The most important message of this study is that across the great diversity of American society there is a broad consensus on a number of specific ways in which adults should be engaged with other people’s children to raise a next generation that is healthy, responsible, involved, and productive. The results of our study confirm that these expectations are not the province of any one group or type of community in America, but are widely supported by a diverse spectrum of Americans.

This finding reflects the stereotypical “melting pot” image of America—that despite our differences, there are some values about nurturing children and youth around which we congregate as one people. That message should not be lost in this chapter as we examine some of the different threads that make up the fabric of American culture.

But our results also reflect divisions, which sometimes are deep, in how American adults think they ought to know and help nurture the children and adolescents of their neighborhoods and communities. There are significant differences among groups of Americans in the extent of support even for the core social norms and social values. Thus, while support for the nine core actions is high across all subgroups, some groups of Americans accord them significantly greater importance than do others. These differences suggest that the consensus should not be taken for granted (i.e., we found significant differences even regarding “consensus” actions among different groups of Americans, all of whom agree that those actions are “highly important”). Consensus should not be mistaken for unanimity.

Some groups of American adults are more likely to consider most of these actions important, and to report being surrounded by other adults who actually relate to kids in these ways. The shorthand we use to describe these adults is that they are personally and socially “motivated” to engage with young people. In a sense, they are “kid-oriented,” prompted by personal attitudes and social
reinforcement (perhaps even pressure) toward engagement with young people. We recognize that calling these adults “motivated” may be too extreme and may disregard too much the degree of care and involvement that other adults have for and with kids. Calling “less motivated” or even “uninvolved” those who express limited support for these actions, or who are not surrounded by adults who are involved with young people, or both, may be an inelegant oversimplification.

But, in a gross sense, such interpretive distinctions may accurately capture an orientation, a weltanshauung or worldview, if not necessarily a lifestyle. For some identifiable groups of Americans, it seems it is just more normal to place a higher priority on positively relating to other people’s children and to perceive that other adults also do so. It might not be fair to make these judgments, but it is clear from our results that meaningful differences do exist in how important various groups of Americans think it is for all adults to be engaged with young people. And although they are fewer, there also are some clear differences in the extent to which different groups of adults report that the adults around them actually are engaged with kids.

Psychological and sociological research over the past 150 years has repeated countless variations on a single theme: For optimal development, human beings need both comfort and challenge, security and growth, connection and autonomy (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000). As much as the consensus among Americans is comforting, the differences among us also are challenging.

In the following pages, we discuss some of those differences. These differences do not suggest divisiveness, but they do suggest that we as a people clearly are not of one mind when it comes to how we ought to each share in the collective nurturing of young people. Our data and other studies cited in this book show that Americans clearly believe parents are primarily responsible for their own children, but also that parents are not solely responsible.

Yet we seem unsure how to clearly define even a parent’s role in terms of daily social activities, much less the responsibilities the rest of us have and under what circumstances we have them. Whether we are parents ourselves or not, there is precious little guidance about what we are supposed to do to help guide and nurture other people’s children.

Adults agree on the importance of the core nine actions we’ve discussed, but even among those actions, some groups of Americans, as we discuss in this chapter, think they’re even more important than do others. On the rest of the actions, even where the majority rate the action highly important, there are sometimes great disparities in how differing groups of American adults think and report the adults around them act.

What Proportion of Adults Are Motivated to Be Engaged with Young People?

Within every community are people of all ages and from all walks of life who are actively involved in the lives of children and youth both in and outside