Normative Fragmentation: The Disappearance of Consensus

As we have seen, there is relative consensus on the importance of nine ways adults can engage with young people. Even within that consensus, however, there are divergent views about how important these “consensus” actions are. And once beyond that territory of relative consensus lies a more normatively fragmented American culture in which consensus on the importance of specific kinds of adult engagement fades and then disappears. In this chapter, we further discuss overall patterns of results for the actions that were not rated among the top nine in importance, and the gap between beliefs about those actions, and adults’ actual behavior. In Chapter 8, we look more comprehensively at differences in beliefs and actions among different demographic groups of Americans.

Actions with Mixed Support: Social Values and Personal Preferences

The nine actions highlighted in Chapter 6 represent a solid core of ways that adults can engage in the lives of young people both in and outside their own families. They begin to help define the territory of reasonable responsibility that all adults might assume for child and youth well-being. Knowing that the vast majority of people (70% or more) believe these nine actions are highly important, many adults might get more engaged with young people in these ways. The fragility of this support, however, is suggested by the gap between belief and action, for seven of even these nine highly rated actions. One negative experience—a bad reaction from a parent or a child—may be enough to make even a motivated adult dealing with a highly important, agreed upon action wary of further or deeper engagement.

If that is the case for the most highly rated actions, how much more tenuous is the connection between belief and behavior for the actions beyond this core, some of which elicit considerable, but less, consensus among American adults?
Indeed, all but one of the 20 actions we studied was considered “most important” by nearly 50%–70% of adults, but even fewer adults were reported to do these actions than were reported to do the nine actions considered most important. These 11 actions with mixed support (with percentages of adults who believe they are “most important”) are as follows:

- Tell parent(s) if they see a child or teenager doing something right (65%);
- Feel responsible to help ensure the well-being of the young people in their neighborhood (63%);
- Tell parent(s) if they see the child or youth doing something wrong (62%);
- Openly discuss their own religious or spiritual beliefs with children and youth (60%);
- Actively teach young people to preserve, protect, and pass down the traditions and values of their ethnic and/or religious culture (56%);
- Parents being the sole providers of discipline to their children (55%—as mentioned previously, this action was reverse-scored because it is not indicative of an “asset-building” approach to child and adolescent socialization);
- Know the names of many children and youth in the neighborhood (50%);
- Seek young people’s opinions when making decisions that affect them (48%);
- Give young people lots of service opportunities to make their communities better places (48%);
- Volunteer time or donate money monthly to show young people the importance of helping others (47%); and
- Give advice to young people who are not members of the family (13%).

All of these interactions (except parents having the exclusive role over discipline, which we reverse-scored) can contribute to young people’s well-being. And when we combine the responses of adults who say the action is “most important” and “very important,” at least three-fourths of adults support all but one of these actions. The exception was neighbors giving advice to kids, which only 17% of adults say is most or very important, and which we discussed in the previous chapter.

Despite that solid level of support for most of the remaining actions, American adults clearly deem them less important than the top nine. As a result, it is likely that adults would generally be less likely to engage in these behaviors with young people. And as Table 8 indicated, just 13%–38% of adults say most of the adults they know actually do these other 11 actions. The difference in the perceived importance of and engagement in these actions, compared to the core nine, raises several questions about adults’ priorities, roles, and capacity to make a difference:

- Are the overall lower ratings a result of significant disagreements in society about the importance of these actions? For example, people who are more religious are much more likely to affirm the importance of discussing religious values. Among those who attend services weekly or