

ALL KIDS *A R E* OUR KIDS



*WHAT COMMUNITIES MUST
DO TO RAISE CARING AND
RESPONSIBLE CHILDREN
AND ADOLESCENTS*

PETER L. BENSON

ALL KIDS ARE OUR KIDS

What Communities Must Do
to Raise Caring and Responsible
Children and Adolescents

Peter L. Benson



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PREFACE

The measure of the health of a society is how well it takes care of its youngest generation. By this standard, we fail. This conclusion hardly needs more empirical justification. When it comes to paying attention to one's most precious resource, ours is a society losing its way.

The February 1997 report on firearm-related deaths among children is one somber reminder. As tabulated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. rates for gun-related homicide, suicide, and unintentional death for children fourteen and under is higher here than the *combined* rates for twenty-five other industrialized nations. Tragic. Alarming. No surprise. U.S. rates of many indicators of young people's health status—alcohol, tobacco, too-early sexual activity, too-early pregnancy, violence, school dropout, percentage of children raised in poverty, achievement test scores—are unsavory, whether you take them in absolute terms or in comparison to other nations.

The critical issue before us is: How do we as a nation respond collectively and individually?

Three interlocking strategies are needed. The first is the "meeting basic human needs" strategy, through which we dramatically enhance our national capacity to ensure economic security, food, shelter, good and useful work, and safety for all residents. The second strategy is to target and reduce—if not eliminate—the risks and deficits that diminish or thwart the healthy development of children

and adolescents. Guns, unsafe streets, predatory adults, abuse, family violence, exclusion, alcohol and other drugs, racism, and sexism are among the threats.

Both of these familiar strategies are essential and necessary if we are to raise healthy children and adolescents. But by themselves, even if they are successfully implemented and achieved, these two approaches are not enough. *All Kids Are Our Kids* articulates a third way. It is no more important than the first two, but without diligent pursuit and achievement of this third strategy, we will make only insufficient progress in growing healthy, vibrant, attached, engaged, and competent citizens.

The third way is largely about language, vision, and community. Chapter One presents the vision and the challenges we face. In Chapters Two through Four, I define the concept of *developmental assets*: forty building blocks of human development, each of which enhances the health and well-being of children and adolescents. The language of developmental assets is one of positive development, of good things that must be named and promoted in the dailiness of life. It is a framework grounded in decades of scientific research, reminding us of the “molecules” of healthy development—the gestures, relationships, opportunities, and symbols—that must coalesce to shape lives of hope and possibility.

Based on studies in 460 urban, suburban, and rural communities, I document that these powerful molecules, these developmental assets, are in short supply in communities of all sizes. Furthermore, this rupture in the developmental structure, this failure to pay attention to the development of our young, goes a long way toward explaining the proliferation of health-compromising and future-jeopardizing behaviors among young people that unnerve all of us.

Language is consciousness. One primary goal of *All Kids Are Our Kids* is to shift the language about children and adolescents from a preoccupation with problems, deficits, and risks to a vocabulary of what we need to promote. It is an important first step in unleashing the power of community.

In Chapters Five and Six, I explore a vision of what an asset-building culture and asset-building communities look like. In this vision of child-friendly, child-nurturing, children-and-youth-first places, the actors shift. The prime actors are you and me and our neighbors, coworkers, employers, congregation members, teachers, coaches, and youth group leaders—and our children and adolescents. Professionals, experts, policy makers, and politicians also matter. But the power, the action, and often the leadership is most deeply grounded in the people. In this third way, in this intentional effort to pay attention to healthy development, no resident of a community is on the sidelines. All of us are on the team.

Chapters Eight through Eleven provide strategy, story, and technique for growing healthy, asset-promoting communities. These chapters mix theory with the experiential savvy of people devoted to social change. They are informed

equally by knowledge generated by experts and wisdom gleaned from people and communities engaged in and committed to building developmental assets. These chapters present a way of thinking about organizing and implementing asset-building community movements. As importantly, they define the specific capacities and responsibilities of individual citizens, parents, neighborhoods, caregivers, schools, congregations, youth organizations, businesses, health care providers, the media, and local government.

All Kids Are Our Kids is targeted to all who seek to bring about positive change for the sake of children and adolescents in our society. It is designed to prompt action in anyone who knows, sees, lives with, lives next to, works with, or passes by children and adolescents. It is a call to action that seeks to unleash the extraordinary power of community when communities unite around a widely shared vision of healthy child and adolescent development.

The third strategy, building asset-promoting communities, is also a long-term one. This emphasis cannot be overstated. Long-term means forever, permanent, a change in normative behavior in which symbols, policies, resource allocation, dialogues, decision making, and the self-definition of what it means to be human incorporate deep commitment to human development in the first two decades of life.

The third way also requires (in the parlance of contemporary social change ideologies) the simultaneous process of grassroots and top-down change, of residents taking individual action, and leaders altering systems. *All Kids Are Our Kids* weaves stories both of processes and of the synergy among them.

Finally, the third way advocated in this book is not the end point. At some point, a fourth way merges and integrates the three approaches of meeting basic human needs for food and shelter, reducing threats to human development, and promoting the atoms and molecules of healthy development. It is my hope that the work on furthering the third strategy so raises the profile of America's young that it functions to unleash sustained energy in addressing the first two.

The jury is still out on how such change-making occurs. We learn from the close to two hundred communities now working with these ideas. We plan to learn a great deal from the newly launched Assets for Colorado Youth initiative, a five and one-half year social experiment to encourage and support a statewide mobilization around the asset framework. Supported by a major, long-term commitment from The Colorado Trust, this effort devotes significant resources and energy to evaluating the impact of dozens of community asset-building initiatives on youth and adults.

I currently use two images to describe this work. One is "journey." The tasks of naming the elements and molecules of healthy development *and* conceiving how culture and community transform are informed both by emerging scientific

inquiry and by the learning that comes from and with communities. This is a journey we are only beginning. We have much to learn.

The second image is of “movement.” Healthier development for America’s children and adolescents is not about starting another short-term, professional-led program. Rather, it is about some combination of shared vision, passion, and sustained action that touches, encourages, and changes most Americans and most communities. For now, I find *movement* to be the word that best captures this process.

Let the movement begin.

Minneapolis, Minnesota
July 1997

Peter L. Benson

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P. L. B.

THE AUTHOR

Peter L. Benson is president of Search Institute, Minneapolis, a national organization that generates knowledge through research and promotes its application to advance the healthy development of children and adolescents, where he serves as author, researcher, consultant, and lecturer on youth development, community development, and the intersection of the two. He also serves as adjunct professor at the University of Minnesota and is the author or coauthor of *The Quicksilver Years*, *What Kids Need to Succeed*, *Religion on Capitol Hill: Myths and Realities*, *Beyond Leaf Raking: Learning to Serve/Serving to Learn*, and *The Troubled Journey: A Portrait of 6th–12th Grade Youth*. He was educated at Augustana College (B.A.), Yale University (M.A.), and the University of Denver (M.A., Ph.D. in social psychology).

About Search Institute

Search Institute is a nonprofit research and educational organization working to advance the healthy development of adolescents and children through research, evaluation, consultation, training, and publications. Founded in 1958, the institute launched its national Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth initiative in 1996. For information, contact Search Institute, 700 S. Third Street, Suite 210, Minneapolis, MN 55415; toll-free: 800-888-7828; web site: <http://www.search-institute.org>.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

From Peril to Possibility

Imagine a U.S. city that is especially successful in raising caring, responsible, and healthy children and adolescents. What would this community look like? What does it do that makes such a difference?

Some characteristics are fundamental. It has a vibrant economic infrastructure that meets basic needs for adequate income, meaningful work, affordable housing, health care, and safety. Moreover, it provides humane and effective services and interventions for vulnerable families and their children. It aggressively works to reduce the environmental circumstances—poverty, racism, malnutrition, abuse, and violence—that threaten young people’s healthy development.

As fundamental as these efforts are, they are not sufficient. A community that truly meets the needs of its youngest generation complements its strong economic infrastructure with a vibrant developmental infrastructure—that is, with community commitments and strategies that accentuate the positive building blocks of human development. In this community, children and adolescents experience:

- Daily support and care provided by one or more involved, loving parents or other caregivers
- Sustained relationships with several nonparent adults in the community
- A neighborhood where everyone knows, protects, listens to, and gets involved with the young