



## Youth and the Family

*"Today's adolescents and youth are 1.8 billion strong and make up one quarter of the world's population. They are shaping social and economic development, challenging social norms and values, and building the foundation of the world's future. Maturing earlier than previous generations, both physically and socially, adolescents and youth have high expectations for themselves and their societies, and are imagining how the world can be better. Connected to each other like never before through new media and because of globalization, they are driving social progress and directly influencing the sustainability and resilience of their communities and their nations".*

### 1. Introduction

Young people grow up in families and the particular familial environment plays a critical role in the development of the young adult. Important factors include the family's personal and social well-being; the psychological consequences of economic hardship; marital relations; the quality of parenting; sibling relations; the loss or absence of a parent; children's and adolescents' role in the household management and economy<sup>1</sup>; exposure to substance abuse; domestic violence; and the family's capacity to adapt to changing circumstances. <sup>2</sup> This paper will consider the impact of some of these factors and how they affect the intertwined relationship between young people and their families.

### 2. Definitions

The National Youth Policy of 2000 defines 'youth' as all persons between the ages of 14 and 35 years – a very broad definition. Importantly, it is a definition that embraces varied historical categories of youth, who have been exposed to different socio-political and economic experiences. It includes the 35-year-old youth who lived during a period of heightened political conflicts, when he or she was a learner in school, as well as the contemporary 14-year-old, who is growing up in an environment when many of the new reforms and achievements of those struggles are being realized.<sup>3</sup>

Many consider the ages between 0 and 13 as the years of childhood. UNICEF extends its childhood category up to the age of 18, as does our Children's Act, which sets 18 as the age of majority. However, within this childhood age segment also falls the adolescent category, which is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as falling between the ages of 10 and 19. Over one third of South Africa's population is expected to be under the age of 18 in 2015.<sup>4</sup> This means that next year, according to UNICEF's *Generation 2030 Africa* report, out of South Africa's projected population of 53 million people, 18m will be under the age of 18. The South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) recently extended the Child Support Grant to 21 years of age.

Youth is a transitional stage. Sociologically, youth denotes an interface between childhood and adulthood. Psycho-socially, the period is characterized by the search for identity, a sense of belonging, experimentation, exploration, a growing awareness of the world beyond the family of origin and school, and tentative engagement with that wider world. Biological changes are accompanied by questions. Who am I? What shall I do? Where do I fit in? The search for identity encounters peer pressure for conformity. There is a gradual shift from dependence to independence. It is also a time of intense feelings: many young people experience extreme alienation, insecurity and inadequacy. A sense of competence is often undermined by a sense of inferiority, role confusion and a lack of purpose. The family plays a critical role in nurturing self-

esteem, the importance of which cannot be overestimated.

### 3. Building Resilience

Successful and sustainable interventions in the lives of young people should focus on the realization of their full potential, and in so doing foster resilience. The term 'resilience' has come to mean an individual's ability to overcome adversity and continue his or her normal development. However, the Resilience Research Centre (RRC) uses a more ecological and culturally sensitive definition. Prof. Michael Ungar, family therapist and Professor of Social Work and Co-Director of the RRC, has suggested that resilience is better understood as follows:

*"In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways."*<sup>5</sup>

This is a dynamic process and involves various role players, the most significant of whom are the parents/primary care-givers/significant adults. The empowerment of such persons in positive discipline strategies that equip and train them with the knowledge and skills to establish and instill discipline and respect within their children is critically important. Young people need structure, but structure that is flexible and creative. They need the consistent guidance of responsible adults, and the best place to instill respect and discipline is at home.<sup>6</sup>

Positive discipline is about providing a consistently nurturing and containing environment that is as predictable as possible. Children who are able to explore and experiment with boundaries within a safe, secure environment are less likely to experiment or engage in risky behavior in adulthood, as they are 'self-contained'.<sup>7</sup>

Quinton Adams argues powerfully that meaningful and successful communication with young people must be based on six building blocks: respect; compassion and care; rules; authority; responsibility; and the distinction between right and wrong.<sup>8</sup>

### 4. Gangs

It is a notorious fact that, in various parts of South Africa, difficult home environments, a lack of nurture, grinding poverty, school overcrowding, and frustrated ambitions can lead young people to participation in gangs. They join gangs in search of a sense of belonging and identity, and in pursuit of (dubious) social status and perhaps economic prosperity. Being a gang member opens the door to a range of seemingly attractive possibilities which are very tempting to the young. Daniels and Adams emphasize that it is essential

*"to develop a critical understanding of how the childhood experiences of township youth influence their decisions to become gangsters. The findings show that decisions that township youth make cannot be separated from their community's social disorganization. Gangs form a safe backdrop to childhoods characterized by a lack of personal validation in families, scarcity of suitable role models, and personal economic deprivation. The street gang provides the stability and validation that was lacking in their home environments".<sup>9</sup>*

However, participation in gangs is not empowering or transformative. Gangs remain limited by the social context in which they exist, and members may be trapped in gangs as a consequence of uninformed choices made while very young. It is important, though, not to equate participation in gangs with criminality as they do not necessarily go hand in hand and such labeling may be prejudicial and alienating.

### 5. Youth Participation

Youth unemployment, high rates of violent crime, teenage pregnancy, and alcohol and drug abuse often have their roots in children and young people growing up without positive parental role models. The Edmund Rice Camps Project<sup>10</sup> seeks to offer opportunities to marginalized children, youth and young adults to experience meaningful relationships and to acquire life coping skills, thus empowering them to become agents of change in their own lives and families, and in the communities in which they live.<sup>11</sup> In reaching out to young people in need, the project offers recreational and life-skills camps for vulnerable children and youth from 7 – 16 years, as well as family camps for vulnerable children and their parents/guardians.

An evaluation of the project has identified the need to build stronger relationships with other support agencies and to have more contact with the parents. Parenting programmes are seen as a key element of sustainable interventions. Parental engagement and bonding with children at home leads to union in the family, and helps parents to become more aware of children's needs and rights. It was also apparent that young volunteers in the project required more opportunities for development; consequently, an accredited training programme is now offered that includes business writing skills; an introduction to project management; mentoring and coaching; facilitation skills; and office management training.<sup>12</sup>

## 6. Youth Development Environment

The Western Cape Department of Social Development has drawn up an outcomes based strategy from working with the youth of the province. These measurable outcomes speak to "key competencies young people must acquire in order to operate as 'productive' adults"<sup>13</sup>, and seek to move away from a narrow prevention-focused paradigm towards a more dynamic and interactive model.

In terms of this approach, the 'Youth Development Environment' consists of the family, peers, school or other educational institution, as well as the broader community – all of which shape the economic, psycho-social and environmental context of young people. It is through these societal institutions that the youth develop a sense of belonging, of emotional stability, of educational competence and mastery of tasks, physical security, and opportunities for further development. Coping mechanisms are taught and encouragement is provided. Youth groups, sports clubs, drama and music societies, scouts and voluntary community work can all provide alternatives to participation in gangs, cultivate a sense of belonging, and help create a resilient sense of identity.

## 7. Positive and Negative Indicators

Positive indicators for youth include supportive engaged parents; family resilience; peer affirmation; hope, aspirations and a sense of imminent possibilities; access to quality education; connections and networks for access to economic and life opportunities; levels of social solidarity, inclusion and cohesion; and access to

support services. Negative indicators include bad or harsh parenting; family vulnerability, hunger and income poverty; isolation from peers; hopelessness and despair; poor education; a lack of connections outside the community; exposure to long-term unemployment; high levels of community fragmentation and conflict; and exposure to trauma or to high levels of crime, conflict and violence.<sup>14</sup> These indicators are not mutually exclusive. Each young person experiences a complex combination of these indicators which impact on each in an individual manner – nature, nurture, environment and support systems or lack thereof all playing a role in the 'life script' of the young person. However, positive interventions in any one of these areas can do much to develop resilience and to encourage healthy psycho-social development.

## 8. Systemic Issues

The importance of systemic issues in youth development must not be underestimated. The physical environments in which so many of our young people journey toward adulthood undermine their sense of worth. Adequate housing, and access to proper sanitation, electricity and piped water are not assured. Furthermore, access to quality education is not a given. Employment opportunities are bleak and poverty seemingly unending. Such circumstances engender a sense of alienation and aimlessness and encourage negative behaviours, including crime and substance abuse. Moreover, a lack of funds for public transport means that many young people are trapped within a small area close to their place of residence and have little experience of the world beyond, or opportunity to engage with that world. As one commentator noted,

*"of our young people who are under the age of 35, nearly ten million are not economically active and are likely unemployable. The growing and wealth-creating economy has left these millions of our energetic and aspirational young people outside – unemployed and unemployable. I want you to imagine for a moment what that must do to their psyche as they watch our world of things and their aspirations – unreachable".<sup>15</sup>*

## 9. Conclusion

15<sup>th</sup> September is the International Day of Democracy and the theme of this year was

'Engaging Young People on Democracy'. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called on "members of the largest generation of youth in history to confront challenges and consider what you can do to resolve them. To take control of your destiny and translate your dreams into a better future for all".<sup>16</sup> The capacity to meet these challenges and to realize a better future begins

and develops in the family. There is a desperate need to expand and improve family strengthening and positive discipline programmes which develop a more integrated approach that will build family and community resilience, address poverty, and work towards better educational outcomes; and in so doing enable our youth to realize a better tomorrow.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Towards Realizing the Full Potential of Adolescents and Youth' <http://www.unfpa.org/public/adolescents/>

<sup>2</sup>The Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office, NICRO and the Western Cape Department of Social Development held a Roundtable Discussion on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2014 on 'Youth and the Family'. The Roundtable was addressed by David Abrahams the Acting Head of Ministry – Western Cape DSD; Educational Psychologist Quinton Adams; Wayne Golding: Coordinator St Kizito Children's Programme; Jennifer Fredericks: Coordinator Edmund Rice Camps and Sean Lategan: Archdiocesan Youth Chaplaincy

<sup>3</sup>This is particularly the case with regard to Child-headed Households

<sup>4</sup> Families in Troubled Times: Adapting to Change in Rural America. Social Institutions and Social Change. Conger, Rand D.; Elder, Glen H., Jr.

<sup>5</sup> National Youth Policy 2000 of 1996

<sup>6</sup>This is according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report released on Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> August 2014

<sup>7</sup> Presentation by Quintin Adams at Roundtable Discussion on 'Youth and the Family', July 2014

<sup>8</sup> As above

<sup>9</sup> cf CPLO Occasional on Positive Discipline Paper July 2013

<sup>10</sup>Presentation by Quintin Adams at Roundtable Discussion on 'Youth and the Family', July 2014

<sup>11</sup> 'Breaking with Township Gangsterism: The Struggle for Place and Voice' Doria Daniels and Quinton Adams African Studies Quarterly | Volume 11, Issue 4 | Summer 2010

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Rice Camps are part of the Edmund Rice Network which is an initiative of the Christian Brothers

<sup>13</sup> Presentation by Jennifer Fredericks, Coordinator of Edmund Rice Camps at Roundtable Discussion on 'Youth and the Family'.

<sup>14</sup>Facilitated by the Edmund Rice Network in Partnership with Accredited Training Body and the Fanani Training Services

<sup>15</sup>'Western Cape Youth Development Strategy: Youth and the Family' Presentation on Youth and the Family, 4th July 2014

<sup>16</sup>As above

<sup>17</sup>'Whose Savages are they anyway?', Xhanti Payi, Daily Maverick, 23rd July 2014

<sup>18</sup>UN Press Release 15th September 2014