4 Lessons from Research on Volunteering for Mobilizing Adults to Volunteer for Positive Youth Development

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Children and youth, growing up in the United States and around the world, face many challenges. The guidance and support of parents and other adults are crucial for positive youth development. Recently, Search Institute developed an empirically sound framework of 40 developmental assets that children and adolescents need to become mature and productive adults (see Clary & Rhodes, Chapter 1, this volume). Unfortunately, research suggests that some youth do not have access to these assets (e.g., Scales & Leffert, 1999). But to whom can they turn? Certainly, our governments have not been able to address the needs of young people (e.g., Children’s Defense Fund, 2002), leaving some children behind, through lack of developmental opportunities and assets and positive adult role models to provide them, or through inadequate educational systems and neglect. So, in the context of diminishing top–down solutions from states or nations, communities must look inward for bottom–up solutions to the problems of young people.

In the second volume in this series, Scales (2003) convincingly makes the case that a key strategy to avert the disenfranchisement of today’s youth may be to change social norms about adults’ interactions with youth. He suggests that, although young people clearly benefit from active connections with adults other than their parents, getting involved with “other people’s kids” is perceived to
be risky or an intrusion on parents’ rights or wishes. Nevertheless, most respondents to Scales’s survey of American adults rated the types of behaviors that provide developmental assets to youth (such as talking about values or encouraging school success) as very important, even as they saw that the adults in their community failed to engage in them. Scales hopes that widely publicizing the finding that parents are open to having their kids interact informally with other adults in the community might dispel “pluralistic ignorance” (p. 126) and therefore increase positive action. In other words, once community members learn that parents are okay with, and even approve of, other adults interacting with their kids, then we should all feel free to develop connections with neighborhood youth.

But perhaps removing the barrier of perceived parental opposition will not be enough to encourage widespread action. Scales (2003) noted that norms that encourage desirable behavior are often weaker than norms that discourage undesirable behavior. White (1984) also found that whereas social norms for prosocial behavior were consensually agreed upon, they lacked regulatory power. Indeed, there are no sanctions against adults who fail to connect with other people’s kids, and adults who do not occupy roles that specifically prescribe involvement with youth (such as teacher or religious leader) often avoid such involvement. The most common youth development workers are still likely to be parents who get involved, as Scout leaders, coaches, classroom volunteers, or mentors, initially in the interests of helping their own children, and then, perhaps, by broadening their activities to help others’ children (Jones, 2001). Scales discussed a number of potentially successful methods for encouraging other adults to engage informally with the youth in their communities, including talking up the benefits of engagement, challenging negative statements about involvement, and reinforcing self-perceptions related to prosocial behaviors. These strategies may move some adults to help youth in some communities. An additional strategy that communities can adopt to facilitate the involvement of adults is to turn to volunteers who engage with youth through programs sponsored by formal volunteer organizations.

Although youths’ more informal engagement with adults from their own communities may offer unique and invaluable benefits, a case can be made that structured formal activities linking young people and adults, arranged by volunteer organizations like the Scouts, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, or 4-H, may be a stable and reliable solution to the problems of disengagement (see Rhodes, 2002). Formal volunteer programs, with their orientation sessions, training, safeguards, and evaluation or review (e.g., Sipe & Roder, 1999), may also reduce worries on the part of adults that they may be intervening inappropriately, ineffectively, or intrusively with other people’s kids. It may be easier to encourage adults to volunteer for organizations that provide services to youth (such as Big Brothers Big Sisters of America) than it is to encourage them to learn the names of their neighbors’ children and to engage those children in discussions about values.

Volunteerism has been defined as “any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization” (Wilson, 2000, p. 215). Clary