

Rather Than Fixing Kids – Build Positive Peer Cultures

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While there has been an explosion in resilience research, there are no agreed upon definitions of resilience and protective factors, nor is there a consensus of the way resilience and protective factors interrelate. Resiliencies are internal strengths, while protective factors are external. The family, the school, the church, the community, and the peer group have been identified as potential protective factors. While there has been substantive documentation of the importance of caring adults, only limited thought has been given to transforming the environments in which youth intermingle. This article will explore the power of positive peer relationships and ways in which adults can assist in developing positive peer cultures in education and treatment settings.

In the State of the Union Address, President Bush (2005) said:

Now we need to focus on giving young people, especially young men in our cities, better options than apathy, or gangs, or jail. Tonight I propose a three-year initiative to help organizations keep young people out of gangs, and show young men an ideal of manhood that respects women and rejects violence. Taking on gang life will be one part of a broader outreach to at-risk youth, which involves parents and pastors, coaches and community leaders, in programs ranging from literacy to sports. And I am proud that the leader of this nationwide effort will be our First Lady, Laura Bush.

In an interview with Jim Lehrer, First Lady Laura Bush said:

It is a very big deal because gangs offer boys, young boys, exactly what we want families and mentors and coaches to offer them—and that's acceptance in a group, something to do after school, somebody to be with after school, a way to feel cool, a way to get up some sort of self-esteem boost.

As youth are given this national attention, it is tempting to develop more programs designed to fix kids

by providing mentors, coaches, special education services, and other pull-out programs. While these programs may be helpful, they are not sufficient. We need to advocate for the transformation of the environments where youth live and breathe. We need to push for a national agenda where the top priority is to focus on building positive peer cultures every place young people interact. Further, we should demand that teachers, parents, youth workers, politicians, and others concerned with youth identify, appreciate, and celebrate each young person's strengths as well as weaknesses.

Mobilizing the power of young people builds on the inherent human desire to connect and be of help to others. Unleashing the power of young people to help create caring relationships works in schools, sports teams, after school programs, and on street corners. Rather than adding one more promising intervention program or tougher sets of rules, Sergiovanni (1994) suggested that cultivating caring communities for young people will help meet their basic human needs of belonging, of continuity, of being connected to others and to ideas and values. These make our lives meaningful and significant. Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

Everybody can be great, because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle ... (or) Einstein's Theory of Relativity ... (or) the Second Theory of Thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.

Developing Positive Peer Cultures

Knowing that the peer group is a tremendous influential factor during the years of adolescence, cultivating positive peer environments can be a particularly effective way of supporting adolescents. A positive peer group offers acceptance, emotional avenues for catharsis, and a place for testing new values and judgments. A positive peer group gives adolescents a chance to help others and encourages them to develop a positive support network. The interaction among peers can be used to create new meanings, perceptions, and solutions. Peers can help provide feedback and can model alternative perceptions and behaviors. Positive peer cultures provide members with opportunities to check out the effectiveness of their communication, behaviors, perceptions, and values. This helps them understand that they are not alone in their struggles.

Relationships Among Group Members

Every group of youth creates a peer group culture, sometimes positive, sometimes negative. In some cases, adults are oblivious to the negative, intimidating, and hurtful underground operating in the environment, e.g., bullying in schools. More often, the adults tolerate the underground culture as inevitable and think it cannot be changed. However, it is possible to enlist youth as active agents and partners in developing positive environments. When given proper direction, youth are not only willing to help themselves, but also willing to help others. Just as a peer group can foster problems, so also can the peer group be used to solve problems. The core question in developing positive peer groups asks whether a youth is willing to help others, rather than simply helping oneself. When a person gives and becomes valuable to others, feelings of self-worth are increased and a more positive self-concept is built.

Another core concept of developing helping and nurturing peer cultures is teaching values rather than imposing rules. If there were only one rule, it would be that people must care for one another. Caring means wanting what is best for a person. Unfortunately, caring is not always popular among youth; therefore, adults have to foster a milieu in which caring becomes fashionable.

We can use the positive influences of the peer group to help change the behaviors and values of individual youth. Numerous youth empowerment programs and public schools have successfully used a comprehensive and specific methodology known as Positive Peer Culture (PPC) (Vorrath & Brendtro, 1985).

For many youth, their major source of learning is from informal groups with whom they associate at one another's houses, at local malls, at schools, or on the streets. What they learn from these groups, however, is dependent on the norms of the group.

When properly managed by youth workers, the group represents an opportunity for youth to practice newly learned behaviors in a caring setting, which later can be transferred to the community. The group also provides a large number of models, role players for behavioral rehearsals, persons to do monitoring, and partners for use in a "buddy" system. The group provides multiple sources of ideas in that members can brainstorm goals, alternative behaviors, reinforcements, and even intervention strategies. Another important benefit is that the group provides a natural laboratory for learning discussion and leadership skills that are essential to good social relationships. Furthermore, negotiation and problem-solving skills are readily addressed in the context of the group as the members solve group problems and negotiate differences among the members.

In the process of interacting in a group, norms are established that serve to influence and shape the behavior of individual group members. If these norms are introduced and effectively maintained by adults, they can be powerful therapeutic tools. Group members begin to confront members to conform to such norms as helping vs. hurting, reinforcing peers who do well, analyzing problems systematically and specifically, and assisting peers with identifying their problems and building their strengths. Of course, if the youth worker is not

careful, negative norms can easily develop. To prevent or reduce the impact of such problems, the worker can use different problem-solving techniques for modifying the norms of the group. The adults can also facilitate the attainment of both individual and group goals by modifying the cohesiveness, status pattern, or communication structure of the group. It is also necessary to resolve more specific group problems, such as scapegoating, interpersonal conflict, and excessive teasing as they arise. Much of the power of the group's ability to achieve a caring culture is lost if negative group dynamics are unrestrained or group problems remain unresolved.

In groups, youth must learn to deal with the idiosyncrasies of other members. They must learn to offer other youth feedback and advice. By helping others, they are not always relegated to the role of helper or client, as in typical adult-youth interactions. They become aware that they have skills and knowledge that might benefit others. Moreover, they are afforded the opportunity to learn the art and skills involved in giving and receiving both critical feedback and advice as demonstrated in the following scenario:

While the group is involved in planning an activity, one member consistently aggravates the group, and a couple of other group members are beginning to get distracted and feed in to the aggravator. The youth worker has tried every trick of the trade in order to redirect the leader but then decides to stop the activity in order to have the group address the issue at hand.

Staff: I wonder how the group can help Karen get back on task?

Karen: I don't need any help. Why are you putting my name in it?

Latisha: She didn't do anything. What are you talking about?

Melissa: Right now, we should finish planning the activity. Could all of us just do that?

Joann: Karen, I know you and Shavora have talked a lot and you can really help her. If you can just stop all your clowning around, we'll have time afterwards.

Karen: OK, I'll pay attention.

Staff: The group really did a nice job of getting yourselves back on focus. I really liked that Joann acknowledges Karen's strengths. Does the group think that it was that little piece of acknowledgment that helped Karen get back on track?

The group nods in agreement.

Staff: Acknowledging one another's strengths goes a long way.

Youth Empowerment

The thrust of youth empowerment is to develop a strong group that is committed to caring for and helping one another and preventing members from getting hurt. For example: You notice a bruise over a kid's eye and ask him what happened. He tells you that it is a carpet burn he got from playing blackout, a game involving choking one another until one passes out. You find out that the "game" was played in class, as the teacher worked with a small group of students in an adjacent room. What would you do with respect to staff and students? Obviously, you can conclude that it is the adult's responsibility to provide a safe environment to prevent this type of behavior. Closer supervision is an obvious external solution. But you also know that people can outwit most systems; therefore, the second issue is that the group does not view the game as their problem to solve (whether the members enjoy or despise the game). They believe that it is the responsibility of the adults to come up with external measures to prevent the problem. If you choose the latter solution, the situation is likely to recur once the external controls relax. Further, you have not challenged the students' values, thinking, or responsibility. The incident occurred because group members did not care enough about or know one another well enough to anticipate the problem and prevent it. If we intend to empower young people to take responsibility for one another and their environment, we want to ask the group questions: Why didn't they see this coming? How could they have prevented it? How else has inattentiveness affected them? What could they do to get to know their group members better?

In order to cultivate caring peer environments, youth should have as much responsibility as possible for their daily lives. The adults should choose an indirect approach rather than a direct one, for example, "Does Sharon have everyone's attention?" or "Is

the group ready to listen to what Sharon has to say?," rather than "Be quiet now and pay attention." However, this does not mean that adults should be passive or uninvolved; the group needs adult guidance. On the other hand, the adults should not be too controlling or directive, because it leaves the group dependent on them.

The Group Meeting

You're either part of the solution or part of the problem.

– Eldridge Cleaver

The group meeting is an essential component of cultivating positive peer culture and is the forum for youth to help one another resolve their issues. The group meeting ideally should take place every day when the group is together. Depending on the environment, this may be once a week or daily and typically lasts for 90 minutes. The adult group leader is responsible for facilitating the group meeting. A variety of approaches are used during the sessions, including cognitive-behavioral interventions, strengths-based solution-focused interventions, anger management education, self-esteem enhancement, and social skills training. Vorrath and Brendtro (1985) offered a structured way to identify and talk about problems and for group facilitation. Yalom (1995) noted that an essential aspect of group work is respecting group members' abilities to create and carry out effective solutions to problems. The group should develop to the point where group members take the responsibility for starting the meeting and going through the different stages.

In more traditional groups, group members typically focus on what went wrong in the past, and members leave the group with good skills for explaining or rationalizing why things went wrong for them in life. While these groups often are perceived as being supportive because members get to talk about their issues and express their feelings, they often lack the suggestions for how the individuals should continue their lives. Focusing on trauma and problems works against the natural process of change. However, when the focus of therapy groups is changed to concentrate on group members' strengths (e.g., the times the presenting problem does not occur and the action taken to bounce back from adversity) the

group is able to instill hope and aspirations for participants that their lives can be different. Further, they identify solutions and behaviors that will assist them in dealing with life's challenges. It is very straightforward:

- It is easier and more profitable to construct solutions than to dissolve problems.
- It is easier to repeat successful behaviors than it is to stop or change existing problematic behavior.

In the group meeting, youth discuss their situations and learn from each other new perceptions and ways of thinking. All people have strengths and resources to change and to recognize that no problem happens all the time—there are exceptions to the rule. Through capitalizing on strengths and resources and engaging in *change talk*, changes in the clients' behaviors and beliefs happen rapidly. The group focuses on times when the problem is not happening. When group members begin to help one another find these times, the group becomes more action-oriented. When group members or adults label kids in a problem-focused or pathological manner, they reinforce the hopelessness and the helplessness of kids. However, when a different frame is offered, it invites them to think about themselves differently. Michael White (1990) wrote:

Since the stories that persons have about their lives determine both the ascription of meaning to experience and the selection of those aspects of experience that are to be given expression, these stories are constitutive of shaping the persons' lives. The lives and relationships of persons evolve as they live through or perform these stories. (p. 40)

The group leader's responsibility is to suggest a description that offers hope. Examples of problems that can be reframed to create new perceptions are shown in Table 1 on page 141.

Suggesting a new perception does not change the diagnosis or minimize the problem. The new perception normalizes and redefines the presenting problem so that the group members begin to perceive solutions. Discussions in the group meeting are always directed toward solutions, and the solution to a problem should never include punishment and fault finding. All problems or situations relative to the group and to any individual group member are eligible for discussion. If a member is revealing

Table 1

Problem Description	New Solution Description
Major depression	A feeling of sadness that evolves from a sad series of events.
Hyperactivity	A high level of energy that interferes with calmness, rest, or relationships.
Eating disorder	A habit of changing one's eating patterns that influences one's health in a negative manner.
Anger	A feeling of hostility that is at times justified but that is not controlled in a way that is acceptable to others.
Bipolar	Mood swings that tend to keep one from being calm, organized, and composed.

more than the group is ready to deal with, the group leader may change the subject or suggest that the student talk about something else that has more relevance to the group.

While strength-based group work does not deny problems, it stresses the identification of group members' resiliencies. Encouraging group members to discuss their strengths often results in increased self-disclosure, communication, and cohesion among the members.

When the group becomes aware of the strengths members had forgotten or ignored, they begin to search for their own (potential) strengths and may begin to think about these as avenues for change. Reflecting on issues described by their peers, participants may discover strengths they did not know they had. In this way the group creates a forum where group members begin to identify their internal resiliencies. As a result, group members become more effective at accessing their strengths and using them to bounce back from adversity. It is worth noting that using the strength paradigm in group work does not ignore the pain that many young people experience. Rather, it acknowledges that even the most troubled youth have strengths and it encourages them to identify and access their own competencies during times of hardship.

Why Would Youth Be Interested in Helping Others?

Young children are extremely motivated to help others and, when their contribution is acknowledged and appreciated, they beam with pride. While many children and teenagers appear to be reluctant to reach out to others, they also have an innate desire to help and make a difference in the lives of others. However, this predisposition to be helpful must be nurtured, and adults must provide opportunities for kids to develop this sense of responsibility, compassion, and social conscience (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001).

The life experiences of many youth have taught them that they can count only on themselves; therefore, they often present themselves as self-centered, placing their own needs before anything else. Nevertheless, we have seen that when kids are presented the opportunities to be of assistance to others, they are ready to put their own needs aside and go to work. When we examine the psychological reasons for this behavior, it is not strange. In order for a person to feel positive about himself, he must feel accepted by others and he must feel that he deserves this acceptance. In most client-professional relationships, the first condition for positive self-worth is present, that is, most helping professionals are accepting of and empathetic toward the people with whom they work. Helping professionals go to great lengths to let the troubled person know that he really is not so bad as he thinks, that he is worthy as an individual, that he has many fine qualities, and that we accept him. However, just telling someone he is a fine person and treating him empathetically is not sufficient to develop a positive self-concept. The person often thinks others are being nice to him only because they feel sorry for him or perhaps even because they are getting paid to be nice (Vorrath & Brendtro, 1985). However, when a youth is a member of a caring peer group, she is expected and has the opportunity to help others. Thus, the peer group approach provides the natural ingredients for an improved self-concept. It is important for a person's self-worth that he feels he is worthy of acceptance. If he knows that much of his behavior is irresponsible and damaging to himself or others, he does not believe he is really making worthwhile contributions to life. If he is to feel deserving of the acceptance, he must start making positive contributions to others and stop harmful behavior. Therefore, adults

must cultivate caring environments where youth stop their irresponsible (hurting) behaviors and have ample opportunities for helping others. These are the ingredients of a truly positive self-concept.

Summary

The challenges facing our nation's youth are multi-faceted and include violence, drug abuse, gangs, school dropouts, suicide, delinquency, and despair. President Bush has made addressing these issues an agenda item during his second term. The cultivation of positive peer relationships in school, sports teams, street corners, and community systems involves mobilizing youth as leaders in building positive peer cultures that focus on solving problems and helping one another. Gang involvement, acting out, and narcissism are the signs that adults have failed to meet our youth's basic human needs for belonging and being a part of a community.

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Peers don't compare and scolds while parents do. A teenager can use abusive words in front of peers but can't dare in front of parents. Example: I had a friend in college who used to smoke. Once I told my father... I believe parents should stop their teenage kids to avoid doing wrong things. But, they need to handle kids as per the situation and as per the age. They need to share their feelings with their teenage kids openly. And 2 way communication is always better. Related Questions. Americans need to advocate for the transformation of the environments where youth live and breathe. They need to push for a national agenda where the top priority is to focus on building positive peer cultures every place young people interact. Further, they should demand that teachers, parents, youth workers, politicians, and others concerned with youth identify, appreciate, and celebrate each young person's strengths as well as weaknesses. In this article, the author explores the power of positive peer relationships and ways in which adults can assist in developing positive peer culture... Peer pressure and influence can be positive. For example, your child might be influenced to become more assertive, try new activities, or to get more involved with school. But it can be negative too. Build up your child's self-esteem and confidence Children who have strong self-esteem are better at resisting negative peer pressure and influence. You can build your child's self-esteem and confidence by encouraging her to try new things that give her a chance of success, and to keep trying even when things are hard. You can also be a role model for confidence too, and show your child how to act confident as the first step towards feeling confident. Praising your child for trying hard is important for building self-esteem and confidence. Besides close friends, your peers include other kids you know who are the same age like people in your grade, church, sports team, or community. These peers also influence you by the way they dress and act, things they're involved in, and the attitudes they show. It's natural for people to identify with and compare themselves to their peers as they consider how they wish to be (or think they should be), or what they want to achieve. You might not hear a lot about it, but peers have a profoundly positive influence on each other and play important roles in each other's lives: Friendship. Peers who are kind and loyal influence you to build these qualities in yourself. Even peers you've never met can be role models! Positive peer pressure: This makes the teen do positive things such as joining in a gym to maintain a healthy weight, participating in competitions, joining a hobby group, and following some good, everyday habits like eating healthy food because peers do the same. Positive peer pressure is indeed a delight for parents who may otherwise struggle to convince their child to take up good habits. It is the negative peer pressure, which is worrisome. [Read: How Does Peer Pressure Influence Teen Pregnancy?]