

The maturation of the adolescent brain requires opportunities to interact in group situations which facilitate concern for others, problem solving, and responsible behavior. The purposeful design of positive youth cultures supports the brain's development and prepares youth for participation in a democratic society.



Positive Youth Cultures and the Developing Brain

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Four decades ago, pioneers (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Morse, 2008; Redl, 1966) in the field of ecological psychology began to focus on understanding individuals in the context of their environment. Bronfenbrenner's ecology of positive growth model centers on the child's development within the family, childcare environment, school, peer group, and neighborhood. Inspired by this work, Nicholas Hobb's Re-ED approach developed as did a variety of family systems approaches (e.g., Bowen, 1985; Satir, 1983) using systemic approaches to assist children and families with troubled and troubling behaviors.

During the last ten to fifteen years, a push for positive psychology, strength-based social work, and resiliency has undergone a revolutionary development. The willingness and ability to consider what is right with people, to identify their strengths, and to discover the salient factors that support bouncing back from adversity are remarkable. Following right behind this has been an explosion in the knowledge gained from neuroscience including the knowledge that the brain changes in interaction with the social and physical environment. Siegel (1999) suggests that "experience shapes the activity of the brain and the

strengths of the neural connections through life, experience in early life may be especially crucial in organizing the way the basic structures of the brain develop" (p. 13).

By high school graduation, children have spent over 14,000 hours in school and maybe another 4,500 hours in after-school programs or extracurricular activities. Add to that maybe 10,000 hours in child care before a child enters school. A purposeful design and implementation of cultures in these environments can both support the brain's maturation and prepare young people to live and participate in a democratic society. As more knowledge is gained about people's strengths, the good life, and protective factors, the knowledge gained from neuroscience works toward the creation of positive youth cultures that are in sync with the maturation of the social brain. Almost one hundred years ago, John Dewey (1899, 1902, 1916) and other progressives called for the development of collaborative school cultures that would teach and demonstrate the social knowledge and skills that citizens in a democracy need.

Core Elements of Positive Youth Cultures

At the macro-level, healthy communities provide safety, access to work and adequate pay, adequate housing, education, and reasonably priced health and mental health services. Healthy communities also enhance the capacity of individuals to take control over their lives and improve their mental health. This includes showing respect for culture, equity, social justice, and personal dignity (Joubert & Raeburn, 1998). Positive youth cultures build on the strengths and assets of young people while attending to their growth needs. Positive youth cultures develop as a result of an adult-guided intentional process and can be developed in schools, neighborhoods, communities, and peer groups. Essential components of positive youth cultures are safety, support and inclusion, and participation.

Positive Youth Cultures are Safe

Positive youth cultures provide physical and psychological safety and are free from abuse, exploitation, and coercion. Without safety, the following universal growth needs go unmet: belonging and connections, the development of skills, talents, and pro-social values, youth involvement in decisions about themselves and their environments, and giving of themselves to others.

In positive and healthy communities people of all ages embrace and celebrate life in its physical,

emotional, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions which are the basis for leading productive and fulfilling lives and learning to manage challenges that do not cause harm to self or others (Ministry of Health, 2002). Unfortunately many children and youth today are subjected to violence at the hands of those who should protect them and in many places victims of bullying (Laurson, 2008). They have learned through too many experiences that they cannot count on anyone other than themselves, and as a result, many youth are left to make their own decisions without the guidance of elders. Other prerequisites for meeting one's growth needs include clear expectations, clear boundaries, and consistent adult intervention when boundaries are broken. This does not necessarily mean that the adults have to immediately measure out consequences (Laurson, 2003). Rather, youth should be engaged in thinking about how to restore the situation.

Positive Youth Cultures are Supportive and Inclusive

Positive youth cultures are intentionally designed to support youth in developing their growth needs. In caring youth cultures, access and voice are assured for all, especially those who are most likely to face challenges (e.g., youth in foster care and juvenile detention facilities, runaways, youth of color, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth, youth with disabilities, youth living in poverty, and non-English speaking youth). Positive youth cultures provide accepting, not just tolerating, environments to assure the well-being of all youth in order to eradicate discrimination and the abuse of power.

Positive Youth Cultures are Participatory

Positive youth cultures have high expectations and hold positive images of youth. They have the inherent belief that young people are the future and that their value and strengths are necessary for the continuation of democratic societies and a sustainable world. They promote collaboration across boundaries, and they explore and put into place unprecedented solutions that move beyond just being "less bad" to creating pathways that will allow people to live in an increasingly interdependent world (Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, & Schley, 2008).

Youth cultures that provide a sense of deep democracy, not just representative democracy, foster a deeper level of dialogue and inclusivity. Such cultures welcome competing views and prevent rank and power from marginalizing individuals and groups (Mindell, 2002). When young people are

provided the opportunity to take an active role in creating positive and caring environments, they develop leadership skills, build stronger communities, and strengthen a sense of participation in a democracy. Young people who are at the center of decision making about issues that influence them and their environment have ample opportunities to contribute to their communities and thus become engaged with people of all ages.

The Social Brain and Democratic Participation

While the process of raising children in the past was assured by natural interactions with older people—from older siblings, to parents, to elders—technological societies must purposefully design strategies in order to assure the enculturation process of children and youth. In such cultures, guided by adult principles and values, youth connect with each other without losing the directions of adults. After the Second World War, both parents began to enter the work-force, single-parent households became more prevalent, the mobility of families to find jobs became the norm and resulted in more nuclear parenting, and an earlier beginning of schooling. Later developments of television, computer games, mp3 players, cell phones, and the internet leave many children engaged with technology for many hours daily. Many of today's youth are thus under the influence of virtual or peer relationships during the crucial years when their logical brain undergoes important formation. Restricted from connections with elders, the development of the young person's brain is less likely to develop core democratic virtues such as acceptance and respect for diversity, collaboration, debate, and acceptance of majority rule.

Positive youth cultures have high expectations and hold positive images of youth.

The evolving field of neuroscience aids the understanding of the “interwoven tapestry of biology, psychological, and social processes” (Cozolino, 2006, p. 6) that shapes the social brain. The question of whether nature or nurture shapes development has become an obsolete question; the answer is nature and nurture. The brain develops as a result of experiences and “relationships mold our experience and biology” (Goleman, 2006, p. 5). While the brain is most susceptible to influence during the early years of life, the social synapse (Cozolino,

2006) continues to influence people not only during the formative years but throughout life. People are social beings who rely on interactions with others to thrive, and even survive, in the world. Getting along with and communicating with others is a learned behavior and requires social norms for appropriate and acceptable ways to act and respond to each other. The child's immature brain demands strong social interactions through adolescence in order to arrive at an autonomous adulthood.

The brain develops from bottom to top, back to front, and right to left. The back of the logical brain (parietal lobe) processes sensory information to help in recognizing and analyzing dangers and opportunities, and the front of the logical brain (the frontal lobe) processes the response strategies which are then developed and used. The pre-adolescent brain focuses on sensory development and on developing the skills to read, compute, and recall facts about the factual world (Cummings & Mega, 2003; Goldberg, 2001). During adolescence, the frontal lobe begins to develop the adolescent's capacity to:

- Access the environment
- Integrate perceptions, emotions, and past experiences
- Select and evaluate a plan of action
- Execute a plan

During this time of prefrontal development, the adolescent brain still works quite slowly compared to an adult brain. When adolescents are exposed to social environments where they “practice self-control and calculation of practical consequences of actions in relation to others they will more efficiently use the natural capacity of the prefrontal cortex to achieve cognitive control over their behavior” (Moula, Timpka, & Puddephatt, 2008, p. 130). Thus, when youth are given opportunities to participate in the governance of the places where they interact (schools, clubs, etc.) they develop the ability to more thoughtfully regulate their daily life. Over time, the prefrontal lobe develops to become the brain's executive director.

The logical brain is also divided into right and left hemispheres. The right hemisphere (in right-handed people) among other activities recognizes and responds to novel challenges. On the other hand, over time the left hemisphere specializes in responding to familiar recurring challenges. Language is an example of an established communication routine

typically centered in the left hemisphere. The ability to analyze the challenges is a learned process in the prefrontal lobe. The resulting problem-solving abilities create opportunity for finding new solutions and developing routines for recurring challenges. The prefrontal lobe acts as an executive director that carries out the decisions.

Relationships mold our experience and biology.

In summary, the maturation of the adolescent brain is focused on two tasks: developing autonomy and understanding self in context of the community. Therefore, parents and other adults must assure that young people have multiple opportunities to interact in supportive environments where they can develop the capacity to self-regulate and achieve autonomy. Without self-control the adolescent may react impulsively to new and challenging situations “that usually lead to inappropriate actions and failure to realize goals” (Moula, Timpka, & Puddephatt, 2008, p. 130). Secondly, the adolescent must be exposed to multiple opportunities to cooperate with others and develop a sense of community including respect and helping others.

The maturing adolescent brain requires ample opportunities to face challenges, problem solve, and carry out decisions. These are all processes that are parallel to basic assumptions of democracy including the protection of human rights, a free press, a judicial system, free and fair elections, and majority rule. Thus, purposeful design and implementation of positive youth cultures support both the brain’s maturation and preparing young people to live and participate in a democratic society.

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