicity, and racial experience of the young people involved.

Youth organizations must give careful attention to culturally sensitive issues because they represent entry points for caring adults to affect the lives of youth. The interest in rites of passage from boyhood to manhood is an opportunity for African-American men to connect with and influence younger African-Americans. Like Ferguson (1990), Kunjufu (1985) prefers programs that match African-American mentors with young men in a one-to-one relationship. Emphasizing that a neighborhood or community commitment to its young people is essential, he asks all citizens to step forward and connect with youth in caring ways. It's less important to have the Jesse Jacksons or Andrew Youngs as mentors; rather engage the local bus driver, the mail carrier, the police officer as a visible presence in a youth's daily life.

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The 1994 Big Brothers/Big Sisters study (Morrow & Styles) found that cross-race relationships between the mentor and the young person were very successful. More important than racial differences was the motivation of the adult. Relationships between young people and developmental adults were more rewarding and lasted longer than those between youth and prescriptive adult volunteers. Nicholson (1992) points out that girls do not require female leaders in every situation, but when they are involved in single-sex programs designed to address specific gender-based needs or to remedy existing inequities, the presence of caring female adults as role models is a benefit. The much-debated issue of female coaches for male teams and vice-versa has no clear resolution.

Developmental adults establish relationships that are family-like, positive, and available.

There is no simple solution to the challenge of involving adults in productive learning relationships with young people. As youth organizations work to expand their pool of caring adult volunteers, it is important to consider the aspirations and motivations of the adults being recruited. Not every adult is ready for direct work with young people. Prescriptive and negative attitudes may be addressed through training, mentoring, pairing, or careful selection of job assignments. If an organization is clear about providing youth with the support of caring adults, it can become a constructive educational force in the community as well as in the lives of children.

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