



***Family, Faculty, Fellowship and Fun: gifting  
our children and young people  
for their futures***

***Address by  
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## ***Introduction***

Few would disagree that one of the most fulfilling things we do as humans is watch our young people grow and mature into healthy, happy, confident and independent young adults. But this does not happen magically or spontaneously. It is not conferred by birthright, class, economic circumstances, ethnicity, gender, genetics or ability, although these factors certainly have a significant part to play. It also has to do with how these young people grow up, what they experience, what happens around them, and what opportunities they have to safely explore their worlds.

Here in Australia as in many other western industrialised countries, change is the norm. As individuals, it could be said we are all at risk in a world that changes so swiftly we struggle to keep up.

How is change impacting on children and young people today? This presentation will explore current understandings of children and young people. It will consider changes to society and the effect on young people's wellbeing.

'Family' plays a role in a young person's development and well being, as does 'faculty', in terms of the school experiences offered. Moreover, there is increasing evidence that what we might call 'fellowship' – collaborative networks and partnerships, both formal and informal in the community – plays a crucial role. After considering the role of family, faculty and fellowship on childhood development, this address will challenge some prevailing views on the relationships among schools, families and communities.

## ***Changes to Society***

Australian society has changed considerably over the last few generations. In many ways, we seem to be 'better off'. For example, last year, the United Nations Development Program ranked us as second to Norway as the best country in the world in which to live<sup>1</sup>. However, there are those who would argue that the fabric of our society might be becoming threadbare and fragile<sup>2</sup>.

The media bombards us with seemingly never-ending instances of global, national and local conflict and catastrophe. Societies are more complex and unstable than ever before and economic influences are pivotal<sup>3</sup>. We live with inconsistent messages about boundaries and values. Former communities are fragmented with an emphasis on privacy and civic disengagement rather than shared vision and commitment. Families often operate in environments characterised by isolation, pressure, silence, mistrust and age segregation. Work practices have changed and become more demanding and insecure. With longer hours spent on work, and the expansion of cottage and home industry, the boundaries between work and leisure time are blurring.

There is also mounting evidence that our standard of living is not the same as our quality of life. It is true that increasing income benefits those at low-income levels<sup>4 5</sup> but there appears to be a threshold effect once basic needs are met. Little if any benefit, in terms of health or happiness can be detected above the economic growth threshold in terms of improvement in quality of life. On average, Australians are five times more affluent than at the turn of the century<sup>6</sup>, but there is evidence that this escalating economic growth may be resulting in a deterioration of quality of life<sup>7</sup>.

In a recent Victorian survey<sup>8</sup> on quality of life, 41% of respondents felt that life in Australia was getting worse, 33% felt it was getting better, and 27% felt life in Australia had remained about the same. Those who felt life was getting better tended to be older people on higher incomes.

The same survey examined what most people thought were the most important national values and goals. The highest rating qualities tended to be ethical or non-material values such as honesty, environmental responsibility, democracy, security and happiness, ahead of the more material values of efficiency, economic and political strength, material living standards and high technology.

### ***New tribes with an emphasis on the local***

Earlier generations had a sense of loyalty to the nation state. Current young people have a sense of connection only with the local – for example, their football team or garage band. They have also become committed to global issues such as the environment or world music through conduits such as the media or the Web. Young people have substituted their national sense of connection with connection to local and/or cyber communities. The result is a blending of the local and the global to the point that their environment can be termed ‘glocal’. As Chalke notes:

*the old tribes have been dismantled. They were based on class, politics and religion. People are tending to focus much more closely on their immediate environment. People are placing greater emphasis on what’s happening to **them**<sup>a</sup>, **their** family... rather than the big issues<sup>9</sup>.*

Therefore, “new tribes that have formed are based on location rather than birth<sup>10</sup>”. By concentrating more on the individual and local level, we seem to have lost many of the traditional networks that used to sustain us. So networks linking our children and young people to our **families**, our **faculty** (or school), to the **fellowship** of our communities, and society as a whole, are to be valued and cultivated.

### ***Four turnings and generational types***

Generations are defined by shared circumstances and age-determined roles in major events of the time. Time-specific values, beliefs and behaviours also influence them. Although there is some blurring at the boundaries, it seems each generational cohort produces progeny with certain distinct characteristics as a result of changed world conditions and views, and often rebels against the views and behaviours of their parents.

Strauss and Howe<sup>11</sup> contend that society unfolds in 80 -100 year cycles, which form generational frameworks, and within each cycle there are generational archetypes. These archetypes repeat, revealing apparent social similarities from one historical rotation to the next. These four generational paradigms are what Strauss and Howe call ‘turnings’. They base their theory on a cycle of nurturing and parenting (or lack of it) from generation to generation. The four turnings<sup>12</sup> are called:

1. ‘high’ - an era of strengthening institutions and weakening individualism with a new civic order and decaying old values
2. ‘awakening’ - marked with spiritual upheaval when the civic order comes under attack from new values
3. ‘unravelling’ - an age of strengthening individualism and weakening institutions, when the old civic order decays to be replaced by new values, and

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<sup>a</sup> Italics added for emphasis

4. 'crisis' - a time of upheaval, when values are paramount, resulting in replacement of the old civic order with a new one.

So let us look at how the generational archetypes apply to today's context. The first turning of the current cycle is the Baby Boomers, the generation born in the 40s and 50s in the wake of the Second World War. They are on a post-war 'High'. Strauss and Howe call them 'Prophets' as they are indulged and 'spirited'. Bill Gates is an example of a 'Prophet'.

Generation X is the second turning, born during the 'Awakening' of the 60s and 70s. They are called 'Nomads' because they wander through life neglected and 'bad'. Winona Ryder is one example of a 'Nomad'.

Today's teens, the Millennials, born in the 80s and 90s, into an 'Unravelling' world, are what Strauss and Howe call the next 'Heroes'. Born to parents who brandish 'Baby on Board' signs in their car, they are protected and 'good'. Ian Thorpe could be classed as a Millennial 'Hero'.

The fourth generation "yet to be born (into the 'Crisis'), are the 'Artists' (who will be) suffocated and 'placid'<sup>13</sup>".

Howe and Strauss contend that:

*Millennials are held to higher standards than adults apply to themselves... they're a lot less violent, vulgar, and sexually charged than the teen culture older people are producing for them... over the next decade, they'll entirely recast what it means to be young... and in time, they could emerge as the next great generation<sup>14</sup>.*

This generation offers hope, promise and great expectations for the future. These Millennials, the next heroes, protected and good, are our young people. They are our adolescents, our teenagers, our youth - our children.

I will return to this notion of generational types and their inherent behaviours later but first I would like to explore the definitions of adolescence, teenagers and youth.

### **Defining adolescence and teenagers**

The dominant lexicon now used in talking about young people is quite recent. Hall first used the term 'adolescence' in a 1904 psychology text<sup>15</sup> while Burt<sup>16</sup> first referred to "the young delinquent" in 1926. The word 'teenagers' was coined in the USA in the 1940s to name pop music supporters and 'youth culture' is a term first used by Talcott Parsons<sup>17</sup> in a 1942 article on 'Age and Sex in the Social Structure of the United States'.

### **Young people as deviants and aliens**

The approach that emerged in the 1950s, which still has significant currency today, sees young people as "exotic deviants<sup>18</sup>".

*"...from the perspectives of the major institutions of social order, youthfulness is excess; it is implicit or incipient disorder; for society it is a 'problem' that requires handling, control, cooperation or channelling in socially approved directions<sup>19</sup>".*

Young people are also frequently characterised as having a "propensity towards recklessness"<sup>20</sup>, or deviance<sup>21</sup> and are referred to in economic and social discourse as:

*'victims of poverty', 'problems of society', 'alienated from community', (or) 'disengaged from democracy'. These are the types of images that permeate the ... media, ... and professional practice.<sup>22</sup>*

This discourse categorises young people as aliens<sup>23</sup>, whether as a romanticised version, as in media representations from James Dean to Britney Spears, or the demonised rendering of 'street kids'.

### **Defining youth**

Youth is "a slippery concept"<sup>24</sup>. When does it start and finish? Many government policies consider youth to be from 12 or 13 to 25<sup>25 26</sup>. Most would agree it is defined by the period that marks the physical, psychological and social transition into adulthood. But we all know someone who has not quite completed that leap!

Adolescence appears to be a uniquely human experience lasting at least four years between the juvenile stage and adulthood. Once they reach adult size, all other animals are able to reproduce immediately<sup>27</sup>. Recent neuro-scientific research has shown that, for humans, brain development areas that organise social judgement and self-control are not completely established and fully operational until we are in our twenties. The resultant hypothesis from this finding is that "teenage brains may be constructed in a way that makes their owners more open to ideas, more amenable to change and more likely to experiment – all in all, less set in their ways<sup>28</sup>".

Although young people are competent with formal operations such as abstract thought, known as "cold cognition", they have a decreased capacity for "hot cognition", that is, the ability to reason and make multiple decisions under conditions of high anxiety and stress<sup>29</sup>. In light of this new neuro-scientific research establishing brain maturity in our twenties, I could hypothesise that this may well be the reason for young people's lack of 'hot cognition'.

In past decades, adulthood has been closely linked to the autonomy that results from employment. However, being defined as an "adult" in this way is no longer as important to many young people. They may now seek to define their independence by engaging in 'adult behaviours' such as substance and alcohol use and sexual activity. For contemporary society, "there is no doubt that the biggest challenge of all will be how to prepare young people for an adult life in which the commonly accepted definition of independence no longer exists<sup>30</sup>".

Research indicates youth are in an "intense process of individuation associated with social fragmentation and atomisation<sup>31</sup>". That is, young people cannot be conveniently homogenised<sup>32 33</sup> and "defy pigeonholing<sup>34</sup>". Youth are more different than similar and so any generalisation ignores their diverse experiences, levels of maturation, gender, cultural transformations, the relations between groups of young people, the role of institutions, economics and politics, historical and cultural changes in identity formation, sexuality and work. Although we appears to be generalising by using the term 'Millennials', we need to be mindful of the notion that individualisation is one of the fundamental elements that denotes Millennials.

Youth is therefore more accurately described as a relational stage<sup>35</sup>, where young people are "very much individuals in their own right, developing through a sequence of critical transitions from childhood to adult life"<sup>36</sup>.

Dwyer, Harwood and Tyler<sup>37</sup> provide a useful chart of new typologies of young people's life patterns, which, when considered with their data on the personal priorities of over 1400 respondents, strongly supports the view that a uniform and linear approach to youth policies is unacceptable or inapplicable to most of them.

### ***Youth population statistics***

It is estimated that on 30 June 1999, 20.7% of the total Australian population of almost 19 and a half million<sup>38</sup>, were between the ages of 12 and 14 years and 14.2% were between 15 and 24 yrs old<sup>39</sup>. This indicates that there are more than six and a half million young people under the age of twenty-four in Australia today. Discounting those 23 and 24 year olds at the boundary, that is still a considerable number of Millennials!

### ***Youth culture, the nature of youth today and what research says***

It can be difficult for a young person caught between childhood and adulthood, not belonging to, accepted or acknowledged by either group. Some young people are optimistic; others are not. Some revel in these rapidly changing times; others do not cope. However, we know that in the main, outside their own family, young people do not know other adults well, are often strangers in their own neighbourhood and ignored or unwelcome in public places. They are rarely asked their ideas and opinions on programs focused on or designed for them, or on community deliberations. They experience considerable time each day without adult presence and lack safe places to spend time<sup>40</sup>. They seldom, if ever, join with peers or adults in philanthropic enterprises<sup>41 42</sup> and many feel they have no one they can trust or depend on<sup>43</sup>.

*[R]esearch found that of 2600 year 8 students, aged 12-14, 40% of the students could not name a single adult, a single person whom they felt knew them well – knew their deepest fears, knew their aspirations and their dreams, the name of their favourite pet. ... [A] quarter could not name a single adult, not a parent, not a teacher, no one, whom they felt that they could trust<sup>44</sup>.*

Millennials have unsurpassed opportunities available to them, but this comes at a price. This is the "paradox of prosperity"<sup>45</sup>. "Young people from all spheres of society, even the most wealthy and talented, are subject to a burden of expectation which imposes considerable pressures in different areas of their lives<sup>46</sup>". Not only are the 'have nots' disadvantaged by the socioeconomic, educational, workplace and technological divides, but those who might be seen as "privileged" also experience impediments. Those well positioned to grasp new and numerous opportunities, have unreasonable pressures on them to succeed, and those unable to do so are burdened with false expectations and a poverty of aspiration. Both the 'haves' and the 'have nots' experience heavy workloads at school and a high awareness of the importance of qualifications.

Some of the pressures young people have to deal with today include<sup>47</sup> the:

- intensive nature of education and training
- difficulty of transition between different stages of education, especially moving to secondary and tertiary levels
- competitive nature of the job market
- descent into debt
- renegotiation of traditional gender roles
- acceptance of different types of family
- emphasis placed on image

- perception of risk within society
- the search for belonging and meaning.

All these can contribute to young people's low self-esteem, depression, psychiatric disorders, suicide levels and substance abuse as a means of escape from day-to-day problems<sup>48</sup>.

Although Millennials are concerned about a wide range of issues, they tend to be politically cynical and participate in direct action only where visible, immediate effects can be gained. However, they are judgemental about what they consider are deserving and undeserving issues in society<sup>49</sup>.

They cope with the impact of changing gender roles. They are reinterpreting age boundaries as they want to be 'older younger' and 'younger longer'. They are struggling to establish their individuality while still striving to fit in with their peers in the midst of media pressure and widening feelings of mistrust and vulnerability<sup>50</sup>.

### ***Young people and change***

Because our current young people have grown up in a time of accelerating change, Hugh Mackay argues that they have learned to **expect** change. "Being the children of change, change is not much of an issue: it is the air they breathe; it is simply the way the world is<sup>51</sup>".

He calls our young people the 'options generation', postponing commitments, waiting to see what tomorrow brings, 'hanging loose'. Stephen Ball concurs with this notion that "the present rather than an uncertain future takes on greater importance<sup>52</sup>".

### ***Young people's three top issues***

In the 2002 Mission Australia Youth Survey<sup>53</sup>, the three top issues of importance to young people were: depression and suicide, accounting for 52.6% of the responses; family issues at 39.1%; and equal third ranking at 39% for abuse and sexual assault along with alcohol and other drugs.

Recent Queensland research suggests "one in five kids from disadvantaged backgrounds ... (are) at risk of suffering a serious mental health problem before the age of eight<sup>54</sup>". 'Kids Help Line' found that calls about mental health doubled from 2.5% in 1994 to 5% in 2000<sup>55</sup>. Richard Eckersley believes sources of youth suicide can be traced to pervasive social and specific personal qualities of our societies and "represents the tip of a large iceberg of suffering, not a tiny island of misery in an ocean of happiness<sup>56</sup>".

By now you may be thinking many of our young people are in a state of extreme danger; at risk of not making it through to adulthood.

What does 'at risk' really mean?

Historically, the term was used about physical illness<sup>57</sup>, for example, 'at risk' of tuberculosis or infant mortality. Now it is predominantly consigned to behaviours and is bandied around so often I sometimes wonder what the people who use it think it means.

Those in health-related areas use it to identify people in danger of contracting disease or who engage in health-compromising behaviours. Social workers use it to distinguish

those in socio-cultural situations that may be hazardous to their well-being or development. Educators use it in relation to school retention or gaps in knowledge and skills that may impact on students' economic futures. Law and justice workers use it in relation to those with a propensity to get involved in criminal activity or those who seem more likely to suffer the effects of violence, abuse or crime.

However, it is interesting to note that these distinctive meanings in different service sectors are becoming increasingly blurred. For example drug trafficking and use are now not only criminal 'problems' but also 'problems'<sup>58</sup> in the social ecology of young people's lives.

There is a body of work that challenges the term 'at risk'. As an example, most of us would probably consider early school leavers to be 'at risk'. That would be **our** perception, **our** conceptualisation. However, last year, Johanna Wyn, in reporting on the Youth Research Centre's project on young people's pathways through school, post-compulsory education and training and work, revealed that young people who we might perceive as having restricted chances "still define their lives in terms of choice<sup>59</sup>". They are **choosing** to leave school or their careers, negotiating alternatives and struggling to control their lives. In this instance they do not always see school completion and career acquisition as **their** 'pathway' to success. Success for the 'Millennials' is not restricted just to credentials or career promotion; it includes a shift in emphasis to dimensions of leisure and relationships<sup>60</sup>, a valuing of flexibility and horizontal mobility. Therefore, these early school leavers did not always perceive themselves as being 'at risk'.

### ***Who young people rely on***

When young people were asked in the 2002 Mission Australia Youth Survey<sup>61</sup> who they would turn to for advice and support, the three most frequently ranked groups were friends (87.4%), parents (73.4%) and family friend or relative (59.7%). Interestingly, school counsellor or guidance officers came in fourth with 22.2%. There were no differences in ranking between sexes; however, males relied less on friends (80.9% compared to 91.4%), and more on parents (79.1% compared to 70.0%), than females.

*For many, family is a stable and welcome source of help, but for a sizeable minority, the family network is fragmented or non-existent. As a result, friends are increasingly seen as the 'family of choice', but friendship can bring its own problems in the form of bullying and peer pressure (not to mention ill-informed or immature advice). Traditional forms of religion and spirituality do not appeal to most young people, and many are now looking to alternative forms of spirituality for support and help. Formal support systems are generally considered ineffective by young people, [as] they occupy a difficult position in trying to reconcile young people's feelings of dependence and independence<sup>62</sup>.*

We seem to be experiencing a "failure of modern Western culture to do well what cultures are supposed to do: provide webs of meaning that shape the way people see the world, locate themselves within it, and behave in it<sup>63</sup>".

### ***The ecological model***

The 'ecological' model originally developed by Bronfenbrenner<sup>64</sup>, depicting the environmental influences that operate simultaneously on the development of children and young people, indicates that contextual as well as individual factors are important in

shaping behaviour. I believe we need to include all dimensions of the ecological model in working to foster the well-being of young people. Family, faculty and fellowship are crucial influences.

### ***The role of families***

Family well-being is a cornerstone of healthy communities; however, the structure of our families has changed. Family is not a stable configuration, but a dynamic and constantly evolving process<sup>65</sup>. A little more than a century ago the divorce rate was about 0.1 per 1,000 population, but by 1999 it had risen to 2.8 divorces per 1,000<sup>66</sup>, almost 30 times higher.

This means the traditional nuclear family is now much more fluid, and people live in a wide variety of networks. Egalitarian nuclear families, sole parents, blended and stepfamilies, foster, intergenerational, geographically dispersed, and same-sex families are some variations. Twenty-eight percent of children aged under 17 are living apart from one of their natural parents in a step, blended or one-parent family<sup>67</sup>.

Although there are many valid positive outcomes of these new family structures, there

These lyrics say a lot about how many of today's young people feel about their life choices and pathways, and more importantly, their quandary about who to turn to for advice and support.

Millennials need to know society's limitations and boundaries, what to accept and what to challenge. "Our increasing failure as a society to mark those boundaries denies them crucial support and guidance in the passage to adulthood and maturity<sup>72</sup>".

Although families are normally the primary communicators of these values and beliefs, a school counsellor is in a key position - especially in the absence of a sympathetic family - to provide the crucial prerequisite for healthy growth and development, i.e. a close relationship with a dependable adult<sup>73</sup>.

Schools are changing from the traditional model. They are now actively involved in networking and forming alliances with other schools in Australia and globally, as well as with community, welfare and recreational groups. Schools should be "sites for holistic service delivery<sup>74</sup>", broadening their traditional role to encompass counselling, family support, life skills, health care, student and family emergency relief, school/work programs, and welfare support, all coordinated through the school – as a 'one-stop shop'.

A 1997 British survey revealed that 63% of 16 - 25 year olds felt that schools do not prepare people for life in the real world<sup>75</sup>. Now, more than ever, life skills are viewed as a crucial component of the school curriculum.

Committed counsellors have an extensive 'bag of professional tools' to contribute. A list of 'tools' Education Queensland<sup>76</sup> considers essential for school guidance officers or counsellors includes:

- working with students and their parents or caregivers, often in conjunction with teachers, specialist support personnel and other community agencies
- identifying factors that can be barriers to learning and development
- planning or assisting in planning interventions or programs that can help students achieve positive outcomes
- assessing students' developmental levels and abilities
- considering educational adjustment
- assessing students' placement and specialist support needs
- assisting students in adjustment to new settings
- providing personal counselling on individual safety and crisis management
- helping students manage relationships and behavioural difficulties
- for secondary students, providing assistance with study skills, subject and course selection, and career planning and decision-making.

This is a formidable list, and I commend you on your expertise. Faculty roles such as these are really significant in helping young people cope in their multiple environments.

There is enormous potential for the counsellor to support young people, particularly at times of young people's transition. A role advocated The American School Counselor Association<sup>77 78</sup> covers transitional periods in which anyone (but particularly young people) are traditionally vulnerable, to help them negotiate different ecological environments.

My challenge to you is to move into the community and collaborate with teachers, parents, health care professionals, business and industry, local civic and community groups, state and federal agencies, and private organisations. Networking with these groups to provide young people with support in these transitions could become a major part of your role.

We have discussed family and faculty. This brings us to the fellowship dimension of the ecological model.

### ***The role of fellowship in the community***

Community strength depends on natural assets that produce economic, human, and social and institutional capital. 'Natural' assets include ecosystems, aesthetic features and natural resources. 'Produced economic' capital includes manufactured goods, services, financial capital and infrastructure. 'Human' capital embraces the capacity of people to contribute, and 'social and institutional' capital comprises patterns and qualities of processes through which people engage with each other, various organisations and expert systems<sup>79</sup>.

Social capital, or fellowship, is accommodated through formal and informal collaborative networks and partnerships in the community. Social engagement and community strength are created through civic participation and volunteering. People require trust and trustworthiness, altruism, shared norms, ideals and purposes to build social capital. This creates a sense of community, tolerance of diversity and equality of opportunity, attitudes of self-reliance, leadership, and mechanisms for managing community conflict. The positive outcomes of social capital are individual and collective well-being<sup>80</sup>.

If more families and schools are involved in formal and informal linkages with local and other communities, we will be rewarded with positive outcomes in education, health and well-being, not to mention the bestowal of generational values and goals<sup>81</sup>.

Without fellowship, the future influence of Millennials on communities and society as a whole is debatable. What seems likely is a more transactional approach to life, in which young people increasingly expect to see tangible results in return for their contribution to society, or what has been termed "self-interested altruism<sup>82</sup>".

Do we want this as our legacy to young people? If not, we need to make radical changes in the way we perceive the world and act within it. It is imperative that families, schools and communities collaborate to re-establish safe and fertile environments for our children and young people. We need to resuscitate our sense of FAMILY, FACULTY, and FELLOWSHIP.

### ***The deficit-reduction approach***

One approach to this challenge is based on so-called deficit reduction. This is used in programs targeting young people already determined to be "at risk". It is fuelled by social researchers who name and count the negatives and is reinforced by media in the form of a "mayhem index<sup>83</sup>".

This hidden agenda of emotionally-loaded messages alienates and labels these young people as 'different' or not 'fitting in' with the mainstream. When young people's

transitions have hiccups, the response is to design and implement what Benard calls "fix-the-kid"<sup>84</sup> programs, to reduce or eliminate individual risks and problems. The analogy is curing a disease with 'band-aid' strategies. Such 'therapy' "confers status upon those who practise it. It also protects us from feeling impotent in the face of overwhelming forces and it enables us to derive an often illusory sense of efficacy"<sup>85</sup>.

The difficulty of this approach is that it is based on a simple cause-and-effect model that ignores the complex and interactive bases of human behaviour. The deficit-reductionist approach fails to consider the complex interplay of factors at the different levels in the ecological model.

The deficit model of service delivery positions young people and families as passive recipients. Many therapists, educators, researchers, family and community organisations are moving away from this disempowering approach to embrace a strengths perspective<sup>86</sup>.

### ***The asset-building approach***

There has been a growing interest in another paradigm founded on a positive strengths-based approach. The African saying that 'It takes a whole village to raise a child', although simplistic, epitomises this approach.

Where deficit reductionism sees young people as no more than a sum of parts, the holistic framework of 'developmental asset building' acknowledges and promotes "people skills, people resources, trusting relationships, and the strength of collaborative networks and partnerships, both formal and informal, existing within the community"<sup>87</sup>. It celebrates connectedness and is built on the intersection of two rationales - the promotion of a community's well-being and accumulation of developmental skills. It moves from a 'victim' to an 'agent of change' narrative. This is 'preventative medicine'. This is 'vaccinating' our young people and developing a 'healthy immune system' capable of keeping them safe from 'illness' throughout their lives.

One example of this approach, is an investigation by Vinson, Baldry and Hargreaves<sup>88</sup> which found there were considerable differences in child maltreatment rates in two socio-economically similar adjoining neighbourhoods in Western Sydney. The area associated with a higher rate of abuse was found to lack familial and community networks, social connectedness or what we are calling 'social capital'. The researchers suggested programs to establish community building and connectedness could significantly reduce the incidence of child abuse.

The asset-promotion approach requires a community to take responsibility for determining how many assets it possesses as an indicator of where strengths lie. The community then accumulates assets, 'or building blocks' it does not yet possess, and closes any gaps. This has a cyclic effect. As an asset-accumulating community nurtures and strengthens young people, they provide the critical mass to further enhance the community's well-being.

This concept "presupposes a family's capacity for optimism and hope, a sense of connectedness, and the availability of accessible community resources"<sup>89</sup>. In addition, a family that is depicted as resourceful and skilled is more likely to get actively involved in the process of addressing their issues and solving their own problems<sup>90</sup>.

It requires young people to be 'gifted' with positive experiences from elders, and communities to be responsible for encouraging all young people to experience and gather more 'building blocks'. It produces intergenerational bridges<sup>91</sup>.

Wong's<sup>92</sup> research supports the assertion that:

*young people who have strong bonds to their families, schools, and communities are more invested in following the beliefs and standards held by these groups. These bonds are created by providing opportunities for young people to be involved in meaningful ways, skills for successful involvement, and recognition for their involvement.*

### **Asset Taxonomy**

The American Search Institute<sup>93</sup> devised an **Asset Taxonomy**, which has three outcomes:

1. protection - a resistance to health-compromising or future-jeopardising behaviour
2. enhancement – which promotes forms of thriving, has greater positive outcomes, buffers youth against adversity and builds on young people's innate abilities, and
3. resiliency - which promotes the ability to beat the odds, to be able to 'bounce back' or "recover from the adverse conditions of life<sup>94</sup>".

Resilience development usually focuses on the individual, but can be applied to families or entire communities. Asset-building empowers families and communities to use those assets to build resilience<sup>95</sup>.

### **40 developmental assets**

The Search Institute's Asset Taxonomy covers "the basic inputs or raw resources that young people need to build competence, confidence, connections, and character<sup>96</sup>".

It consists of forty asset 'building blocks' that are the indicators of thriving. It includes both internal and external 'assets' grouped into eight categories: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies and positive identity.

It is interesting to note that the list developed by Australia's National Crime Prevention Strategy<sup>97</sup> of protective influences against delinquent behaviour in the child, family, school, and life events, mirrors the majority of these developmental assets.

### **Asset statistics**

Scales states that "young people with 31 - 40 of the assets are 17 times more likely than asset-poor youth with 0 - 10 of the assets to avoid problem alcohol use, whereas those with 31 - 40 assets are eight times more likely to succeed at school than youth with 0 - 10 assets<sup>98</sup>".

So the more 'building blocks' we have, the better we are at resisting 'at risk' behaviours, which is a form of 'inoculation'. We stubbornly adhere to the false logic that youth must be 'fixed' before they can be developed.

Even for marginalized youth and families, the strategy is not fix then develop; it is fix using development<sup>99</sup>. You will note that this is not just an individualistic approach, but a broader, ecologically embedded approach.

Asset-building is also interesting because it embraces participation by young people and requires meaningful involvement and membership by all sectors of the community. It is particularly important for young people to participate fully and not tokenistically to achieve asset growth. Instead, youth become allies working with adults and adults work with youth in “nonadultist ways<sup>100</sup>”.

This community empowerment creates supportive environments for young people to enhance their social, physical, psychological and educational well being. Most importantly, in contrast to deficit-reduction approaches, asset-building is self-sustaining in the long term.

Dr Bob Hardingham has recently been carrying out a limited measurement of developmental assets in a small number of primary and secondary schools in Queensland. In general, he believes these students should have more developmental assets than their American counterparts. However, he has noted some concerning findings.

For example, Australian youth do not feel valued by their communities. They are not called on as a resource to address community issues and there are few opportunities for them to serve the community. Neighbourhood boundaries are very weak (as opposed to school boundaries) and peer influences are often perceived as negative. Young people claim there are limited creative activities available to them, far too few youth programs and they don't feel supported by their neighbourhoods. They are alienated by homework and many feel there is little bonding between them and their schools. Many say they lack skills for planning and decision-making in their lives and often resort to resolving issues through conflict. Only a small number of young people read regularly for pleasure.

On the other hand, there are some very positive signs. Many young people feel they have strong support from their families, although a much smaller number feel they can discuss issues of personal concern openly with their parents. Most feel both school and family boundaries are strong and they have access to good adult role models. They want to achieve well and feel reasonably good about themselves (although self-esteem is a problem with a number of young people and could be more serious with girls in years 9 and 10). Many feel they have adequate interpersonal and cultural skills, are responsible, and try hard at school.

However, Dr Hardingham considers only 20% of the young people in his study have an adequate number of developmental assets. There is certainly room for much improvement.

### ***Two paradigm comparison***

However, in the end there must be a balance, or convergence, of these approaches to target risk and assemble protective factors. Asset-building accompanied by risk reduction programs will ensure issues such as poverty, abuse, unemployment, school retention, crime, drugs, homelessness, self-harm and other health-compromising behaviours are addressed, while still promoting a climate of capacity and community building. This two-pronged strategy deals with unconstructive or harmful incidences while creating protective mechanisms for young people against potentially risky behaviours in the future.

Even under optimal conditions there is still a small proportion of young people who will not respond, but remain 'at risk'<sup>101</sup>. Similarly, there are those who against all odds and with multiple barriers seem to be able to pass into adulthood unscathed.

So, while deficit-reduction programs are necessary, we should place an equal amount of energy into asset promotion and community building, which benefits everyone, not just those youth, children or families we choose to categorise as 'at risk'. We should be strengthening our communities so **all** our children are healthy and resilient.

### **Conclusion**

We want to build an Australia of the future that is even better than the Australia we have now. Families, faculty and fellowship all need to work in tandem. We can achieve this if we focus on people's strengths, especially those of our young people. We need to form intersections where every person feels connected and valued. We need to audit our assets and build them into an impenetrable fortress so they are passed on to successive generations. We must be vigilant about looking after **all** our children and young people, not just those in our genetic family, but all those in our community, especially those who may be at greater risk due to their low 'account balance' of assets.

Most importantly, this connection and bonding of family, faculty and fellowship must be accomplished in way which is fun for those involved.

I believe this is necessary because, in the end, children and young people "deserve to be highly valued for the unique contribution they make through just being those children"<sup>102</sup>.

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