

LIFE & STYLE

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When Everyone in Town Has a Stake in Raising the Children

By LYNN SMITH
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ST. LOUIS PARK, Minn.—It all began five years ago when Carl Holmstrom gave his now legendary it-takes-a-village speech to the Rotary Club.

Neating retirement as school superintendent, Holmstrom wistfully recalled the old days when teachers and neighbors would step in and correct or encourage children, like himself, whose parents were going through hard times. Their own middle-class suburb bordering Minneapolis, like every hamlet and urban core in the rest of the country, had changed—children were growing up in poverty, or with distracted parents, sleeping in cars, taking drugs, having sex too soon. America, he told them, was selling out its own children by all adults, not just parents, putting themselves first.

Holmstrom got the club's first-ever standing ovation and the offer of a check from one of the town's wealthiest businessmen. He turned it down at first, he said, because he hadn't the foggiest notion of what to do. Even in socially progressive Minnesota, nicknamed the "land of 10,000 treatment centers," children's programs seemed to come and go without changing much. This time, however, civic leaders, afire from Holmstrom's speech, were determined to come up with something different.

What they ultimately pioneered here—a research-based initiative that aims to rally the whole community

NEIGHBOR TO NEIGHBOR

*One in an occasional series
about community building*

around building specific strengths in children—has now spread to hundreds of communities in Minnesota and as far away as Maine and Alaska, from Native American reservations to the entire state of Colorado, each tired of despair, hungry for solutions and believing the answer lies in engaging disparate elements of cities and towns for the common good.

The fervor for community building can be traced partly to the devolution of money and power from the federal government to the states, which has sparked a search for low-cost solutions to local social problems. But more, "There is a readiness for a language of hope, a language about human beings that shifts from deficits and problems to the possibilities," said Peter Benson, a social psychologist and president of the Search Institute, the nonprofit research organization based in Minneapolis that was hired by St. Louis Park's original partnership to find a new approach.

By reviewing research literature, the institute had already identified 30 (now 40) "developmental assets"—such as sustained attention from at least three adults, structured use of time and church attendance—that can be correlated with healthy behaviors in young people. Questionnaires of 250,000 students across the country showed that as the number of assets rose, there were corresponding reductions of many forms of "high-risk" behavior, such as drinking and driving, violence and school failure.

While it may be obvious that children do better with more community support, public policies and programs have tended to shift from problem to problem, from teen pregnancy to AIDS to violence, Benson said. "As a culture, we keep looking for the silver bullet, the one program we can put kids through that will shape them up."

Youthful and enthusiastic, Benson said his work, funded by many private foundations, primarily the Lutheran Foundation, underscored the point that

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desirable developmental assets are cumulative. "Kids need not 8 or 10 of these things, but all of them," said Benson, whose book on community asset building, "All Kids Are Our Kids," will be published by Jossey-Bass in the fall. "The average kid has less than half of them."

To encourage other cities to come up with their own programs, the institute developed a Healthy Communities-Healthy Youth initiative, including surveys, materials and advice. In response to the interest—most of the 220 communities have signed up in the last year—Search Institute has upped its staff from 50 to 70 and is now opening a branch in Colorado.

Even so, the initiative has yet to be tested; controlled studies have only just begun.

Benson said the questions remain: "How can a St. Louis Park, a Seattle or an Albuquerque change the public will, and change the action of citizens so that most kids in the city will become more asset-rich? Can you actually raise the bar so the average kid has 30 of them?"

Some researchers from the University of Minnesota cautioned that correlations are not the same as causes. "You can say kids should play music because somebody has found some correlation between music and kids' well-being. It doesn't follow that if you tell kids to play music, they will function better," said Alan Sroufe, a researcher at the university's Institute for Child Development. The cures for today's social ills are more complicated than providing opportunities for youths because the most troubled children are not likely to take advantage of the opportunities, he said.

Even so, St. Louis Park City Manager Charlie Meyer said the city's Children First initiative was the first strategy he had ever seen that attempted to build strengths in children as an alternative to spending money on rehabilitation or foster care. "That was the hook for me," said Meyer, who is now chair of Children First. "There isn't any other model that gives you the hope you can do that."

At the least, there's a lot of "feel good" in the air around St. Louis Park, a suburb of 44,000 mostly white residents that is struggling to keep big-city problems from moving in and middle-class residents from moving out. With the usual amount of divorces, dual-income families and a disproportionate number of single

GRASS-ROOTS FILE

How to Engage Youths

Developmental assets, found by the Search Institute to lower risky behavior in children and adolescents, include:

- Support—family support, positive family communication, other adult relationships, a caring neighborhood, caring school climate, parent involvement in schooling;
- Empowerment—community values, youth given useful roles, community services, safety;
- Boundaries and expectations—family, school and neighborhood boundaries, adult role models, positive peer influence, high expectations;
- Constructive use of time—music, art and drama, sports clubs and organizations, religious community, time at home;
- Educational commitment—achievement motivation, school performance, homework, bonding to school, reading for pleasure;
- Positive values—helping others, equality and social justice, personal integrity, honesty and responsibility, behavioral restraint;
- Social competencies—planning and decision-making, interpersonal and cultural competence, resistance skills, nonviolent conflict resolution;
- Positive identity—personal control, self-esteem, sense of purpose, positive view of personal future.

Further information may be obtained through the Search Institute, 700 S. 3rd Street, Suite 210, Minneapolis, MN 55415; (800) 888-7828; fax, (612) 376-8956; e-mail, search@search-institute.org; or Web site, <http://www.search-institute.org>.

mothers attracted to its small Cape Cod homes, St. Louis Park isn't exactly Garrison Keillor's mythical Lake Wobegon, but it's not that far removed either.

According to Dennis Ormseth, pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Reformation, "The trouble is so general, it's hard to put your finger on it. You need many fingers and a many-branched solution. We need to build assets for all the children in the community, not just those who manifest one or two of the symptoms and in a clear way."

Through Children First, scores of asset-building efforts have been promoted by a five-member partnership from the business, religious, education, city and health care sectors, a "vision team" open to anyone and a full-time coordinator. Town and neighborhood meetings have been held. Fliers have been sent to homes.

So far, townfolk have responded with efforts as small as a father vowing to talk to the baby sitter when he drives her home and as large as a health-based foundation opening a free community clinic for kids. One businesswoman organized a mentor group for young girls; another for boys will start in the fall. Churches have

helped teenagers provide free baby-sitting for parents outside their congregations. A convenience store operator stopped selling cigarettes. High school students have worked together to help fund asset-building projects, such as an off-campus coffeehouse.

Elizabeth Edman, 18, the first chair of the Students Speak committee, said members supported the coffeehouse because some students were creating a "bad image" hanging around the McDonald's across the street. "There were a lot of complaints about the high school kids. We're trying to improve the image."

Edman, who said she rebounded from experimenting with sex and drugs, believes adults must be realistic, and not "overly mushy" about what positive thinking can accomplish with teenagers. But she said she senses a new spirit of community in St. Louis Park. In fact, she's now involved in so many projects—from tutoring to serving as an intern for the mayor—that she's delayed enrollment at the University of Wisconsin to attend a community college.

City planners are also reversing design trends and building alleys and sidewalks to encourage face-to-face conversations. Because

intergenerational relationships are among the assets, the city designed its new recreation center to accommodate young and old in one complex. "We opened it in June and so far, it has worked phenomenally," Meyer said. "The feedback I'm getting is it's a place to meet your friends and neighbors. Not a place to drop off your kids."

He's changed his behavior too. He mentors a student at the high school. He and his wife have gone out of their way to make sure their daughter feels comfortable developing relationships with other adults, so that "if for some reason, she can't talk to Mom or Dad, she's got somebody else to go to."

But more needs to be done to change behavior communitywide, he said. "What I think we have done is a really good job on a broad, shallow level. We haven't reached deep enough in the roots." Now he's working to instill asset building into efforts to revitalize neighborhood organizations. "That's the frontier we really have to go to to have a radical impact on behavior."

As old-timers gathered for late morning coffee at McDonald's, a group of teenage boys clanked in, wearing football practice gear, and occupied a corner window. They're well aware of how shopkeepers eye them suspiciously and women tend to switch their purses to the other side, or cross the street when they see them approach.

Rich Harrison, 18, said it was friendlier where he grew up in Kansas. "The bigger the city, the more paranoid the people are."

Researchers agree the first place to start building assets is a community's attitude. Most adults now admit they have negative views of young people. According to a recent report by the New York-based organization Public Agenda, the majority of people believe today's youth are "rude, irresponsible and wild." Many people said they were afraid of youth today and avoid any confrontations out of fear of provoking their parents.

The old-timers at a nearby table lamented the passing of an era when children chopped firewood, went on hayrides or sleigh rides for fun and respected their elders—or at least acted as if they did. "I still think a spank in the butt is a good idea, but that would be child abuse nowadays," said a retired nurse, 75. Of the few who had heard of the Children's First initiative, one couple said it has encouraged people to get involved with kids they might otherwise have ignored, reported or just complained about.

A few years ago when the McDonald's was overrun with

teenagers, "It was too rough for the senior citizens," said Duane Googins, a retired school official, who along with several others helped find a solution. One group offered to buy coffee for police officers to ensure their presence at the outlet, the school mounted a camera, the phone company removed a pay phone the kids were using, the bus company temporarily took out a shelter where they hung out, and a youth counselor came over to talk them back to class.

Said Googins: "Prior to that, I saw people pointing the finger, saying, 'Why doesn't the school do something? Why don't the police do something? Why don't the parents do something?'"

"The initiative gave people the awareness that they could solve a problem together, and it gave them permission," said his wife, Gail Miller, a school psychologist. "Everybody says nothing can be done. But something can be done if enough people put their shoulder to the wheel and say, 'This is important.'"

In an era of mistrust, when norms and values seem to shift from home to home, the well-intentioned can run into some snags when they try to connect with neighbors or their children.

Soon after hearing about Children First, an abduction at a bus stop inspired some elderly neighbors to organize a formal Adopt-a-Bus-Stop program. Jill Terry, a stay-at-home mom who had already been watching out for kids at the bus stop, signed up.

"Everybody remembers a day at school that started out horribly with somebody picking on them on the bus," said Terry, who remembers being frightened in junior high. "I've always been short. I thought, 'If I don't hide well enough, I'll get nailed. I never felt anybody was looking out for me.'" What's more, she said people these days raise children to be mistrustful. "Adults need to show kids what trust looks like."

The volunteers had to apply, undergo background checks and receive training in how they might build assets by getting to know the children's families. In a year, the neighborhood organization had 126 bus stops covered.

Terry took kids into her home on chilly winter mornings before and after the bus came, and parents who felt they couldn't reciprocate paid her a dollar. Once when she saw a child waiting more than two hours on his doorstep after school, she debated about whether to report the working mother. But she was afraid she would alienate the mother, who might forbid her child

to come to her house, his only refuge. She said nothing and, over time, the situation improved.

Gradually, the formal program faded away, parents dropped out as their kids grew up, and Terry is unsure how many bus stops will be covered this year. Nevertheless, she'll be back on the corner this fall for her 10th season as "the bus stop lady."

"Some kids have switched bus stops to get the one I'm at," she said, "just because they feel safer."

Under the Healthy Communities-Healthy Youth initiative, each community is encouraged to develop its own programs, choosing among the assets residents believe are most important, Benson said.

In one town, Platteville, Wis., advocates did not want to ban all risk for adolescents and came up with their own asset—safe risk. They are working to build a ropes course for teenagers.

But in another community, an advocate gave up after running into heavy opposition. The politically divided town had a long history of turf battles between schools, churches and other organizations, said the frustrated pastor. One faction was philosophically opposed to asset building, favoring tougher law enforcement to resolve drug problems. At the same time, many supported teenage drinking as an alternative to drugs. What's more, some people raised privacy issues, fearing to expose family problems in public parenting groups.

"The name of the program is an important indicator of what needs to happen," the pastor said, explaining that not all communities are fit for comprehensive reform. "You can't create a healthy community unless that community is already healthy."

To be sure, Benson acknowledges that community asset building must be combined with ongoing efforts to combat the larger forces of poverty, racism and family violence, and to provide good jobs, decent housing and health care. And it needs to find a way to sustain itself over time.

Even in the most welcoming communities, Benson said, the largest barrier is retaining enthusiasm for positive development over time. To encourage support among communities, the Search Institute holds regular workshops, and in October will hold its first convention in Bloomington, Minn.

"It is a movement that needs to last somewhere between 20 years and forever," Benson said. "It somehow needs to become a permanent part of the way people think about themselves."