

It Doesn't Take a Village to Raise a Modern Child: The Economic, Political and Cultural Socialization of Young Americans

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At a County Board Meeting in California, a commissioner said, "We've got a proposal here asking for money to support another youth program. I vote no. Our real problem is that we always pay to keep young people together when what we really need is for them to be associated with adults."

A Chicago neighborhood leader, concerned about the local "gang" problem said, "The gangs aren't the problem. The problem is that our youth have lost connection with the grown-ups."

A suburban mother complains that her daughter spends most of her free time at the mall with her friends.

These three observations are particular manifestations of a widely recognized youth culture. It has, in significant measure, been generated and exploited by the marketplace. Then, this age-based culture has been enhanced and institutionalized by schools and youth programs that intentionally organize young people's lives around the daily experience of age-based segregation. In a sense, this process can be understood as adult communities "out-sourcing" their youth to segregating institutions and markets. As a result, there are very few neighborhoods, towns or villages that actually take part in collectively raising their children."

While there are many negative results of this age-based segregation, perhaps the most consequential is the loss of the adult community's ability to introduce the young to the economic, political, cultural and spiritual worlds that surround them. The experience of acting as a citizen or an economic producer or a creator outside the youth culture or as a political participant is largely delayed until an emancipatory event called graduation.

This has led many people to ask whether it is possible in this consumer society filled with age-segregating institutions for a "village to raise its children." Are the adult members of the village capable of introducing and engaging it's young to the experience of unsegregated life?

There are, of course, many exceptional villages where this experiential integrated life is available to the young. Many of these places are communities where the historic integrative role has survived.

However, ask members of local neighborhoods and villages how they collectively raise their children and in most, silence will prevail until someone points to the schools. In truth, most villages have long since lost the memory of how to introduce their young to the knowledge, collective wisdom, associational productivity, enterprising skills, and "small p" political life. It is not that they don't have the capacity to do this work. It is that they have forfeited this

community function to the age-segregating world of consumer culture, educational institutions and youth programs.

Is it possible for these villages to recover their roles as knowledge producers and providers of integrated experiential learning? Fortunately, the answer is positive. There are villages and neighborhoods experimenting with modern approaches to recovering their capacity to raise their children. Often, they begin by identifying the knowledge of local residents. A current example is the knowledge of residents on two blocks of a working-class neighborhood in a small midwestern city:

Village Knowledge

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Customer service | 29. Hunting | 55. Working with elderly |
| 2. Acts of kindness | 30. Fishing | 56. IT skills |
| 3. Cooking soup | 31. Shooting safety | 57. Painting rocks |
| 4. People skills | 32. Working on trucks | 58. Designing T-shirts |
| 5. Accounting | 33. Carpentry | 59. Kayaking |
| 6. Cooking | 34. Homebuilding | 60. Walking |
| 7. Baking | 35. Saving the bees | 61. Coloring |
| 8. Farming | 36. Handyman | 62. Hamster care |
| 9. Animal care | 37. Neatness | 63. Fostering children |
| 10. Excavating | 38. Welding | 64. Writing children's books |
| 11. Human resources | 39. Tree cutting | 65. Prosthetics |
| 12. Jack of all trades | 40. Bike riding | 66. Dog training |
| 13. Heart and soul of people | 41. Working on cars | 67. Basic maintenance of houses and cars |
| 14. Gardening | 42. Soccer | 68. Mathematics |
| 15. Volunteering | 43. Swimming instructions | 69. Writing songs |
| 16. Writing | 44. Remodeling homes | 70. Football |
| 17. Playing violin | 45. Mowing grass | 71. Riding and fixing motorcycles |
| 18. Making good friends | 46. Singing | 72. Building self esteem |
| 19. Working in a Thrift Store | 47. Dealing with bullying | 73. Dealing with mental illness |
| 20. Gay subculture | 48. Dealing with anxiety | 74. Recovering from alcoholism |
| 21. Raised gardens | 49. Dealing with binge eating | 75. Writing recipes |
| 22. Landscaping | 50. Stand-up paddle boarding | 76. Karaoke singing |
| 23. Horses | 51. Sociology | |
| 24. Family life | 52. Anthropology | |
| 25. Working with kids | 53. Veterans Services | |
| 26. Event planning | 54. Reduce/reuse/recycle practices | |
| 27. Crafting | | |
| 28. Creating safe neighborhoods | | |

It is especially significant that only 10 of the 72 topics are those that schools typically teach. And of even more importance, connecting neighborhood young people to this pool of knowledge establishes many new youth-adult relationships. In the aggregate, this process revives one fruitful way for villages to once again raise their children.

In addition to knowledge of individual residents, the village also has collective knowledge held by its clubs, organizations and associations. A typical example of these “knowledge banks” is this list of associations in a small midwestern town with a population of 1,600.

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American Legion Post 253

Badgerland Girl Scout Troop 2669

Bloomin' Buddies Garden Club

Cub Scout Pack # 38 Spring Green

Bunco Babes

Christ Lutheran Church Community Theater Association (Gard)

Concerned Citizens of the River Valley

Cornerstone Church of Spring Green

Driftless Area Book Club

FFA Organization (at River Valley High School)

Friends of Governor Dodge State Park

Friends of the Lower Wisconsin Riverway (FLOW)

Friends of the Spring Green Community Library

Green Squared Building Association

Greenway Manor Volunteers

Habitat for Humanity, Lower Wisconsin River

Knights of Columbus

Knitters at Nina's

Kops for Kids

Mew Haven, Inc.

Miracles on Hoof

Mostly Mondays Poetry Society

Older & Wiser Land Stewards (OWLS)

Pineland Association

River Valley Area Community Choir

River Valley Boosters Association (athletics)

River Valley Mom's Group

River Valley Music Boosters

River Valley Players

River Valley Soccer Association

River Valley Stitchers

River Valley Youth Football Club

Rural Musicians Forum

River Valley High School Alumni Band

River Valley High School Madrigal Choir & Jazz Vocal Group

River Valley High School Senior Service Learning Class
Skills USA (at River Valley High School)
Solstice Jazz Band
Spring Green Area Arts Coalition
Spring Green Area Chamber of Commerce
Spring Green Area EMT District
Spring Green Area Fire Protection District
Spring Green Area Historical Society
Spring Green Arts & Crafts Fair Committee
Spring Green Cemetery Association
Spring Green Community Church
Spring Green Community Food Pantry
Spring Green Dog Park
Spring Green Dolphins
Spring Green Farmers Market
Spring Green Film Club
Spring Green Golf Club, Inc.
Spring Green Lions Club
Spring Green Literary Festival
Spring Green Senior Citizens Club
Stitch 'n Bitch
Unity Chapel, Inc.
Wyoming Valley School Cultural Arts Center

Youth connected to any of these associations learn the skills of collective decision-making and democratic practice in addition to the substantive interests of the group. Examples of the integrated experiential learning available from local associations include:

- A knitting club teaches finger knitting to children.
- Rotary Club members teach a youth group how to run a meeting.
- Local college band members offer a Saturday learning event for new, fifth grade band students.
- A voluntary association of emergency medical technicians offers an after-school first aid clinic.
- A motorcycle club offers free rides to kids and their parents around a parking lot.
- A Veterans for Peace group member gives a talk at the local middle school.
- A group of retired teachers volunteer to have their monthly lunch at a local elementary school a few times per year to spend time with kids.
- A master gardeners association starts a school garden.
- An informal group of neighbors who like to jog together offer a week-long track and field “tournament” for neighborhood children.
- A genealogy enthusiasts group offers to work with youth who want to research their family history as part of a school assignment.
- A high school chess club teaches the game to fourth graders.

- An annual music festival hires high school students to design and contribute to social media and other marketing strategies.
- A neighborhood association seeking a mural to cover a graffiti-laden wall creates an opportunity for neighborhood youth interested in art to learn about the neighborhood from the local historical society. With that information, they design and paint the mural to reflect both the past and the future of the neighborhood, with guidance from a professional mural artist/educator.
- A neighborhood association organizes neighbors to teach middle school students how to provide lawn care services. Neighbors teach lawn mowing, hedge trimming, and weeding skills. Other neighbors offer their lawns as practice sites. The association helps the young people market their services in the neighborhood.
- The organizers of a front porch music festival dedicate one porch to youth performers, and seasoned gig musicians also performing at the event provide the young people with tips on pursuing future performance opportunities.
- The Rotary Club creates a special role for youth participants to connect with local business owners and learn about community issues.
- A fourth of July Parade Committee asks youth to be involved in the planning. 15
- A neighborhood association establishes a youth-led committee to take on projects of their choice.
- A local chapter of the League of Women Voters invites youths to get involved with voter registration efforts.
- “Friends of” the neighborhood park hold a youth summit to identify priorities and organize youth activities to improve the park.
- A community theatre group invites a young person to learn about and assist with lighting and set design.
- An environmental group requests that a youth with visual art skills attend a community forum on river water quality and create a drawing that captures all of the dreams people have for a healthy river.
- A Parent-Teacher Organization invites high school students to come back to their elementary school to design and lead a school event.
- American Legion members invite a middle school band to perform at a Memorial Day service.
- A local poet’s group creates an open-mic poetry event for high school students and provides one-on-one feedback sessions.
- A quilter’s club partners with a church youth group to make a prayer quilt together for a grieving family.
- The local historical society invites and trains high school students to help with primary research, interviewing residents who lived through a local natural disaster.
- The local conservation club helps a high school student do field research on water quality for a school project.
- A bowling league organizes an intergenerational team tournament.
- An environmental justice group trains youths to make presentations about asthma and air pollution.

- A string chamber ensemble invites strong youth musicians to perform with them in concert.
- A canoeing club invites families with young children who live nearby the boat launch to ride along and learn about canoeing.
- A local makers space opens the doors to teen inventors twice per month.
- Youth are invited to take charge of children’s activities at a neighborhood National Night Out celebration.

Local businesses, not-for-profit organizations and government entities also can provide valuable experience and knowledge as the following list indicates:

- A church Bingo game invites teenagers to participate as guest callers.
- The Boys & Girls Club organizes an afternoon walking tour to nearby businesses including a book store, yarn shop and candy store. At each location students learn something about how the business works “behind the scenes.”
- Students at a vocational high school form a credit union using skills they have learned from a local credit union’s staff. Anyone from the school or community can invest, and upper classmen teach incoming freshmen how to keep the business running.
- A local food pantry asks for help from youth in designing a new logo.
- Construction firm staff teach young people how to use graph paper and architectural rulers to design a building.
- The owner of a yarn shop offers a free month-long knitting workshop for neighborhood middle schoolers.
- Bank employees share the power of compound interest with elementary students through a marshmallow game in math class.
- A municipal community planning department engages youths in focus groups to inform comprehensive planning, and invites a team of youths to participate in data analysis.
- A neighborhood café owner meets with a group of youth entrepreneurs to answer questions about starting a business.
- A salon volunteers to teach skin care to adolescents.
- A yoga studio offers trauma-informed yoga practice for youths in a residential facility.
- Middle school cafeteria staff invite seventh graders to plan a menu and quantities within a budget for one week of school lunches.
- A rental property owner teaches graduating high school students about their tenant rights and responsibilities.
- A garden center sponsors, and staff supports, middle schoolers to install a butterfly garden at their school.
- A graphic design company works one-on-one with high school entrepreneurs to create a logo and business card.
- Neighborhood teenagers are hired to work at an understaffed library.
- A municipal Parks Department creates a youth Advisory Council which learns from Parks staff how to raise and manage funds for youth projects, publish a youth-focused newsletter, design and plant gardens, and organize activities for younger children.
- Experienced students enrolled in a literacy program are trained to become teachers for students just entering the program.

- A group of middle-schoolers who started a recycling program in their school help their old elementary school do the same.
- A group of small retail businesses work together to create a labor pool of neighborhood teenagers to call upon for part-time, seasonal and on-call work.
- A senior center invites youths to teach smart phone skills.
- A commercial business association invites neighborhood teens offering services (babysitting, lawn care, pet care, etc.) to be part of the local business directory and attend meetings.
- A local political party creates internships for youth to learn about and participate in campaign work.
- A real estate agents professional group invites ten high school students to shadow ten real estate agents for a day, and attend one of their group lunch events to learn about the profession.
- A Habitat for Humanity chapter enlists teens to do physical inventories of housing stock in target neighborhoods.
- A performance auto shop invites teens with mechanical ability to intern for the summer.
- A local hospital invites teens to job shadow.
- A mayor's office creates a high school internship in Communications and Policy.
- A police department offers ride-alongs to high school students interested in a career in law enforcement.
- A fitness center offers a once/month teen night with personal trainers to help develop personal exercise routines.
- An ethnic grocery offers a food tasting event and kid-friendly recipes for local parents with young children.
- A hardware store offers a tool library and club for youths working on do-it-yourself projects.
- A sexual assault crisis center creates internship positions, educates and supports high school students who want to tackle toxic masculinity in their schools.
- A bakery invites a preschool class to make bread and learn how commercial baking equipment works.
- A nature center supports a "youth crew" that works with staff to design and lead environmental projects.
- The local farmers' market engages high school students in inventorying weekly crops offered by vendors, visiting other area farmers' markets for comparison, and recommending new kinds of vendors to strengthen the market in future years.

The obvious point is that outside the mall, school and youth programs, any neighborhood is rich in associational and institutional experiential learning resources.

Connecting youth interests with these three community resources results in several benefits:

...First is the knowledge gained by youth that is not available in schools.

...Second are the skills learned that are not in school curricula

...Third is the experience of participating in the social, economic and political life of the community.

...Fourth are the special relationships that develop when youth are connected to adults in productive roles. This heals the brokenness of an age-segregated community.

...Fifth is the village would become stronger as it enjoys the productive vitality and energy that it's young people contribute.

As a village recovers and manifests its capacity to integrate youth into productive life, an unintended side effect usually emerges. The village will learn that it does not have a "youth problem." Instead, the adults will learn that what they have is a "community problem" that grew out of allowing its young people to be raised in a segregated culture created by a marketplace, schools and youth programs. Solving that community problem will result in a village with the new power to raise its children.