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Youth need to “feel connected”

Michelle Dagnino

Youth have long felt that they are lacking a voice in the public discourse. We are quick to point out all the things that young people are doing wrongly. But we close our eyes to the things they are doing well. Moreover, we need to begin examining alternative solutions to the problems that do emerge. We all know that the adversarial, singularly-minded focus of treating the problem after it's taken place is more than just a problem of “too little, too late.” It has us kicking kids out of schools and into the streets, of building bigger jails rather than building communities. Here are ten principles that can guide us in building a healthy environment for youth.

One, that participation in sports and recreation gives young people important self-esteem, life and leadership skills, as well as a connection with the community which helps them to pursue success in life. Active bodies means active minds and participation in these events leads to important networking and employment opportunities.

Second, the most important things we can do to help our young people succeed are to give them access to education, recreation and employment and we need to create programs targeted at students who face barriers to leadership, employment and community involvement opportunities, in particular the cost of such leadership training.

Third, many of these programs should be introduced in-school, where safety, income and other risk factors confront young people daily.

Fourth, whatever opportunities we make available for young people we have to ensure we make them relevant to their lives. Programs that come to the students, and use their most favorite activities, such as sports or games as an avenue to involvement, are likely to be the most successful.

Fifth, let's reinforce the importance of mentoring relationships. Youth need mentors to succeed, but should also be given the opportunity to be mentors themselves. Studies have shown that when young people are put in positions of responsibility, where they are expected to care for another, they are more likely to take on leadership qualities. Mentoring is a collaborative, mutually beneficial partnership between a mentor who possesses a set of learned skills, knowledge and experience and a mentee who is looking to increase his or her skills, knowledge and experience. Anyway you look at it, mentoring helps everyone involved.

Sixth, we need to improve job prospects for young people. Higher unemployment rates always lead to higher violence rates, a correlation that is clearly established. What we need to do is make a proactive effort to bring youth into fair waged, sustainable jobs. The promotion of apprenticeships, diversity-training and non-traditional recruiting are all ways to increase employment rates for youth. Entrepreneurship classes in high school would teach youth important skills beyond running a business – how to network, how to keep their finances in check, how to work with others, and could be a catalyst for some great initiatives.

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Seventh, provide right-based educational programs. These programs should highlight our constitutional rights as young people, as well as reinforce for youth that if the law is broken, they will be dealt with in accordance with the law.

Eighth, let's take advantage of some of the great for-youth programs that already exist. I have spoken about a few but there are dozens upon dozens of programs that have a proven track record of working with youth, but are always in need of more volunteers and resources. Let's lend our time to these groups rather than stretching already finite resources more thinly.

Ninth, emphasize the responsibilities that come with being first, a child, then a teen, then a young adult. Roots of Empathy draws attention to the importance of developing rites of passages programming for young people. We need to teach youth the responsibilities of adulthood, in ways that will increase self-esteem and provide practical ways to deal with the difficulties of growing up.

And finally, be aware of what is going on around you. Take note of the quiet kid, or the one who never seems to go out and play with others. Help young people feel empowered by making them feel heard – take the time to listen and to include them in the important decisions to be made in your societies – whether it be in their families, schools, or organizations.

Alternatives begin with you – the community. We cannot see it as someone else's problem. Just by the fact that you are here today means you care, that you are willing to step up and have your voice heard. We have to take action. Parents much reach out to their children. Teachers to their students. Friends to friends. Neighbors to neighbors. And we have to give youth the opportunity to self-organize. This means ensuring that youth have access to leadership and decision-making opportunities such as in student council, youth cabinets, youth lead organizations and youth designated positions on municipal councils and other government bodies and structures.

Successful efforts to reduce youth violence won't result from simply more police and penal institutions. Giving youth opportunities to build connections in their communities – through meaningful work experiences and exposure to positive environments - is a critical step towards an increase in youth engagement in their community.

This was reprinted from a speech given by Michelle Dagnino at a forum on Gangs and Gun Violence. Michelle Dagnino is the Executive Director of Youth Action Network, a for youth, by youth national non profit organization.

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