

Youth at the Community Hearth: The Role of Community in Mentoring Adolescents and Teens

Presented by
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Introduction

“If the fires that innately burn inside youths are not intentionally and lovingly added to the hearth of the community, they will burn down the structures of culture, just to feel the warmth.”

- Meade, Michael (1993). Men and the water of life: Initiation and the tempering of men. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.

Developmental transitions for youths

Erikson – Adolescence (age 12-18): Identity vs Role Confusion

Previously life was more about how they developed physically and mentally. The focus was on skills and capacity.

Now life now becomes about what they do with themselves and their lives. This involves integrating all of the previously observed roles into a whole self-image.

Transition / Initiation into Adulthood

Most visible and recognized aspect of initiation consists of a rite of passage – a marker of the passage to adulthood

Traditional initiations:

Separation / descent

Ordeal / testing

Reintegration / celebration

Dangerous and brutal, often with ritual marking or scarring.

Need / Drive for Initiation (Maturation process)

Youth will find ways to grow and expand/express themselves with or without the support of the community.

Modern initiations:

Armed forces,

Church/religious confirmations,

Graduations,

Bar / bat mitzvahs,

Drivers' license,
Menarche.
Larger significance the pattern of life growth is often lost, ignored, or not recognized.

What youth need

Modern objective: to teach as well as honor and bless the learning of adult lessons of responsibility, accountability, integrity, social responsibility, reliability.

Modern initiations are seldom organized or socially sanctioned – at our peril, or rather, the peril of our youth and our community.

Absent a more formal system, youth have created many pseudo initiations and life transition markers:

tattoos,
first sexual experience,
joining gangs,
joining fraternities,
getting arrested,
first drug use experience.

All stem from the natural impulse of youth to test and prove themselves, to expand their experience, to define themselves in a context that is apart from what they were raised with.

What we complain about with teens is often them just doing and being exactly what they are developmentally supposed to be doing. The problem is largely that we provide few socially acceptable avenues for them to do this, so they find ways to do it on their own.

Needed: a revitalized initiation / transition for our youth.

Traditional and successful modern initiations all include a critical period of instruction or mentoring by elders who are further along on the path, and who are not the parents of the youth. This is not a task for parents.

A core element of the youth's identity formation is to establish that he/she is not his/her parents. Thus, traditional societies used grandfathers and grandmothers, aunts and uncles as mentors and teachers. Parents were considered too close to child to teach the lessons of adulthood.

Mentors must be representatives of the society, who help the youth develop in a way that is advantageous to the society, while also allowing the youth to do it in their own way.

Who are the mentors that our youth need?

“Every kid needs an old man.” - Patrick McManus

Our society as a whole largely abdicates mentoring. Common attitude: parents or schools or churches or law enforcement should teach children to be responsible adults.

Exceptions are programs like:

Big Brothers / Big Sisters,
4-H,
Boys and Girls Clubs,
Boy and Girl Scouts,
YMCA
Girls, Inc.

Positive Youth Development (PYD) perspective:

“All youth possess strengths, such as the capacity to change their behavior, to develop new cognitive abilities, cultivate different interests, acquire new behavioral skills, and establish new social relationships.”

Per Lerner et al: “If the strengths of youth can be aligned with the capacities of adults to provide for young people a nurturing, positive milieu in which their strengths may be honed and enhanced, then young people may be resources for the healthy development of themselves and others.”

Mature and elder adults (=35+) are the most valuable resource for youth mentoring

Mentoring matches the adult stage of Generativity: “the capacity to care for ... and pass on cultural traditions...that will survive the self and become a legacy for future generations.” Also: “A concern for establishing and guiding the next generation.” (Erikson, 1968.)

What Do They Need to Learn From Us?

Key factors that promote PYD:

Competence
Confidence
Caring
Contribution
Connection
Character

A Challenge:

How will you choose to be a part of, or give support to the transitions and initiations of our young people into the society of the future?

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