Facing Life-Sized Issues -- Empowering Teens with Problem Solving Skills

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Overview

Being a teenager today is risky business. Among the risks are alcohol and drug dependency, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and violence. Consequently, high risk acts may lead to single parenting, prolonged poverty, or physical danger.

The reality of the lives of youth are evidenced in statistics such as:

> ➢ The firearm homicide rate for ten- to fourteen-year-olds more than doubled between 1985 and 1992 (Carnegie, 1995).

> ➢ From 1980 to 1992, the rate of suicide among young adolescents increased 120 percent (Carnegie, 1995).

> ➢ One in 15 teenagers say they currently use both alcohol and illegal drugs (Children's Defense Fund, 1991)

> ➢ Almost 1.8 million teens were victims of violent crimes in 1988, and 3.2 million were victims of theft (Children's Defense Fund, 1991).

The problems facing youth are so immense, many adults throw up their hands in frustration. And in many communities, teens are written off as "unsalvageable by their schools (pp. vii, Children's Defense Fund, 1991)." Early adolescence, however, is recognized as the last best chance for communities to ensure that youth have the coping mechanisms in place to prevent their entry into high risk practices (Scales, 1996).

Answers to many complex societal problems are costly, but professionals are working diligently to discover solutions. In response to glaring statistics, politicians and others are calling upon

families and community organizations to address human values. But even this does not represent a clear cut response. There is controversy over ambiguous definitions between what values to teach and whose values are taught.

This brief article uses comments made by 15 urban North Carolina youth, 14-17 years of age. Their collective comments address the issues that concern them the most. They were asked to respond to one open-ended question in a non-random sample. Their comments, gathered as part of a county teen needs assessment, provided the impetus for Extension youth professionals locally to begin to rethink their practices with adolescents labeled as "at risk" of failure in the social, economic, and educational world. Their responses to "What issues are youth facing today?" focused not only on issues of concern, but were sprinkled with concerns about growing up and being exposed to high risk environments.

Each youth comment is followed by examples of how a preventive or educational organization can recognize and respond to their expressed concerns. A programmatic framework -- based in the "caring" literature -- is offered. The caring framework can undergird training programs for adults working with youth in schools, families, and community organizations.

Youth Concerns and Society's Response

> "All you hear anymore is some "certified doctor" telling why there are so many problems with America. Everybody blames everything on someone else. What they need to teach is responsibility and real family values. I think that the nation is too concerned with dealing with issues and not concerned enough about the family."

These words exhibit a concern with instability in community leadership and few solutions to daily concerns. Teachers and parents are seeking solutions. As community educators in North Carolina, Extension Agents who teach using the research-base about children and families have experienced an increase in requests for information about the development of family values and youth ethics. The traditional work of scholars such as Kohlberg, Piaget and Freud have long been theoretical supports to undergirding practices in communities. But this research base may not be enough to guide practice when youth express heartfelt concerns such as:

> "On the news there's nothing but kids (12-17) getting shot. When I'm home alone I worry that someone will rob the house while I'm alone and if they have a gun, I'm afraid they will kill me."

The level of stress is different for youth today. Their stress is a picture of life or death viewed through an incomplete developmental lens. Reality for children is different from reality for adults. There are major concerns today that were not present in generations past. Children are

exposed to adult decisions at earlier stages in their lives (Elkind, 1994). Youth views are not only affected by an incomplete cognitive understanding, but also the context of the environment comprised of individuals living, working, and surviving in neighborhoods and communities. Multiple community systems interact to create a violent unsafe setting or to form safety nets to build resiliency. Community organizations offer services but often fail to interact efficiently; instead forming barriers in a segmented system that does not adequately serve families. Thus families and youth are faced with complex decisions just to meet their basic needs.

From a moral standpoint, just knowing what is 'right' is not enough. In his research on moral development, Lawrence Kohlberg (1969) implies that moral knowledge is sufficient for moral behavior (Noddings, 1992). But, from an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), it is unmistakable that responses -- including moral responses -- vary according to contexts in which the individual is placed at almost any age. For example, a 12 year old youth said:

> "When I grow up, I'm going to try my best not to do the wrong thing. When I get old enough to make my own decisions, I'm going to try and make the right choice for living."

Simply wanting to do the right thing does not take into consideration the situations in which youth may be placed in neighborhoods or communities. Professionals working with youth must be aware of the combination of KNOWING what is right, with the CONTEXT in which youth are placed to make decisions.

When children are in the early learning stages, who is teaching them right from wrong? One child said:

> "The parents are not teaching their children right from wrong. I know all about it because I see it everyday in school."

Many community organizations and agencies have begun to recognize the importance of teaching problem solving skills, teaching responsibility and building human resiliency. Resiliency is the process of healthy human development, whereby the individual dynamically interacts with the environment. What results is determined by the balance among risk factors, stressful life events, and protective factors (Werner 1990). For communities to build protective safety nets, relationships with families can not only be defined by the services and programs offered - but rather in resources of people and organizations. A resource-based model emphasizes formal and informal supports using community resources valued as rich, expandable, and renewable. Solutions are defined from within the people comprising the community and supportive human organizations. Many professionals recognize that an active collaboration between families affected and the support services available are a powerful combination. Even

youth recognize that the families who are affected directly by problems should be involved in making the decisions. One youth said:

> "If we could all just come together to be one, we people would have nothing to worry about."

In addition to building resource safety nets, professionals must realize that the development of human potential requires more that simple policies and practices. Youth need time with caring adults who can assist youth in exploring their own developing sense of right and wrong, good and evil. Adults, including teachers, parents, and policy makers, can't assume that children will learn their sense of values from the school, at home, or in youth groups. Collectively adults must provide multiple opportunities for youth to exercise their developing sense of caring.

Understanding 'right' and 'wrong' -- 'good' and 'evil' is developed out of a foundation of caring relationships. Everyone wants to be accepted and to elicit a response. Youth join clubs, groups and even gangs to elicit a response and to fulfill their need for acceptance during their adolescent search for identity and affiliation (Elkind, 1984).

CARING relationships are developed by experiencing full receptivity, one of another. The act of caring is a dynamic encounter, brief or long term. Loving, trusting, caring, and developing relationships play central roles in ethics and moral education (Noddings, 1992). Caring is missing when youth feel compelled to comment:

> "Youth are facing crimes and drugs. Crimes in the world because people are starting to hate one another. So the person that got mad will go home and get his gun to kill someone for something stupid."

A Caring Perspective

From the perspective the work of Nel Noddings (1992), the development of caring has four substantial components. The first component is modeling which remains one of the strongest teaching methods. As adults model caring behaviors, young children and others learn this trait. When parents exempt themselves from rules expected of their children, they create confusion and often rebellion. One youth makes an observation about how children learn negative behaviors from their parents:

> "Youth are facing drugs. Kids are taking drugs because they see their parents doing it. Kids 12-15 aren't fully developed so their lungs can't take it."

In addition to modeling, youth need to be presented with opportunities to dialogue about their concerns with each other and with caring adults. This allows youth to explore developing feelings and challenges individuals with higher order thinking and subsequent action. By definition, dialogue is open-ended with neither party knowing the outcome of the dialogue from the outset. Dialogue is practice in receiving others, while attending fully and openly. Through dialogue, there is a common search for understanding, empathy, and appreciation. It can be playful, serious, imaginative, or goal oriented (Noddings, 1992). Dialogue provides the opportunity to question WHY. It connects us to each other. It is the foundation for caring. When youth have had the chance to practice making wise decisions in safe situations, they are better prepared for real life higher risk situations. Many times they may not realize the reason for what appears to be a socially accepted behavior among their peers. For example one teen said:

> " People get beat up because they have on some shoes or jacket that others want. That has been a problem with my brother. "

Depending on their life experiences, youth develop ways of reacting and develop skills and attitudes to fit a range of circumstances. Some attitudes are considered insolent or cocky, but attitudes shaped by experience are developed through positive practice in caring environments -- resulting in more caring attitudes. The capacity to care is a mark of good morals. This being the case, teachers and parents must seek ways to increase opportunities to show how to care. Often youth are not empowered with appropriate reactions for stressful situations yet there are indications that they are stressed and worried about the same things adults worry about. One youth said:

> "I worry about crime and violence -- that it will hurt or kill someone I love, or me. I worry about my dad and grandparents."

Empowering youth with problem solving skills is one factor that contributes to resiliency (Bogenschneider, Small, Riley, 1990). Problem solving through dialogue is an area in which schools rarely recognize achievement or give credit. Many schools spend more time on fact-based drill than on life-sized problem solving situations. The third component of the framework is confirmation. Confirmation is encouraging the best in others. Confirmation involves identifying something admirable and encouraging the development of that trait. This lifts youth toward a vision of hope for the future and a positive view of self. To build from this point, continual trust must ground the confirmation.

Caring and engaging in more dialogue with children, particularly adolescents, may be one solution. The implicit problems in our schools of large classes and rigid attitudes toward our youth can be shaped through different ways of viewing youth and providing opportunities for youth to think about their developing feelings, explore their sense of values, an develop a

repertoire of solutions. Practice in adult caring is a skill that expands the conversation on values and morals. The use of CARING is a seemingly easy application but a learned skill.

Sources

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