MOBILIZING ADULTS FOR POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Strategies for Closing the Gap between Beliefs and Behaviors

EDITED BY E. GIL CLARY AND JEAN E. RHODES
Mobilizing Adults for Positive Youth Development
The Search Institute Series on Developmentally Attentive Community and Society

Series Editor
Peter L. Benson, Search Institute, Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Mobilizing Adults for Positive Youth Development

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Perhaps no other challenge is more pressing in creating “developmentally atten-
tive community and society” (the theme of this book series) than mobilizing
adults to play active, constructive roles in the lives of children and adolescents. In
a society that too easily defaults to designing programs as cure-alls for meeting
young people’s needs, particular attention must be paid to understanding and
mobilizing the kind of positive, relational energy that prepares each successive
generation to assume its place in society. Although programs and institutions
certainly play important roles, the key lies in the personal commitment, involve-
ment, and investment of adults in young people’s lives.

In Mobilizing Adults for Positive Youth Development: Strategies for Closing the
Gap between Beliefs and Behaviors, E. Gil Clary and Jean E. Rhodes have assem-
bled the insights of leading scholars from multiple disciplines and contexts for
engaging a broad cadre of adults as allies for youth development. As the editors
write, the question guiding the book is, “How can we most effectively encourage
adults, both individually and collectively, to begin to behave differently with re-
spect to the young people of a community, to do so consistently, and to do so in
a variety of ways?” What is being proposed, then, is nothing less than a social
movement that engages individuals, small groups, neighborhoods, workplaces,
schools, faith communities, and broader social institutions in attending to the
well-being and healthy development of young people.

A growing number of books and reports already explore the why of adult
engagement, and those foundational questions are appropriately addressed in
this volume. What makes Mobilizing Adults for Positive Youth Development unique
and compelling, however, is its focus on the how—the strategies that can lead to
real change, transformation, and engagement at the individual, organizational,
and societal levels. This focus on change strategies requires understanding not
only the needs of young people but also the realities, motivations, and priorities
of adults. In addition, it demands careful attention to the processes of change at
the individual, organizational, and societal levels.

Since the field of positive youth development is only now beginning to ex-
amine these complex dynamics, this volume invites experts in these issues to
use their knowledge in responding to the specific question of engaging adults
in the lives of young people. Hence, the contributors introduce and apply to
youth development a broad range of theories and approaches, from volunteer
management and mentoring (which focus on engaging individual adults) to
civic engagement and social marketing (which focus on mobilizing adults at
a community or societal level). When drawn together, these chapters offer a
multifaceted, multidisciplinary blueprint for the kind of social change needed to ensure that all young people experience the kinds of positive relationships, supports, and opportunities they need to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible.

At its core, the Search Institute Series on Developmentally Attentive Community and Society is intended to advance interdisciplinary inquiry into the processes for mobilizing all aspects of society to build developmental strengths for and with young people. This book exemplifies the goal of the series, making a vital and unique contribution to the field—and to the adults who invest in the lives of children and youth.

Peter L. Benson, Ph.D.
Search Institute
Series Editor
Acknowledgments

Why do people with good intentions often fail to translate those intentions into action, and how might the gap between intentions and action be closed? These two questions arise in many areas of human life, and students of human behavior have devoted a great deal of conceptual and empirical attention to these questions. The chapters in this volume focus on these and related questions as they arise in connection with adults’ intentions to contribute to the positive development of the youth of our communities. Specifically, why do adults, who believe in the importance of adults in a community assisting with the development of young people, and not just their own but also other people’s children, often fail to engage in activities that assist in that development? And how might a community or society effectively encourage and mobilize its adults to participate in positive youth development?

As with any work of this sort, many people have made important contributions to the preparation of this volume. To begin, let us recognize the efforts of the contributors to this volume, who were willing to consider the above questions from the perspective of their programs of research. Several of the authors have been wrestling with questions about positive youth development, while others have been focusing on these kinds of questions as they concern mobilizing adults. In all cases, the authors were asked to contribute their best thinking to the fundamental question of how a community can encourage large numbers of adults to practice positive youth development.

We also wish to recognize the contributions of several members of Search Institute. The volume emerged from conversations among the editors, Peter Benson, and Gene Roehlkepartain, and was further shaped through discussions with Patricia Seppanen, Peter C. Scales, and Arturo Sesma Jr. We also wish to recognize the guidance that Gene has provided throughout the process of organizing this volume. Finally, Mary Byers did exceptional work in copyediting the volume, and Lynn Marasco provided valuable assistance.

Our colleagues from other institutions generously contributed to the volume. Mark Snyder and Arthur A. Stukas offered important and useful feedback as we were planning this volume, as well as contributed chapters to the volume. The Summit on Youth Mentoring, which was sponsored by the National Mentoring Partnership, provided a rich context for exploring these issues in depth. Along with valuable conversations with many participants at the summit, Kenneth Maton, Andrea S. Taylor, and Abraham Wandersman contributed chapters to the volume.
Last, we wish to acknowledge the support provided by the Lilly Endowment for the Search Institute Series on Developmentally Attentive Community and Society. We also acknowledge the contributions of the acquiring editor at Springer, Judy Jones, and assistant editor Angela Quilici-Burke, who shepherded the volume through production.
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Introduction and Conceptual Foundations

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“It takes a village to raise a child.” This principle and the idea behind it have been repeated often in the past several years. It has been the subject of numerous articles and several books, including volume 1 in the Search Institute Series on Developmentally Attentive Community and Society. In effect, that book, Developmental Assets and Asset-Building Communities: Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice, edited by Richard M. Lerner and Peter L. Benson (2003), was devoted to the science and practice of the hypothesis implied by this phrase: that the healthy development of children and adolescents is tied to the community or communities in which young people live. Several of the authors in volume 1 documented the empirical basis for the importance of developmental supports or assets coming from a wide variety of sources in the communities (e.g., families, schools, peers, neighbors, religious congregations, and other segments of society) for the acquisition of valued characteristics and skills. And other authors described attempts by communities or some segment of the community to translate the concepts of developmental supports and assets into practice.

The second volume in this series, Peter C. Scales’ s (2003) Other People’s Kids: Social Expectations and American Adults’ Involvement with Children and Adolescents, reports the findings of a national survey showing widespread agreement that it is important for the adults in a community to provide developmental supports and assets to nonfamilial children and adolescents. The survey reveals that, although many adults recognize the importance of close, one-to-one relationships with youth, far fewer are willing to act to develop such relationships. To
illustrate, the poll reveals that 75% of adults reported that it is “very important” to have meaningful conversations with children and youth, whereas fewer than 35% reported actually having such conversations. Scales delves into the reasons for this disconnection between values and action, illuminating the psychological basis for the relative neglect of our nation’s youth and mapping out a means for redressing it. As Scales suggests, the diminishing availability of caring adults is caused not only by changing communities, schools, and families but also by a deep cultural ambivalence that has emerged regarding what it means to connect with other people’s children. In Western societies, parents have come to be considered solely responsible for their children, so the involvement of other adults is often met with suspicion and discomfort. Scales finds considerable evidence for a significant gap between adults’ beliefs about providing supports and assets for nonfamilial young people and their behaviors that represent supports and assets.

The present volume, the fourth in this series, is devoted to strategies and tactics that are designed to close gaps between beliefs and actions, or put another way, strategies that seek to mobilize adults to contribute to the positive development of young people. To be more specific, this volume focuses on conceptual and empirical work related to social influence strategies, broadly defined, that might assist individuals and communities in moving from the current state of affairs, as documented by Scales’s Other People’s Kids, to a society in which individuals and communities provide young people with the supports and assets they need for positive development, as documented by Lerner and Benson’s Developmental Assets and Asset-Building Communities. In the following discussion, we first explore what is meant by mobilizing adults—who is to be mobilized and how that is best accomplished; second, we consider the meaning of positive youth development—what young people need. In short, what are the goals of positive development, and what can adults do that will help bring about positive development?

Mobilizing Adults for Action

The central question to be explored in this volume is how best to encourage adults to act—specifically, to translate good intentions into behaviors that promote positive youth development. Moreover, this question is applied to the actions of individuals, small groups, neighborhoods, municipalities, workplaces, school districts, and religious communities, as well as to large groups of adults as represented by society. Although each chapter of this volume may focus on only one or two of these targets of influence, we contend that to create developmentally attentive community and society, action must occur at all levels.

Gaps between intentions and actions occur in many areas of life. At the individual level, people intend to adopt a healthy diet, engage in physical exercise, quit smoking, put into practice their moral beliefs, and the like, but they frequently fail to achieve these goals. Organized collections of individuals often struggle to encourage and even pressure their members to act in ways that
help achieve group goals, including attendance at meetings, participation in committee work, generating funds, and recruiting members. Questions about influencing actions, and particularly about closing the gap between people’s beliefs and actions, have long occupied behavioral scientists attempting to understand the conditions under which a person’s attitudes or beliefs will or will not serve as the basis for action (Olson & Zanna, 1993).

On its face, the problem of mobilizing adults for positive youth development seems a simple matter, given that the beliefs of individual adults (1) are already highly favorable to the cause of the positive development of youth and (2) are shared by a large number of adults, with the result that these beliefs also stand as social norms (Scales, 2003). At the same time, some force or set of forces seems to be preventing the behavioral expression of these beliefs. Broadly speaking, these forces may be of two types: an absence of one or more critical factors (e.g., motivation, time, appropriate venues) that are necessary for action to occur; and the presence of factors that serve as barriers or obstacles to action, or otherwise suppress the behavioral tendency to contribute to youth development. These considerations, of course, raise questions about what exactly these missing ingredients and barriers to action might be.

A possible answer to the obstacle posed by missing ingredients comes from research that has asked what motivation is necessary for a person to put a belief into practice. One conceptual approach to this issue, the functional approach to attitudes and behavior (e.g., Katz, 1960; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956), suggests that both attitudes and behaviors serve important personal and social functions, and that different individuals may hold similar attitudes or engage in similar behaviors for very different reasons. This means that simply holding a belief (without practicing its corresponding action) may fulfill the individual’s purpose. Thus, motivations appear to play a key role in translating beliefs into action, a process that several contributors to this volume consider in greater detail.

Another possible answer to questions about missing ingredients comes from an older line of research on truisms and their vulnerability to challenge (McGuire, 1964) and the more recent efforts to apply these ideas and findings to values (Bernard, Maio, & Olson, 2003; Maio & Olson, 1998). Maio and Olson’s research provided support for the “values as truisms hypothesis,” especially the idea that values such as altruism, equality, and helpfulness sometimes lack cognitive support or rather arguments supporting their value. Furthermore, Bernard et al. provided evidence that such values are vulnerable to attack, although resistance to challenges can be developed by generating supportive arguments or by refuting weaker forms of the attack prior to the primary attack on the values (an inoculation process).

It may well be the case that these kinds of concerns apply to values such as “it takes a village to raise a child,” values that clearly enjoy widespread agreement (Scales, 2003). As with the factors in the Maio and Olson (1998) investigations, values with respect to positive youth development may not have an elaborate set of cognitive supports, may not have received extensive thought, and may rarely have been questioned. The foundation for this kind of belief, in