Strengthening Community for Youth:

What does it mean?
How does one do it?

To understand the significance of strengthening community for youth, it is helpful to compare the way we provide human services with the way we approach wildlife conservation in the U.S. Human services funding has tended to focus most heavily on remediation for individuals who have run into difficulty--foster care and institutionalization of problematic children are classic examples. There is a public expectation that we will punish troublesome individuals and try to "fix" those who have been damaged after the damage has occurred. Typically we pay more attention to the effects of the damage than to its causes.

By contrast wildlife conservationists spend relatively few resources trying to rescue damaged individual birds or animals. There are no counselors for spotted owls; no therapists for alligators! Instead wildlife conservationists focus on preserving and protecting the environment of the species they want to protect. They know the overall welfare of animals depends on a healthy habitat. As a result, laws such as the Endangered Species and Environmental Protection Acts have been passed to identify and protect habitats and the species that live in them. Consequently alligators, in Florida, threatened with extinction in the 1960's, were removed from the endangered list in 1987; their population has grown from a few hundred to over one million. Peregrine falcons were removed from this list in 1999 and bald eagles were proposed for de-listing in 1999.

Of course human service workers cannot ignore an endangered individual child. But we can spread our resources more evenly between remedial and preventive activities, and between work at individual and community levels. Besides asking what one child needs, we can ask "What can we do to make our communities better places to raise our children?" Fortunately there is growing interest in this latter approach.

Effect of Community on Youth

In its broadest sense, improving the environment for youth means strengthening the community—the human habitat.   Urie Bronfenbrenner, Jim Garbarino, Moncrieff Cochran, William Lofquist, Peter Benson and many others have argued that a child's environment contributes heavily to his or her behavior and success in becoming a responsible adult. In a child's early years, his/her environment is largely limited to family, friends and often a day care setting. The effect of community is secondary; it is felt mainly through outside support – or lack of it – for the child's family. Do the child's parents have support systems when they need help? Is there good child care when parents are working? What does the community do to ensure this?

As the child gets older and becomes more mobile, the community environment affects him or her more directly. A school age child lives in three worlds—home, school and neighborhood, that together constitute the child's community environment. The

school environment becomes critically important, as children function in it nearly every day. Beyond learning academic basics, they must learn and exercise social skills, develop networks, and make friends. By bringing many children together, the school provides a prime setting for children to begin building their own social networks.

The middle school child begins to function in the neighborhood as well, and working parents must think about what happens between the time school ends and the time they get home from work. Will the child be home alone? Watching television or surfing the internet? In an organized after school or sports program? On the street or elsewhere with other children? At this point the neighborhood environment begins to matter a great deal. Are there opportunities for healthy activities with adults and other youth? If so, are these accessible to all children or only some children?

When a child becomes an adolescent and enters high school, the neighborhood becomes still more important. During these years, children tend to "break away" from home in many ways. Establishing themselves in the neighborhood becomes an important and necessary developmental task. They must face profound questions such as, "Who am I?" "Do I matter?" "Where and with whom do I belong?" "Can I meet my own expectations?" "Do I have what it takes to gain respect from others?"

The struggle to answer these questions is one of the most critical tasks for adolescents. How they resolve it depends on the environment in which they live. Who is there for them to interact with? What opportunities are there for youth to make a difference (Do I matter?) What is available for them to belong to? What positive opportunities are there to prove themselves in a safe way? And who is available to help guide them through all this—particularly if they are not getting (or not accepting) effective guidance at home?

Community vs. Neighborhood

The terms "Community" and "Neighborhood" are often used interchangeably, but in reality they have different connotations. "Community" is often used in a broad sense, i.e., 'the business community," or "a community of nations." The ties among its members are the key ingredient, wherever they may be located geographically. "Neighborhood" is a much more limited term that implies a geographic place—usually a subdivision of a larger place. A neighborhood is especially significant for people not easily mobile--older people, people without cars--and of course children, because lack of mobility means they cannot easily escape it.

Drawing neighborhood boundaries can be difficult, because they can vary according to the purpose for which they are being considered. Although much planning is done on a county-wide basis, the county is not a meaningful unit from the perspective of a child. A child's environmental unit will normally be much smaller—a residential neighborhood, or perhaps a school district with which he or she can readily identify. In rural areas there may be an advantage to considering a school district as a community unit because it is the place children come together, including those who may not live in

an identifiable neighborhood. And in many smaller communities the school is the strongest institution going in terms of employment and scheduled events that bring nearly all families with children together.

However a strong case can also be made for focusing on an urban neighborhood, a small town, a rural village, or even a trailer park. These entities are likely to be smaller and more manageable, and are likely to have more logical boundaries. School district boundaries often do not coincide with governmental boundaries, and they may cross county lines or actually split a village or neighborhood where children play together.

What does a Strong Community Look Like?

According to Stone, Dwyer and Sethi of Chapin Hall, a strong community has two fundamental characteristics: first, its residents are able to meet basic physical needs for food, shelter, transportation, etc. Secondly, its residents are bound together through multiple relationships and networks. These range from structured organizations and clubs to extended families, informal friendships, and casual associations. Robert Putnam includes these networks in his concept of Social Capital—which also includes a system of shared beliefs and norms.

Communities thrive when people can meet informally and interact casually; this interaction provides the soil for growth of the networks that constitute social capital. But many neighborhoods have lost social capital during the last 50 years or so. It is now common for people not to know their neighbors—a situation almost unheard of before the Second World War. Ironically, residents of poorer communities traditionally depended on strong social relationships to meet basic needs—these relationships were necessary for survival. But wealthier people can buy most of what they need and therefore have less need for community. As a result, some wealthy suburban neighborhoods may have less social capital than lower income communities as wealthier people often focus more on relationships outside their neighborhoods.

Physical infrastructure and public space are important for social capital, as people need places to meet casually to build social relationships. Some neighborhoods have lost public space as stores, workplaces, post offices, schools and churches have closed. Some trailer parks and some suburban tracts have never had public gathering places—and their absence has deprived their residents of easy ways to get to know each other.

Beyond physical infrastructure and social relationships, a strong community for youth development is committed to raising its children successfully, and this commitment is reflected in relationships among adults. Residents watch out for each other's children and work together to promote their development, reinforcing community norms in the process. Some networks and relationships include children and youth, and focus on their development. Children are not banned from certain places, curfewed or excessively punished. Young people are included in the life of the community. To children and parents alike, this community feels like a good place to grow up in.

Some Approaches that Strengthen the Community

Several methods for analyzing community strengths and needs are now being marketed. Some of the best known are Building Developmental Assets for Youth by Peter Benson of the Search Institute, and Communities that Care by Richard Catalano and David Hawkins, and Building Community Assets by John McKnight and John Kretzmann. All have elements in common although they differ in emphasis. Each looks for strengths in the community, and ways to build on them. And each offers a survey or other means to collect data to analyze one's own community. Building Developmental Assets for Youth and Communities that Care both focus on youth development. Communities that Care offers a structured method for implementing responses to problems identified in the community. Building Developmental Assets for Youth offers a new paradigm to mobilize a wide range of people and institutions to take more responsibility for raising their community's youth. McKnight and Kretzmann take a broader overall approach, focusing on total community development. For them, youth are one aspect of the total picture.

The Search Institute publishes a list of 40 Developmental Assets which is a useful organizing tool because it identifies community qualities important for youth development. These include various types of support—from family, other adults, neighborhood and school, as well as various useful roles for youth, plus boundaries and expectations. It also includes opportunities for positive use of time by youth. Communities that Care provides a systematic approach to identifying and reducing risk factors and strengthening protective factors, and it recommends scientifically validated approaches for both. Protective Factors include healthy beliefs and clear standards as well as bonding ("Where do I belong?"), opportunities to contribute ("Do I matter?"), skills to take advantage of opportunities, and recognition for positive accomplishments.

Persons wishing to build social capital can help by sponsoring regular events that bring people together. These can be staged in schools or other public places, or held outdoors. Such activities should not always be required to focus on education or provide a service, as human service organizations often feel compelled to do. Sometimes it is enough to provide an opportunity for people to have a good time together. This can be effective in boosting self-esteem, particularly when people are isolated. And it can provide a setting for relationships and supportive networks to form.

From the perspective of youth development, strengthening a community requires not only strong networks, but attention to increasing the opportunities for adults to interact positively with youth. As age segregation has increased in many localities, this has become more difficult. The traditional methods--through sports (Little League), and youth organizations (Scouts, 4-H, etc), are still strong in many communities, but often do not reach all the children who need them. And not all youth will respond to the same approach—communities need a wide range of opportunities. Some communities have established after school programs that bring adults and youth together around certain interests--photography, art, karate, roller skating and even just plain walking. Some have established apprenticeships to help individual youth to learn vocational skills through a

close relationship with an adult. Some have created youth commissions in which youth work with adults to develop opportunities for youth in their community. A community analysis should be undertaken to determine how many youth are not involved in such activities, and what other opportunities might be set up. It is important to address this because youth need this interaction to develop their potential and we can no longer assume that it will occur naturally.

Ideally, youth development should be closely coordinated with economic development, especially in low income communities. Not only do youth need to learn to support themselves economically, but in communities where youth development is not addressed effectively, drug use, vandalism, etc., may tend to discourage private investment. On the positive side, youth have energy, creativity and many are skilled in using computers—qualities which can be useful in developing economic activities. Economic and youth developers should work together.

In summary a community should ask what can be done to strengthen each of the three main spheres of a child's life—family, school and neighborhood. Focusing on the neighborhood will involve the after school period, where the community is critically important, as working parents usually cannot by themselves provide positive activities for their children if these opportunities don't exist in the community.

Involving Youth

The process of determining what is needed to strengthen community should involve young people themselves. Strengthening communities for youth requires adults to view young people not simply as clients who will benefit from what is done for them, but also as resources, with energy, creativity, talent and knowledge. Youth perceptions are unique; they know what it is like to grow up in their community in ways that adults do not. They may not always be correct in their analysis and reactions, but the same can be said for adults. The effort will come closest to success when adults and youth contribute their perceptions, hear and understand each other's perspectives, and work together to develop solutions with mutual respect. This empowers youth – it allows them to matter, to make a difference—and it provides a broadening and learning for adults. In short, youth involvement in public decision making is an important aspect of both community development and youth development.

Societal Forces

While it is important to strengthen the local environment in which young people function, today's youth are subject to strong forces beyond the reach of the local community. These include television programs, movies, videos, music and the internet. It is now possible for youth to establish relationships with people far beyond their neighborhood without meeting them face to face. Young people can access information their parents and neighborhood cannot screen, control or even know about.

Although parents and the community cannot control completely what their children will do or see through these sources, they can develop and communicate limits and expectations for their youth. They can also provide interesting, fun, and meaningful alternatives to compete for a youth's interest. In a California experiment, social researchers trained children to live without watching TV and videos. This ended up reducing the time spent this way by about one third, and it reduced aggressive incidents on the playground in comparison to students in a school without this intervention.

Media literacy courses are becoming popular for educating children to recognize harmful messages in the media and to understand motives behind them. This can help insulate children from negative effects. Information about media literacy courses can be found at www.ithaca.edu/looksharp and in its links to related sites.

Specific Steps to Take

1.   Pull together a group of key people interested in strengthening the community for youth development. This should include agency people, business people, local government people, youth, the faith community and committed individuals.

2.   Gather data. Find out what's going on. Find out what issues have been identified by agencies such as the county or city youth bureau, the local Cooperative Extension, schools, and other institutions working with youth. Listen to young people themselves. Find out their perspective on assets and barriers. Find out what they would like to see and why. Surveys, interviews, focus groups can be helpful. Search Institute and Communities that Care provide ready made instruments.

3.   Narrow the focus. Determine what geographic area you will cover.

4.   Look at the different spheres for youth—home, school, neighborhood—and figure out how each can be strengthened.

5.   Find out what others have done. The *Communities that Care* kit includes a manual listing some 90 scientifically validated approaches.

6.   Set short and long term goals. Any community effort needs to show some accomplishments within a few months to keep the interest and commitment of its members. But these will be only first steps toward larger goals that will usually require additional resources.

7.   Figure out how to measure progress toward long term goals, and what kind of results you can expect. This means picking milestones – intermediate accomplishments short of the big goal, but necessary to get to it. Think through what results you hope will occur, and ways you can measure them relatively easily. And watch for unexpected results which may become just as significant as those you expected.

8.   Organize working groups for action. Include young people and others from the community as well as people from organizations which get things done.

Search Institute and Communities that Care offer ways to accomplish many of these steps.

Conclusion

In concluding, it is important to note that strengthening community means more than simply providing more services—although that may be an important part of it. Strengthening community also means strengthening informal forces that involve people not paid to work with youth in helping young people develop their potential. These informal forces facilitate human interactions that reduce the need for professional human service workers.

Benson and others point out that our society has become increasingly age segregated. This has resulted from various factors including design of residential areas, larger schools, changes in family work patterns, and commercialization of care. As a result, communities today must look for ways to build links across age barriers so as to encourage people to develop networks and relationships with each other who would not do so otherwise. This means creating settings, events, and groups that engage adults and youth in activities that feel fun and natural for both.   These activities are relatively easy to organize and can bring positive short term results that set the stage for later expansion and long term outcomes. In the process, more adults will become more engaged in informal youth development.

When people in a community view "all children as our children," to paraphrase the title of one of Peter Benson's books, that community will have gone far toward becoming the "whole community it takes to raise a child."

Frank Barry
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