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The Important Role Non-Parental Adults Have with Youth Learning Leadership

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Abstract: Adults have a significant influence on the lives of young people. Qualities to look for in finding successful mentors are identified. The role that non-parental adults play in establishing leadership opportunities is explored. Recommendations are made for creating positive relationships with youth.

Introduction

Adults play an important role in the life of a young person. They use their knowledge and skills to help guide a young person in a positive direction. Adults are concerned about the development of young people. Public opinion polls reveal that American adults are concerned about young people (Scales, 2003).

There have been a variety of studies done on the effects of a young person's behavior and the influence of a "Very Important" non-parental adult (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002). There have also been studies done on how youth see significant people in their lives (Hendry, Roberts, Glendinning, & Colman, 1992). These studies support the important role of an adult in the life a young person.

Adults also have a positive influence on the way youth learn and acquire skills. They might introduce a young person to a hobby or other special interest. One way of discovering their interest is spending time with a young person. If time is a factor, adults need to take advantages of opportunities that already exist in their world (Clary, & Rhodes, 2006). Taking advantages of those opportunities will help adults fit the time into discovering their interest and skill level.

Non-Parental Adults

A non-parental adult is an adult who wants to make a difference in a life of a child. Knowing their experience makes a difference, many adults volunteer their time to do this important work. These individuals may or may not have children currently living in their own home.

Some researchers define non-parental adults as those who have had a significant influence on the adolescent and on whom the adolescent can rely for support. They come from many different socially-defined contexts: extended family members, teachers, employers, church representatives, coaches, or older friends (Chen, Greenberger, Farruggia, Bush, & Dong, 2003). Non-parental adults are those people who devote their time to have an impact on youth.

Non-parental adults can be anyone. There are three that tend to rise to the top. They are teachers, relatives and other community members (Hendry, Roberts, Glendinning, Coleman, 1992). These adults are very essential for young people; because of commitments parents can't always provide the appropriate amount of attention.

Non-parental adults volunteer their time to familiar organizations. It could be a church or a youth community organization such as 4-H or a school. Knowing about the organization, structure and contacts saves time for the non-parental adult.

Youth interact with non-parental adults differently from their parents in a variety of ways. Youth have a tendency to listen more closely to another adult other than their parent. They even accept advice and accept challenges by non-parental adults.

Characteristics of Non-Parental Adults

Non-parental adults in community organizations play an important role with youth. Studies done with 4-H youth show adults in their 4-H clubs make them feel important (65%) and listen to them (64%). In addition, most youth reported that their volunteer leaders do pay attention to them (74%) (Perkins & Butterfield, 1999).

Some specific characteristics of non-parental adults who play this role include that they:

- Are good listeners,
- Are supporters, and
- Have a good sense of youth development.

Organizations that work with young people want a positive and successful experience for the youth they serve. Expecting and encouraging these characteristics in non-parental adults ensures they are creating the most positive experience possible for the young people. Many of them take time to check in with the non-parental adult and young person to get a better understanding of their time together.

Introducing Leadership

The presence of non-parental adult role models is significant for youth in discovering leadership. Non-parental adult role models extend opportunities and provide support and encouragement (Rishel, Sales, & Koeske, 2005). They observe opportunities and direct the information to the young person. With this kind of advocacy, youth have more opportunities to discover their leadership ability.

The adult can ensure that young leaders have the opportunity to begin to experience elementary levels of leadership. Their role will evolve from a fundamental level of support to a level of advancement as the youth grows. This is a natural evolution for the leadership team, as they both grow together and mature.

Non-parental adults have the ability to see opportunities for young people. Non-parental adults often encourage young people to enroll for a leadership experience. This type of encouragement helps a young person to become a participant in a leadership program. Knowing the young person's interest, non-parental

adults can encourage them to participate in leadership opportunities.

Non-parental adults challenge youth with the idea that they are leaders, encouraging the idea that youth have influence over what happens in their lives, their families, the school, the community, and beyond have the most success (Van Linden & Fertman, 1998).

Recommendations

The role of a non-parental adult is vital to the positive development of a young person. There is also a critical role for the non-parental adult to help young people experience leadership.

Some recommendations include the following.

1. Devote time to recruiting non-parental adults. Youth workers need to look beyond their normal audience. One-on-one conversation with individuals proves to be the best practice.
2. Devote time to training. Include in the training curriculum around leadership and helping youth find their leadership potential.
3. Develop a support plan. These non-parental adults will need your support and advice. Develop a plan to support these volunteers in their work.
4. Encourage young people to find a non-parental adult. Frequently, it can be someone they already know.

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