

Opening speech for Penn State National Issues Forum Series – September 2005
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I'm sure there are a few of you, who upon seeing the topic for my remarks today wondered about whether there was a misprint regarding which department I work within... After all, why would someone from US Department of Agriculture be here talking about youth and children and not cows or soybeans?

But there was no misprint, I am from USDA – the department founded by Abraham Lincoln over 100 years ago and which he called, “The People’s Department” and to whom he gave the mandate to use knowledge and information to improve the quality of life for our citizens.

That mandate leads us to ask a lot of questions- such as what do groundwater quality, rates of juvenile diabetes, and migrant worker employment levels have in common? While you might immediately think of one or two things these issues have in common- if I gave you more time to consider them fully- you’d recognize that the answer is “everything.”

In USDA, our work requires us to be systems thinkers – and so, we recognize that these three issues are indicators – measurements of the health of larger systems, in this case, a system called a community. And being the Director of Youth Development within USDA, my attention is on those communities – those systems which we know are critical for our youngest citizens to thrive.

In this role, I often get asked are children and youth worse off today than in the past.

I’ve even been asked if children are an endangered species – although I wondered at the time if the person posing the question understood that children do not represent a separate species from adults...And like any good bureaucrat, I can clearly answer those questions by telling you- “it depends.” What it depends upon are the indicators we choose to determine the answer.

There are literally hundreds of indicators that we can monitor and pull out to give us some sense of the health of systems supporting children and youth. Typically, though- the indicators we focus on have a few things in common—

1. They reflect our values- what we think is important. In other words, our assumptions about what constitutes a good quality of life for children and youth in the first place.
2. They are statistically measurable – let’s face it, while there are a few qualitative studies that inform us, the information we rely upon to tell us about these systems which support youth- is data that can be collected and compared. And we assume that if we don’t see statistical significance- than it’s the programs that have failed- not our methods for measuring them.
3. They are scientifically defensible and reliable.
4. And the indicators have some relevance for policy- meaning that we often collect data on only those indicators which we believe can be impacted by policy.

Consider the indicators we collect related to youth to answer our questions- are children and youth worse off today?

Well, generally speaking there has been a lot of improvement in the lives of children and youth.

For example, the number one killer is motor crashes and injury

While no one thinks that's a good thing, it does tell us that our medical system is providing better care as the reason that this is number one is because there are fewer diseases and illnesses taking the lives of children and youth in other ways. In fact, through medical advances children today are mostly unfamiliar with childhood diseases like chicken pox that only a generation ago were rites of passage.

Youth violence is also down and generally, illegal drug use among youth is down as well.

We can also consider indicators such as policies which impact youth- such as child labor laws, family dissolution, and opportunities for youth with disabilities, policies to address abuse and neglect, and broadened opportunities for girls, and acceptance of diversity- Generally, there is an improvement in the social issues that we know impact their lives. In addition, today there are industries that cater just to the desires and whims of children and youth – and making them happy.

But yes, children and youth are also in trouble.

While violence and drug use are down- today we see far more potent and lethal forms of drugs available. There is greater access to guns which are increasingly more powerful. We live in a world where the consequences of youth's predictable rebellious and risky behavior has increased- a world with AIDS, rather than just pregnancy or VD as the consequences of unprotected sexual activity, for example.

The impact of poverty and economic pressures has also increased- and disproportionately impacts children and youth. While these indicators have reflected on the quality of youth life for decades – it's the level of lethality that today garnishes attention from those of us who care for youth... Jim Garbarino, Professor of Human Development & Family Studies at Cornell refers to these indicators as creating a "**Socially Toxic Environment**" for children and youth-

But there is also another category of indicators, revealing some new trends in how our children and youth are faring...and which often don't get as much of our attention. To get at these, I'd like you to think for a moment about what you think is the primary reason that most parents would want their children to be involved in youth programs...

We've asked and typically hear reasons such as:

- supplemental education (tutoring, etc) to positively impact academic experiences;
- opportunities to learn communication skills to increase later employability;
- good leadership experiences which will assist youth in making contributions later in life.

These reasons, and others like them, emphasize the positive opportunities for youth. Programs which provide these types of experiences are intended to assist a youth in developing their potential and supplement the formal education.

Now, what do you think is the primary reason that most youth would want to be involved in youth programs?

I happen to know the answer to this one, at least for some youth because we've asked them. And the number one reason is FUN, with friendship (including adult friendships) following as an almost immediate second.

While most youth programs can provide both the experiences that adults are wanting for their children, and the fun and friendships that youth want- I've found myself wondering about this difference...and whether we at times, listen more to the expressions from the adults in terms of what a youth development program should look like-rather than the youth (especially since we know who determines the funding).

After all, those of us in youth development are held accountable for the work we do. People (usually adults) want us to be able to demonstrate that we have made a positive difference in the lives of youth and although they may give reasons such as for more enriching opportunities- often what adults fund are organizations which can demonstrate what they do keeps kids out of trouble. So, we're often asked how our programs make a difference in reducing violence, preventing drug use, keeping youth out of prisons, or reducing teen pregnancy – all those indicators previously mentioned.

But let's consider a few other indicators that are shaping the lives of youth- and perhaps their reasons for wanting to participate in youth programs-

- 1) Affluence – just as poverty has a significant impact on the lives of youth, affluence is having a marked impact as well. As people become more affluent, they have a tendency to purchase services for which, at one time, they were dependent upon their neighbors and friends. Those mutual obligations and the interdependency they create often weave the fabric of community life. When they are absent, often so are the social bonds that can create a safety net under children and youth.
- 2) Disruption of relationships- due to divorce, and other social factors- there is a greater mobility that separates extended families or neighborhood networks.
- 3) Television and computers – increasing reliance on TV and computers as a babysitter or companion
- 4) Age Segregation – we continue to separate by ages, the people in our communities, making it possible to more strongly feel the influence of one's peers. This is true for the elderly, but even more so for our youth—where age segregation appears most uniquely in the large concentrations of youth with limited adult contact that we create with the environments that we encourage for the sake of efficiency – such as large schools, and large youth programs.

For so long, we thought these efficiencies didn't matter in the lives of youth- because we compared really large schools of 2,000 or so with only large schools of about 1,000 or so- and that's like comparing jumping from the 90th floor of a building to jumping from the 60th. There really isn't much difference in the outcome. What we are increasingly coming to realize, however, is that there may be a difference if we compare really large schools with small schools- or if we compare jumping from the 90th floor to jumping from the 2nd.

- 5) Our sense of time, what has been dubbed our “cult of speed” – Klaus Schwab, founder and president of the World Economic Forum said, “We are moving from a world in which the big eat the small to one in which the fast eats the slow.” In a Newsweek poll of American adolescents, 73% said parents spend too little time with teenagers (2000).
- 6) Depression – there is more depression in our society, or at least more reported.

In addition, Harvard University professor, Robert Putnam has drawn our attention to several similar indicators in his book "Bowling Alone" and his ongoing initiative the Saguaro Seminars - The project focuses on expanding what we know about our levels of trust and community engagement and on developing strategies and efforts to increase this engagement.

He and his colleagues have found:

Family dinners and family vacations or even just sitting and talking with your family are down by one third in the past 25 years.

In that same period of time:

Having friends over to the house is down by 45 percent.

Participation in clubs and civic organizations has been cut by more than half.

AND Involvement in community life, such as public meetings is down by 35 percent.

They estimate that each additional 10 minutes of commuting time cuts all forms of social capital by 10 percent--10 percent less church-going, 10 percent fewer club meetings, 10 percent fewer evenings with friends, etc.

In that environment of lessened social capital, as Putnam refers to it- and increased lethality of the "toxic" environment that Garbarino has identified- we can add one more set of indicators-**what adults expect from youth...**

According to Berkeley psychologist, Alison Gopnik, Americans have become obsessed with raising smart, successful adults. They have adopted the view that children and youth matter not because of who they are but what they will grow up to be. This is, in essence, what many who try to hold youth development programs accountable ask us to document- that we somehow make an impact on what children will **become**. Gopnik wonders if the value of youth is only that it is the incubation stage for adulthood?

A recent National Academy of Sciences report suggests that there is another, more expansive way of thinking about children and youth than as premature adults. This view, that youth and childhood are valuable in and of and for themselves, really speaks to the quality of life for children and youth. A change in outlook could have profound policy implications. For example, children need time and attention from people who care about them (and clearly want it). But society has changed so much in the past 20 years that it is hard for even middle class parents to meet those needs, much less the parents of the 20% of children raised in poverty.

Youth development is a process, a philosophy, and the practices or programs used to address youth needs and offers some hope for addressing these issues. Youth development is the process by which children begin to make the transition from the protected niche in the social environment to adulthood. And youth need to be seen as central actors in this process, not just passive recipients.

As a philosophy, youth development emphasizes moving beyond a "Problem Orientation" - a focus on simply the "risk indicators" which often hold our attention because we lose the overall mission of youth development and limit our ability to sustain a positive impact on the lives of youth.

Comparison between Wildlife Conservation and Youth Development

To understand the significance of the youth development approach, and since some have asked me if children are endangered, it's helpful to compare the way we provide human services with the way we approach wildlife conservation— Human Services funding has tended to focus most heavily on remediation for individuals who have run into difficulty (foster care, etc.) We pay more attention to the effects of damage than to its causes. Wildlife Conservationists spend relatively few resources trying to rescue damaged individual birds or animals. Instead, the focus is on preserving and protecting the environment of the species they want to protect. The overall welfare of animals depends on the existence of a healthy habitat.

How are the two fields different?

Wildlife biologists study species meticulously to better understand what a given species needs in order to thrive—next, they attempt to preserve those environments which best support that species. They've had pretty good success--- Alligators were removed from the endangered list in 1987; Peregrine Falcons were removed from the list in 1999; Bald eagles were also recently removed from the list. Psychologists and other Human Development specialists have studied our species too- However, there is a complex set of skills that must be learned for youth to be able to thrive- more than just how to obtain food, water and shelter—and human service workers cannot ignore an endangered individual child. However, for nearly 30 years now we've known what young humans need but we haven't consistently applied this knowledge— WHY? We could certainly more evenly spread our resources between remedial and preventive activities-- Why haven't we done this?

1. Social Reasons – We have increasingly come to believe that raising children and youth is an individual responsibility. At the same time, it's gotten increasingly harder for families to do this alone - To respond to the needs of youth takes collective action at a time when we've grown more isolated.
2. Economic Reasons – the monetarization of care—when efficiency and cost effectiveness matter more than the larger purposes of youth development.

What can youth development learn from Wildlife Conservation?

1. That environment really matters—

We are the only species who can truly create and build our own environments. Unlike the beaver, who can modestly shape a small pond if all other conditions (enough trees, enough water, etc.) are present—humans can create habitats in the deserts, mountaintops, or prairies. We also are a species that is incredibly adaptable- so adaptable that we forget that environment matters—and that surviving is not the same thing as thriving.

Frank Barry, formerly the Co-director of the Family Life Development Center at Cornell University speaks of Marginal Environments- that are so obvious to us in other species but not always apparent in our own. Think of a cornfield and along the edges of the field, one usually sees an area where the cornstalks become shorter, with ears not filled out- these cornstalks on the edge of the field received less fertilizer, enjoyed less tilled soil—they exist in a marginal environment. This is true for human youth too- many of them adapt to their environments and can survive in these many different places- but don't thrive.

As we refocus ourselves on what youth need to thrive, we really begin to ask what we must know to successfully create productive youth development opportunities relevant for today's youth.

We must first understand three basic assumptions about how youth fare in the world:

- The first one is that all youth will find ways to meet their basic needs. It's important for us to recognize that youth will do this whether we help them, or hinder them, or ignore them. My hope would be that we would help. We know that young people who don't find help often find ways to meet their needs that are ultimately self-destructive rather than productive over the long term.
- We also know that our youth will find ways to build skills and value. There was a time when I started my teaching career when we referred to young people—particularly early in their childhood—as the blank slate waiting for us to scribble upon. What we know now is that from the moment young people are born, they begin to build a skill set and to form their value system. So if we think of a six-month-old, we can recognize that already they have a skill set that allows them to get adults to respond to change their diaper, to give them food, to give them affection. Those skills continue to develop for a young person as they grow and interact with their environment. The question then becomes whether their skills ultimately are ones that are productive over their lifetime or if they are ones that ultimately become self-defeating.
- Finally, all youth find ways to use their skills, talents, energies, and time in ways that make them feel good and powerful.

We are all motivated towards action that helps us feel more comfortable and powerful and that helps us meet our needs.

So, what do youth need?

- Youth need to know that they are able to influence people and events through decision-making and action. In our programs, we call this INDEPENDENCE and in fact, independence is the flip side of the coin of responsibility.

If we want responsible youth we must give them increasing doses of independence. By exercising independence through meaningful opportunities, youth mature in self-discipline and responsibility and learn to better understand themselves and become independent thinkers.

- Youth also need to know that they are cared about by others and feel a sense of connection to others in a group. Youth need places and people to whom they BELONG.

Current research emphasizes the importance for youth to have opportunities for long-term, consistent relationships with adults other than their parents. This research suggests that belonging may be the single most powerful positive ingredient we can add into the lives of youth and that the quality of human relationships in schools and youth programs may be more influential than specific techniques or interventions.

- They also need to feel their lives have meaning and purpose. By participating in community service and citizenship activities, they can connect to communities and learn to give back to others.

Some would call this GENEROSITY or altruism but it forms the very foundation of a civil society and it is clear that these experiences provide the foundation that helps us understand the big picture of life and appreciate the experiences of others. It is also these experiences that weave the very fabric of our society – that make it possible for our many interdependent systems to function.

- Finally, by exploring projects and activities, youth master skills to make positive life choices. In order to develop self-confidence, youth need to feel and believe they are capable.

They must experience success at solving meaningful problems and meeting challenges for that to occur. In addition, they need to have a safe environment for making mistakes and getting feedback—not just through competition but also as an ongoing part of participation. And, youth need the breadth and depth of topics that allow them to pursue their own interests – we call this MASTERY.

We should also consider how those working in Wildlife Conservation focused their efforts on communicating the following:

1. The resolve and strategies they advocated;
2. The clarity and urgency of the situation;
3. The immediate moral power of the issue of extinction of endangered species;

We need to focus on the strategies which provide sustainable environments for youth to meet their needs.

We must become more vocal advocates for youth-friendly habitats-

- such as building smaller schools,
- strengthening and supporting neighborhood-based programs that are long-term and don't vanish when a grant ends,
- better pay for youth and childcare professionals to reduce the high rates of turn-over.

We need to build and strengthen ties between communities and children by creating welcoming places, creating meaningful roles for young people to participate.

And we must convince our communities that children urgently need adults in their habitats -- In real estate, they say, "Location, location, location." In youth development, we say, "Time, time, time."

We simply have to recognize that we cannot set goals for improving the lives of children and youth without the recognition that the environment within which young people live and what children and youth are allowed and/or encouraged to do has an ENORMOUS impact on whether or not these goals are met. But we need living examples of the policies and ideas that shape the environment in positive ways for today's youth—at USDA, we have a known and respected organization that is just that—4-H Youth Development.

4-H and Cooperative Extension were founded as a way to create educational opportunity at a time when most young people lived in rural areas and had little access to education and all the possibilities that come with it. 4-H is a unique organization. It is the only youth development organization with oversight and sponsorship by the federal government through USDA. The federal government's partners in 4-H include the land-grant universities of which Penn State is one. The role of land-grant institutions is significant, of course. Through Cooperative Extension, 4-H today connects local communities and more than 7 million young people with the land-grant university research in practical ways to improve the lives of these youth and their families.

The pioneers who shaped 4-H as the early junior naturalist clubs or the corn clubs began with not just the intention of changing youth, but with the belief that changing youth would change our nation.

Our early educators designed the 4-H and cooperative education enterprise on the concept that some things cannot be taught didactically but must be experienced.

This concept forms the foundation of our program and we call it *learning by doing*—to teach knowledge and life skills that enhance quality of life by exploring firsthand the practical matters of community and home life.

We discovered along the way that not only was the 4-H model of experiential education of *learning by doing* very effective in developing youth mastery of skills and knowledge, but more important, that youth were highly effective community change agents who led by example and were themselves transformed by the experience of influencing others and their communities. In 4-H, we saw land-grant university knowledge extended to youth, and our youth responded by becoming the early adopters of technology and research. In fact, our country has become strong due in part to the rapid rate of technology transfer from our laboratories to practice. Throughout its history, 4-H has been a leader in creating the access and opportunity that lead our youth to consistently serve as those early adopters.

For over a hundred years, 4-H has been dedicated to creating opportunities—educational opportunities that broaden the skills and aspirations of our youth and youth development opportunities that enhance the maturity...the potential...and ultimately the quality of life of our youth.

We need your help-

- Volunteer – share something you love or enjoy with one youth or many (photography, reading, bike riding, camping)
- Either as a volunteer- or in other ways support organizations such as 4-H, Big Brothers/Sisters, Boys & Girls Clubs that help create sustainable and supportive environments for youth.
 - Work to insure their soundness through whatever form of support you can offer- help them spread in fact -and in influence- and support them as standards for all like activities. (hard in a culture that likes innovation).
- Support family-friendly policies that allow more adults to respond to the needs of children
- Find daily ways to increase face-to-face interaction with others in your community.
- Work to strengthen your family ties- create new rituals together, volunteer together, play games, eat meals together.
- Turn off the television; shut off your email (in Britain, a study found parents spent more time checking email than playing with their children)
- Work diligently to fight poverty.
- Resist the temptation to indulge children's short-term wants without consideration for their long-term needs.

Most of us would agree that children and youth, in general, deserve protection, care and a chance to learn. Yet that value only seems to count in the public realm if it is expressed as a means to higher test scores, a more competitive labor force, less crowded prisons, or fewer teen pregnancies. We may never be able to measure the effects of youth programs on SAT scores or youth participation on adult employment success, and given the variety of influences in the lives of youth, we have limited ability to demonstrate much more than weak correlations between our programs and lower engagement in the risky and increasingly lethal behaviors. However, we have undeniable evidence that youth and those who care for them together seem to be an elegantly designed system for human learning – and that creating the system for this type of social engagement *matters*. What we need to document is that youth development programs provide those kinds of systems and supports on a regular basis, whether we have figured out how to effectively measure it or not.

This is indeed an urgent issue- as George F. Will clarified for us in his column in this past issue of Newsweek, when he noted “The swiftness of New Orleans’ descent from chaos into barbarism ...and that in only a few hours, Katrina dispersed a sense of civility. Where I would disagree with Mr. Will is that civilization was not diminished by simple molten passions as he observed- but by the sudden and immediate lack of any positive way for the human beings in New Orleans to meet their basic needs. A marginal environment only tenuously able to offer survival, gave way. There are many more marginal environments in which our children live every day – only hours away from a similar catastrophic event.

And we must define youth development work as an immediate moral issue...

I mentioned earlier that we asked youth about their participation in youth programs. I appreciated the response of one local 4-H member (age 9) who said that “4-H makes life better.” When asked, “Do you mean life now or when you grow up?” She said, “Both.” When asked, “For you, or for others?” She said, “Both.” Kids get it.

One of the reasons that the images of youth participating in youth development programs is so potent to those who support us, is because they speak to the deeper facts of human nature. As Robert Putnam so eloquently put it, social networks have value – and not just to create warm and cuddly feelings. There are a wide variety of quite specific benefits that flow from the trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation associated with social networks. As a society, America simply does not fully support that social networks are valuable and more important to this discussion, that youth and childhood are valuable in and of and for themselves. Children need childhood and the opportunities youth have to meaningfully connect with others, as our 9 year old friend so clearly articulated, are what make life better both now and when they grow up. The environment matters- and as adults, we have the capacity to shape the environment. Surely there is no more compelling moral issue than the recognition that children and youth are the vulnerable links in the human chain; ultimately what impacts them impacts all of us. The most fundamental contribution we could make might be to help our nation consider indicators for keeping a watchful eye on our smallest citizens which more authentically speak to their quality of life.