

# Mentoring Young People

IRENE M. WIELAWSKI



Robert Wood Johnson  
Foundation

Chapter Eight,  
excerpted from The Robert  
Wood Johnson Foundation  
Anthology:

**To Improve Health  
and Health Care  
Volume XI**



Edited by  
Stephen L. Isaacs and  
David C. Colby  
*Published 10/2007*

## *Editors' Introduction*

The importance of a caring adult in the life of a child cannot be overstated, yet one out of five young people—or 8.5 million kids—lacks a caring adult presence in his or her life.<sup>1</sup> Ideally, that adult is a parent or close relative, but in many cases that caring adult is not a family member, but a mentor. That mentor may be a teacher at school, a staff member at a Boys and Girls Club, a coach from a Police Activities League team, a volunteer from a program such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, or a neighborhood friend. Where a mentor comes from is not critical. What *is* critical is that a child has an adult in his or her life who can provide guidance, values, stability, and love.

Although mentoring has never been a high priority of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Foundation has, nonetheless, invested more than \$29 million to support it since 1989. Those investments have taken a variety of forms. They include research to better understand the concept of positive youth development and to explore the factors that lead children living in disadvantaged, often dangerous, circumstances to tap their underlying resiliency and to thrive. Mainly, however, they include programs that test different approaches to bringing caring adults into the lives of at-risk children—from volunteer and paid mentors to after-school sports programs.

In this chapter, Irene Wielawski examines both the research on mentoring and the Foundation-funded programs to encourage it. Wielawski, a frequent contributor to the *Anthology* series, is an award-winning health care journalist. She has been a medical writer for the *Providence Journal-Bulletin* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

<sup>1</sup> America's Promise Alliance. *Every Child, Every Promise*.  
([www.americaspromise.org/uploadedFiles/AmericasPromiseAlliance/Every\\_Child\\_Every\\_Promise/ECEP\\_Reports\\_-\\_JPEG/ECEP%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf](http://www.americaspromise.org/uploadedFiles/AmericasPromiseAlliance/Every_Child_Every_Promise/ECEP_Reports_-_JPEG/ECEP%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf))

---

Look at the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* from September 24, 2006. You'll see a photo of nine men and women—young and old—posing on a football field. Everyone is looking straight at the camera, but the viewer's eye is drawn to the young man in a red football jersey in the background. He is Michael Oher, star left tackle for the University of Mississippi and the subject of the article, standing straddle-legged and impassive, helmet in hand, in the classic pose of a gridiron superstar.

But what are all these other people doing in the photo? There's a cheerleader, a young boy in a red Ole Miss T-shirt, a mom type, and some men. The hint of what the article will reveal lies in a cross-hatch of hand-drawn arrows leading from Oher to everyone else, then meandering among them before arching back to Oher.

If the emerging health field concerned with the functional well-being of children were reduced to a pictograph, this would be the tell-all image—a diagram of the critically important relationships with adults and peers that help children grow into confident, ethical, and socially competent people.

The accompanying article details how everyone in the cover photo contributed to the rescue of Oher, the neglected and often homeless child of a murdered father and a crack-addicted mother.<sup>1</sup> The circumstances of his early life are not unique. What makes Oher's story newsworthy is his astonishing trajectory from street urchin who barely knew what it was to sleep in a bed to multi-million-dollar pro football prospect.

Sadly, most children born into extreme poverty and whipsawed by family turmoil don't get rescued. The statistics on these children—called “disadvantaged” by social scientists—are grim. Many don't finish high school, and significant numbers of them end up in the juvenile justice system. Statistically, they're at greater risk for substance abuse and early pregnancy. Experts say they are more likely to die young, victims of violence, drug overdose, or accident.

It's a bleak picture, but not hopeless. Within this population of children are some who find their way out of the mayhem and go on to lead stable and productive lives. How do they do it? Interested in this question, a handful of social scientists began to study these children in the early 1990s—to identify factors that helped them succeed, rather than to pursue the traditional inquiry into why children fail. Slowly they began to identify characteristics—called protective factors—that give children added resiliency in the face of adversity. Intelligence is one of these factors; children of higher than average intellectual ability, researchers say, are better able to navigate harmful environments while also reaping valuable psychic benefits from school success. Another protective factor is having positive and caring relationships with adults.

The research underpinning these theories is still relatively new. But it is the foundation of an emerging field called *positive youth development*, which seeks to buttress children's natural resiliency and, especially during the adolescent years, help them steer clear of alcohol and drug abuse, truancy, criminal behavior, and early pregnancy.<sup>2</sup> Between 1997 and 2000, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

supported the research of the Columbia University professor Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and her colleagues into youth-development programs and their effectiveness in reducing risky behavior.<sup>3</sup> This emphasis on the prevention of unhealthy choices captured the interest of RWJF, which in recent years has funded a number of experiments to improve options for disadvantaged children.

Two of these experiments—Friends of the Children and the After School Project—illustrate opposite ends of a broad range of initiatives to improve the social health of children. Friends of the Children is an intensive, long-term mentoring program that works one-on-one with youngsters from kindergarten through high school. Founded in Portland, Oregon, in 1993, it is the brainchild of a local entrepreneur and philanthropist whose commitment—and practical understanding of the needs of disadvantaged children—stems from his own bleak childhood. The After School Project sought to embed positive youth development principles into existing public, private, paid, and volunteer after-school programs in three cities. Acting in a less direct manner than Friends of the Children, the After School Project funded intermediaries whose task was to organize the disparate groups and programs focused on after-school activities into a more coherent and durable system.

Before delving into the details of these initiatives, it is worth stepping back and taking a look at how a foundation dedicated to improving health and health care comes to connect its mission to community-based programs working to give poor kids a chance to swing a bat in Little League, make pancakes in cooking classes, and spend an afternoon feeding animals at the petting zoo.

---

### A New Take on Children's Health

The field of positive youth development sits under a very big tent. Its fundamental tenet—that children need guidance and support to grow into healthy adults—touches just about every unit of society: families, schools, police and other municipal services, and numerous social welfare agencies.

Also involved is a wide array of community and specialized organizations, including acknowledged pillars in the youth service field such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, the Police Activities League, 4-H, and scouting. But experts believe that even organizations as esteemed as these can improve their programs—especially for disadvantaged children—by incorporating findings on youth development research.<sup>4</sup> The conviction rests mostly on theory; how to prove effectiveness continues to challenge the field.<sup>5</sup> Long-range measures include the usual benchmarks of success with at-risk youth: improved high school graduation rates, fewer teen pregnancies, and reduced juvenile substance abuse and crime. A few studies have run long enough to demonstrate that helping disadvantaged children improve interpersonal skills and emotional control during elementary school results in better academic performance and a smoother transition to adulthood.<sup>6</sup> But because the research is still new, virtually every strategy that flows from it provokes debate.

“Even among experts in the field—be they researchers or practitioners—there is no agreed-upon definition of positive youth development,” Renée Wilson-Simmons, adolescent health expert and senior associate with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, writes in a comprehensive report on the field that was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.<sup>7</sup> The closest thing to consensus,

according to Wilson-Simmons, is “increasing clarity” about what children need for healthy development, including the following:

- Structured settings;
- Physical and psychological safety;
- Friends;
- Positive relationships with adults who may also be role models;
- Opportunities to build skills.

In an ideal world, loving parents lay this groundwork for their children, exposing them to books, music and educational toys, taking them to parks and museums, and inviting other children over to play. They have the maturity and the knowledge to leaven discipline with encouragement so youngsters can grow in competence and confidence. Good schools with dedicated teachers complement the work of such parents, creating a smooth path to adulthood. But how likely is such a scenario in today’s world? Demographic studies show rising numbers of single-parent households, and even in two-parent households the norm today is two working parents. The result is an estimated five to 15 million children in the United States who return from school to homes with no adult supervision for extended periods of time, according to the federal Department of Education.<sup>8</sup>

“We have to acknowledge that family structure is changing,” says Floyd Morris, a former senior program officer at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, who helped develop its youth intervention portfolio. This structural change in families has led to exponential growth in after-school programs, daycare, and other substitutes for the ideal world just sketched. “It goes to the issue of how do we care for our kids in the 21st century, and how do we transfer our values to the next generation?” Morris says.

The Foundation’s initial interest in positive youth development theory stemmed from concern about the toll on adolescents from accidental injury, pregnancy, and substance abuse, as well as corollaries to these behavioral health risks of school failure and underemployment. Studies also showed that substance abuse in the teenage years that leads to addiction often is a precursor to criminal activity, according to Kristin Schubert, a program officer at the Foundation, who supervises several youth intervention experiments.

Morris now heads *Children’s Futures: Improving Health and Development Outcomes for Children in Trenton, N.J.*, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded program that is working to improve infant and toddler health in Trenton, New Jersey. He recalls growing interest at the Foundation in getting services to children before they succumbed to alcohol or drug addiction or fell so far behind in school that dropping out seemed their only option. “We were looking at various studies that had been done around preventing substance use, violence, and those kinds of issues. One of the pieces of information we kept coming across was this notion that children who were disadvantaged were disconnected from a sufficient number of adults who could guide them through difficult passages and help them make the right choices.”

A number of Foundation initiatives have incorporated this emerging research:

- A \$14-million program called *Free to Grow: Head Start Partnerships to Promote Substance-Free Communities*, which ran from 1992 to 2006, aimed at improving conditions in neighborhoods and strengthening the families of Head Start preschoolers so they might build the resilience necessary to steer clear of drugs and alcohol in their teen years.<sup>9</sup>
- The *Urban Health Initiative: Working to Ensure the Health and Safety of Children* (1995–2006, \$60 million) sought to have a measurable impact on children’s health in five cities by reducing substance abuse, smoking, street and domestic violence, teen pregnancy, infant mortality, and sexually transmitted disease. Mentoring and after-school programs were common threads in the projects undertaken in the five cities.<sup>10</sup>
- *Reclaiming Futures: Communities Helping Teens Overcome Drugs, Alcohol and Crime* (1999–2011, \$27 million) focuses on young people who were already in trouble with alcohol or drugs—and the law. The program seeks to coordinate efforts by the juvenile justice system—police, juvenile courts, detention centers—and community-based treatment and support programs to comprehensively address the needs of substance-abusing youthful offenders.
- Best Friends (1990–2003, \$2.18 million) worked with girls in grades six through 12 to discourage them from premarital intercourse, smoking, drinking, and drug abuse. The program also had a mentoring component: participating students were asked to choose a female teacher with whom they could talk about personal matters.<sup>11</sup>
- The Experience Corps (2001–2007, \$6.8 million), which the Foundation helped to expand from five to 19 participating cities, was devoted exclusively to mentoring. The program paired elementary school children with volunteer senior citizen mentors. The idea was to harness the talent and experience of older Americans who also had sufficient time to work one-on-one with children in need of both academic and social or emotional support. Experience Corps volunteers also worked closely with school officials and parents to develop before- and after-school enrichment programs. Those who contributed at least 15 hours a week received a stipend of \$100 to \$200 a month, depending on the locale.

The Experience Corps was the Foundation’s first experiment with monetary incentives provided to volunteer mentors. It paved the way for the Foundation’s investment in Friends of the Children, a mentoring program that uses salaried, full-time professional mentors who are assigned to children for the duration of their school years. Foundation Senior Program Officer Judith Stavisky says the model interested Foundation staff members because of the unusual approach toward positive youth development and its early track record of success in helping disadvantaged children to succeed in school and stay away from crime, alcohol, drugs, early parenting, and other threats during the volatile adolescent years. “The single most important factor that fosters resiliency in children is a consistent, long-term relationship with an adult,” Stavisky says. “By paying someone a salary comparable to school teachers in a community, you attract individuals who are willing to commit to a position that provides both satisfaction and an income.”

---

## Friends of the Children

Duncan Campbell, 63, strolls into the lobby of the Harvard Club on 43rd Street in New York City with the rolling gait of an athlete with creaky knees. In fact, Campbell worked his knees hard as a youth growing up in Portland, Oregon, competing for a berth in every sport he could squeeze into his high school schedule, then playing for YMCA and Boys Club teams in the evening. It was

Campbell's way of avoiding the scene at home: his parents drunk to the point of incoherence, the house reeking of cigarette smoke and booze.

Campbell is at the Harvard Club to talk about the youth services program he founded called Friends of the Children. The setting for this conversation is as improbable as the stage Michael Oher now occupies at the University of Mississippi as one of pro football's hottest prospects. Campbell says his earliest memories are of long nights in taverns, wandering among the patrons while his parents tossed back drinks until closing time. Later, when the Oregon legislature barred minors from taverns, he stayed in the family car until his parents were ready to go home. A successful entrepreneur today, Campbell says he nevertheless remembers the fear and loneliness of his early years, his envy of children whose moms smiled and made dinner, and, most of all, his yearning for someone to talk to.

"There were police and bill collectors at the house all the time; my father was sent to prison twice," Campbell recalls. "We didn't ever have a conversation. I think we went to the beach once. I used to have to take care of him at night. He'd be drunk and say, 'Oh, you'll understand when you get older.'"

In time, Campbell did understand, but not in the way his father implied. The memories of his childhood led, he says, to a personal vow: to change at least one child's life "in reality, not just talk about it."

The result is Friends of the Children, an innovative mentoring program now being replicated nationally with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Based in Portland, Oregon, Friends currently has chapters in Boston; Cincinnati; King County (Seattle), Washington; Klamath Falls, Oregon; New York City; and San Francisco. A two-and-half-year, \$1-million grant authorized by the Foundation in July 2005 and running through January 2008 is helping the program strengthen national oversight and quality control, and explore ways to reduce costs per child, currently averaging \$9,000 annually.

The cost issue arises from the program's most noteworthy aspect: the use of highly trained mentors who commit to their assigned children for up to 12 years and earn salaries comparable to teachers' or social workers' pay in the local community. The experience so far, according to program officials, is that mentors average four to six years in the job. Hiring is selective and training is rigorous. Mentors are supervised and supported in their challenging and somewhat solitary work through weekly staff workshops and educational forums.

Mentors generally have eight children assigned to them. There are also shared activities among mentors so that when a mentor leaves the program, his or her children are reassigned to another mentor already acquainted with the child. This ensures that children have a mentor until they graduate from high school. Job requirements include spending at least four hours a week with each child, helping him or her work toward grade-level academic performance, and compiling enriching and challenging experiences in line with the child's interests. Children are selected for participation in

Friends in kindergarten or first grade, with parental approval. Getting children involved early in their schooling reflects the program's core tenet that academic success and attendant emotional and psychic rewards—self-confidence, goal development, hope for the future—are critical to disadvantaged children's long-term prospects. The program has performance goals, but they are set to be within reach of the youngsters selected for participation. Intermediate goals include:

- Improved social behavior and emotional control, and progress toward positive relationships with adults, peers, and community;
- No substance abuse;
- Academic progress, including improvements in attendance, classroom behavior, and reading, math, and computer proficiency;
- Appropriate health care, both physical and mental.

Overall goals for children graduating from the program are:

- High school diploma (preferred) or GED;
- No involvement in the juvenile justice system;
- No early parenting.

Selecting children for participation in Friends is a rigorous process—and not for the softhearted. Indeed, the program hews closely to the research literature on resilience, looking to invest in children with innate tools to turn their lives around. Campbell shorthands the methodology by describing the target group as kindergartners testing between 17 and 31 on standardized tests with a hypothetical scale of 100. The reasoning is this: those scoring above 31 already are succeeding; those below 17 have too many learning and social deficits to benefit from Friends, and also are likely to be picked up by school-funded special education programs. The children Friends looks for have the potential to achieve in spite of severely handicapping backgrounds. Friends hopes to get them to 60; some have soared to 90.

The methodology of selection hews closely to the research on resiliency, according to Catherine Beckett, Friends' national program director. Each candidate undergoes up to six weeks of evaluation in partnership with school officials to determine both the "risk factors" confronting the child (including poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, or substance abuse in the home, to name a few) as well as the child's capacity in the form of "protective factors" (including high IQ, strong relational skills, extended family support, and so on) to meet program goals. Because success rests so heavily on the bond between mentor and child, children with conditions that hinder the development of relationships are not accepted, according to Beckett. These conditions include autism, psychosis, fetal alcohol syndrome, mental retardation (IQ below 75), and attachment disorders.

Results from Portland, where the program has the longest track record, are impressive. (Because other sites started later and are still several years from graduating their first class, this discussion focuses on the experience of Friends' Portland chapter, which has been in operation since 1993.) Of 272 boys and girls participating in Friends' Portland chapter in the 2005–2006 school year, 92 percent steered

clear of the juvenile justice system and only one became pregnant (61 percent of the children in Friends' Portland chapter were born of teenage mothers). In 2006 36 of 42 students participating in the Friends program received high school diplomas or GEDs, and 14 are pursuing college. In total, 66 young people have graduated from the Friends program. Eighty percent have graduated from high school or earned a GED; 68 percent were the first in their families to do so, and 40 percent have continued on to postgraduate education.

School officials in Portland testify to turnarounds in youngsters from tough backgrounds. The children are all poor, some from homes with troubled or non-English-speaking parents, others from no home at all but shifting between relatives and foster parents. They typically arrive in kindergarten unprepared to sit still, take direction, and get along with peers. The attention they need is more than teachers can give in the classroom, resulting in school and social failure and unrealized potential.

"I remember one boy, a second-grader, sent to my office repeatedly who was so hostile—literally snarling," recalls John Horn, an area director for Portland Public Schools and former principal of Portland's Kelly Elementary School, where about 80 percent of the children are poor enough to qualify for the federal school lunch program. "This boy got assigned to a Friend, and I just watched him open up, learn how to handle situations, learn how to manage himself. It was amazing."

Getting some of these children to open up requires dogged resolve, mentors report. The job can be emotionally taxing—a major reason that Friends are paid professionals as opposed to volunteers, the customary workforce in mentoring programs.

"We had one child who wouldn't even talk to his Friend for two years," says Beckett. "Now their relationship is amazing."

Joe Bergen, the program director for the Portland chapter of Friends, who has been a Friend to several youngsters, recalls one of the first boys he mentored. The child had been physically and emotionally abused by his alcoholic father, and by the time he reached school age already had a deep reservoir of rage and mistrust. "He was really good at soccer but he could never finish a soccer game, because he'd blow up over something and start a fight," Bergen says. "Eventually, he was kicked off every team; his inability to control his emotions was ruining any chance of playing the sport he loved."

"I kept saying, 'I believe in you, you can do this!' When you show a child interest and stick by them and don't walk away even when they're goading you, there is a spirit that takes root and becomes infectious," Bergen says. "This boy now is proving to himself that he can do it. He's in sixth grade and playing on a soccer team and managing to stay in the game. His home life is still difficult—the family was recently evicted—and he may never have the tools to go to college, but that doesn't mean the program hasn't made a difference in his life." The confidence this boy gained through success in soccer crossed over into his school performance, according to Bergen, so much so that he now reads at grade level and gets along better with classmates and teachers.



Rachael Langtry, 33, one of the program's first Friends, remembers mistakes she made in her first years, trying to steer the children to her choices—what to eat, how to spend free time—rather than work toward their own. Now a Friends team leader and bolstered by an intensive training program, Langtry helps new mentors avoid similar mistakes—as well as burnout. Friends learn many painful details about their charges' home lives—conditions they can't change and are required to steer clear of. The Friends job description is more precise today than it was when Langtry signed on 13 years ago. It is to be a steadfast friend, as well as a guide to a larger world than most children in the program would otherwise know. Visits to the public library are a staple activity. So are field trips, hikes, cookouts with other Friends, and educational excursions as mundane as riding the public transit system so the children can learn how to get places safely on their own.

"The job is to walk alongside the child, be consistent, show up—this is really key for these kids," Langtry says.

So it was for Briita Vincent, one of Langtry's first assignments, now a biology major at Portland State University. "I was very shy when I was little," says Vincent, a composed, dark-eyed young woman of 20. "School terrified me, and I cried all the time. I didn't know how to interact with other kids. Sometimes I'd lash out, sometimes I'd hide—literally under the desk."

The only child of a single mother with substance-abuse problems, Vincent says she was often lonely at home, and sought solace in books. "It was really good to have someone in my life like Rachael who could give me good advice. She was always very respectful in the way she communicated with me, and she was also a safe person, really careful about having me buckle up in the car, stuff like that."

Vincent's career goal is to be a zookeeper at the Oregon Zoo in Portland. She's paying for her education with a combination of federal Pell grants, a Friends of the Children scholarship, and earnings from two part-time jobs. She stays in touch with her mother by phone, but says they don't see each other much. Vincent laughs ruefully when asked how she came to be interested in animal care.

"Probably my upbringing," she deadpans. "Our house was really small—it had only one bedroom—and there was a period where we had 27 cats and three dogs living with us."

Then she tackles the question in earnest: "When I was in eighth grade, I got into an internship program at the Portland zoo called Zoo Teen. Rachael told me about it. She knew I loved animals, and we were talking about what I could do over the summer. You had to apply for the internship, but I had no idea how to do that or what to say in an interview or anything. Rachael was really calm and encouraging about it. We practiced interview questions, and she got me to think about what teachers would give me a good recommendation. She got me to the interview, too."

"I loved that job," Vincent says. "We took care of the petting zoo animals and the pygmy goats in the Africa area. The petting zoo had ducks, bunnies, owls, lizards, and snakes, and we cleaned out their cages and made sure they had water and the right kind of food. That summer was the happiest time of my life."

---

**The After School Project**

The concept of scale is big in philanthropy today. Borrowed from economics and the high-tech field, scale in health and social philanthropy generally refers to experiments that have the potential to have an impact on a large number of people in a geographic region (compared with a small group of individuals in a demonstration project) or to be replicated in a great many sites throughout the country. It often refers to a program that could be picked up and funded by the government.

Testing the “scalability” of positive youth development theory was a driving force behind the Foundation’s \$16.9 million investment from 1999 to mid-2006 in *After School: Connecting Children at Risk With Responsible Adults to Help Reduce Youth Substance Abuse and Other Health-Compromising Behaviors*. Authorized as a demonstration project, After School set out to test whether the fractured landscape of urban programs covering out-of-school time could be organized around positive youth development principles so as to reduce youth substance abuse and other harmful behavior. The positive youth development goal that After School embraced was to connect disadvantaged youngsters with caring, responsible adults. But how to find these people, train them, and put them together with needy kids served by so many different programs?

“We saw this sort of multiheaded base of the schools, community organizations, city human services agencies, church-based and other kinds of programs serving kids,” says Carol Glazer, a New York City-based management consultant who served as After School’s national program director. “Then there was the continuum of small grassroots projects up to the big national franchise programs like the Boys Club and Big Brothers Big Sisters. Then you add the parks departments, the libraries, and ultimately the police for children who have nothing else....”

Designing the “scalability” mechanism was the central challenge, according to Glazer. To bring the program to a big enough scale, the Foundation’s explicit charge to cities undertaking the experiment was to connect “more than 50 percent” of schoolchildren living in underserved urban neighborhoods with responsible adults in structured activities after school, on weekends, and during vacations. Unlike Friends of the Children, After School provided no direct services to children, nor did it control the staff of the programs where positive youth development theory was to be implemented. Its mission simply—or not so simply—was to get everyone armed with youth development research and marching in the same direction. In other words: communicate, listen, learn, convene, negotiate, train, and communicate some more. To accomplish this, After School supported the development of coordinating infrastructures—the exact form differing from site to site—through which public and private youth organizations could learn how to enrich their programs, find collaborative partners in their field or neighborhood, and more efficiently reach at-risk schoolchildren. A specific goal of After School was to increase the participation in existing programs of youngsters from poor neighborhoods.

The Foundation selected three sites for comprehensive support: the San Francisco Bay Area, Chicago, and Boston. Two other sites, Milwaukee and San Jose, received limited technical assistance but no core funding.

The Bay Area’s intermediary organization is called Team-Up for Youth. Serving San Francisco and Alameda counties, Team-Up helps to strengthen the quality of youth sports programs, with a goal of

getting more low-income children to participate. Specifically, Team-Up provides grants and technical assistance to community-based sports organizations and offers training to foster a youth development focus in coaches and other staff. It also helps broker collaboration between public and private sector youth organizations. One effort, for example, led to a principal's opening up school space for a community-run summer sports program.

Chicago's intermediary organization is called After School Matters. It cultivates apprenticeship opportunities for high school students to enable them to work alongside professionals in arts, sports, technology, and communications. The program is structured as a public-private partnership and, in each participating neighborhood, involves a "community cluster" consisting of the local high school, public library and public recreational center. In addition to apprenticeships, After School Matters also organizes recreational clubs with appealing activities for public high school youths. The program increased the number of clusters from six to 35 and demonstrated that children who participated in apprenticeships or club activities had better school attendance.<sup>12</sup>

Boston's intermediary organization today is called Boston After-School & Beyond. Its history illustrates the time and effort needed to pull everyone under a single, conceptual tent. Only in 2004 was it possible to merge the Foundation-funded organization—originally called Boston's After-School for All Partnership—with a pre-existing effort by the city to address the needs of inner-city children, called the Mayor's 2:00-to-6:00 After-School Initiative. This finally created the public-private partnership necessary to pursue program goals, which are to expand after-school and summer opportunities in inner-city neighborhoods, improve the quality of programs citywide, and ensure adequate funding to support quality.

Many reports have been written about the After School Project, including an evaluation by Axiom Resource Management, Inc., of Falls Church, Virginia, which found the public-private partnership model to be an effective way to get the most out of existing resources, while also giving the After School project an avenue to influence public policy. And though building the organizational infrastructure in each city was a lengthy process that did not immediately yield measurable impact on youth, the evaluation concluded that this collaborative and evolutionary approach was likely to be more durable in the long run than if the After School sites were required to adhere to an inflexible design model.<sup>13</sup>

The goal here is not to duplicate these analyses, but to examine the difficulty of rescuing, en masse, children born into poverty. A tiny slice of the undertaking in Boston—bringing volunteer coaches on board with positive youth development theory—illustrates the complexity of achieving gains with disadvantaged youth on the scale of the After School Project.

The point man in Boston for its network of sports programs is Chris Lynch, a soft-spoken former elementary school teacher, and a coach and athlete in his own right. Lynch came to his current challenge from a more one-on-one experience with the potential of sports to help disadvantaged children build confidence and discipline, get healthy exercise, and improve school performance. In 1997 he began working at a youth development program in Boston called SquashBusters that a

friend, Greg Zaff, had organized the previous year. His duties that first year weren't so different from a Friend's: mentoring, encouraging, and setting and enforcing standards of sportsmanship. Lynch recalls banging on doors in some of the city's toughest neighborhoods simply to make the point to one of his young players that skipping practice and letting down your teammates was not OK. From a pilot program with 24 middle school youngsters eager to whack a hard little ball around a four-walled court, SquashBusters today serves about 100 children in Boston and neighboring Cambridge, and it has inspired similar programs in New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, Washington and San Diego.

However, Lynch's current job as head of the Boston Youth Sports Initiative—a division of Boston After School & Beyond—has exponentially more moving parts. No one even has an accurate count of all the sports programs in Boston. And the issues the project addresses go well beyond sports. Mariel Gonzales, Boston After School & Beyond's chief operating officer, offers the example of a coalition partner who organized business leaders to create a work-study program for teenagers at risk for dropping out of school. Belatedly, they discovered that the children selected for the program lacked the social skills necessary to function in an office setting, leading to a proposal that Boston After School & Beyond organize a remedial junior umpiring program so the teens could learn to mediate, communicate decisions, and handle authority. This potential solution was not orchestrated by the program's leaders so much as it was placed on the table for discussion in hopes that it would find a place on some organization's program agenda. "Everything we do is around network theory," says Lynch. "The idea is to get everyone to work together as a network to achieve their program's goals in the context of quality youth programming."

Lynch also is working on getting coaches—most of them volunteers—to undergo training in sports-based youth development, also called *character-based sports*. Along with teaching kids basic skills and how to win, this coaching model places emphasis on physical and emotional safety and age-appropriate instruction. In other words, a six-year-old T-baller should not be drilled like a varsity pitcher. But how much can you load on a volunteer coach? For the most part, these are people with jobs and families who, Lynch says, already have made "a huge commitment of personal time" to run practices, organize games, assemble equipment, arrange carpools, set schedules, communicate with parents, and handle innumerable other details. Lynch asks rhetorically, "Do we now require training as a condition for getting a sports league permit in order to foster positive youth development?"

Lynch's answer at this early stage of Boston After School & Beyond's consensus-building effort is a resounding "No." The immediate effect, he believes, would be to drive some leagues out of business—no boon to the children now participating. Instead, Lynch is exploring a joint venture with Boston University's Institute for Athletic Coach Education whereby interested coaches might be sponsored for training so they, in turn, can pass the lessons on to fellow coaches.

"The issue is scale and intensity of training," Lynch says. "At the moment, everyone's doing things differently and everyone's reinventing the wheel. Moving beyond that is a long-term effort. We're still in the stage of finding out what's out there in terms of resources."

---

**Conclusion**

The plight of disadvantaged children has long been a rallying cry for social reformers. The novelist Charles Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist* in 1837 in part to lay bare the hypocrisy of England's 1834 Poor Law, which consigned those who couldn't support themselves to workhouses and, under the guise of social charity, brutally exploited their children for cheap labor. In this century, advocates for children orphaned by the unchecked spread of AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa have helped galvanize international medical relief efforts.

In the United States, well-established and popular government aid programs for disadvantaged children include family- and school-based nutrition supplements (WIC, food stamps, and school breakfast and lunch programs) and health care services through Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program. At the community level, many people participate as organizers, volunteers, and benefactors to sustain activities for local youth, including sports, art, music, tutoring, scouting, community service, and mentoring. Such grassroots efforts are complemented by established national programs, including scouts, Little League, Boys and Girls Clubs, and YMCAs.

Philanthropic organizations like the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation also are in the mix. They help sustain programs of proven value while supporting experiments like After School and Friends of the Children with the potential to be tomorrow's mainstays. An early initiative of the Foundation, for example, tested the feasibility of locating primary care clinics in schools serving children with no other source of medical care.<sup>14</sup> Twenty-five years later, school-based clinics have become commonplace. More recent investments by the Foundation in mentoring programs recognize disadvantaged children's emotional and psychological needs. The mentoring programs are grounded in the emerging science of human resiliency, which focuses on innate as well as external factors—called “protective”—that help people navigate adversity. The research is exciting to counselors, teachers, social workers, and others who work with children because it delineates a sturdier framework for rescuing disadvantaged youngsters than the intuitive good will behind so many ad hoc efforts. It also offers a new direction for policy—from one focused on remedying children's weaknesses to one that builds on their strengths. Hence, the titular umbrella under which advocates have organized: positive youth development.

But the field is still new. There are few long-term studies to document cause and effect changes in the trajectory of children's lives from either sustained, one-on-one interventions like Friends of the Children or broad community embrace of positive youth development theory as in After School. A handful of studies have looked at young adults who at some point in their school years participated in programs to help them steer clear of substance abuse and crime. None of these efforts comes close to the intensity of Friends of the Children; many are in-class or pull-out programs to help children build interpersonal and self-management skills. Some specifically aim to reduce substance abuse and crime in the teenage years through this type of emotional and psychological skill building. One such program is the Seattle Social Development Project, which works with children in 18 public elementary schools in various neighborhoods of Seattle. Through interviews with participants who had reached age 21, researchers found that the program had significant positive effects on school and work performance and mental health, but less impact on crime and substance abuse.<sup>15</sup>

There's also a dearth of information on which children are most likely to benefit, and no consensus on what constitutes success. The current measures—high school diploma and avoidance of crime and substance abuse—reflect traditional child welfare goals of reducing personal and social harm. However, those using resilience theory on a day-to-day basis—for example, the mentor cadre at Friends of the Children and After School's community outreach workers—emphasize subtler benchmarks of success such as self-confidence and self-respect, the ability to make and keep friends, and the capacity to trust others. Their comments call to mind the boy in Portland who learned to get through a soccer game without fighting—and only then began to get along and perform better in school. The path to this much-desired self-mastery remains more easily described by anecdote than science and provides evidence of the work still ahead for researchers. And, as Wilson-Simmons notes, even positive youth development experts have trouble agreeing on a common definition of their field.

The Foundation's investments in Friends of the Children and After School are consistent with its history of support for health-related youth programs, all of which aim to assist children trapped by harsh and potentially harmful circumstances beyond their control. With Friends of the Children and After School, the Foundation explicitly challenged the programs, albeit in different ways, to demonstrate the applicability of positive youth development theory on a scale sufficient to improve many lives at an affordable price. In the case of Friends of the Children, that means bringing down the cost per child, currently \$9,000 annually or more than \$100,000 by the time a participant graduates from high school. In After School, the challenge was to get more than half of school-aged youngsters living in poor urban neighborhoods to participate in activities through which they could build relationships with responsible adults.

Neither program has explicitly met those challenges—nor do their leaders entirely agree that these are appropriate litmus tests for success. For After School, the task of getting public and private sector youth services organizations to talk to one another and embrace the idea of joint planning was bigger than anyone expected, and this delayed enrollment outreach, participants say. At Friends, the pressure of funders to reduce costs per child has led its founder, Duncan Campbell, to issue a challenge of his own. Campbell wants funders to consider what he calls the “business case” for “value” investments in high-risk children to prevent the costly consequences of failure—up to \$60,000 a year for juvenile incarceration.<sup>16</sup>

The debate within and around Friends of the Children and After School underscores the important role of philanthropy in nurturing ideas with the potential to improve people's lives. At issue in these experiments was a largely untested social construct—resilience theory—in a new field called positive youth development that is still working to define itself. Intuitively, the emphasis on reaching children early in their schooling and playing to their strengths makes sense. But the logistics of doing that are tougher than anticipated—highlighting the need for more studies asking a broader range of questions to truly bring the field of positive youth development to scale.

---

Notes

1. Lewis M. "The Ballad of Big Mike." *New York Times Magazine*, Sept. 24, 2006.
2. Zimmerman P. *Building Intensive Relationships with At-Risk Children: The Research and Literature at a Glance*. Report funded by the Children's Institute of Oregon.
3. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Grant Results Report. *Youth Development Programs Hold Promise, Often Fall Short, 2003*. ([www.rwjf.org/portfolios/resources/grantsreport.jsp?filename=035504.htm&iad=131&gsa=5](http://www.rwjf.org/portfolios/resources/grantsreport.jsp?filename=035504.htm&iad=131&gsa=5))
4. Roth JL, et al. "Promoting Healthy Adolescence: Synthesis of Youth Development Program Evaluations." *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 8: 423–459, 1998.
5. Durlak JA and Weissberg RP. *The Impact of After-School Programs that Promote Personal and Social Skills*. Chicago: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2007.
6. Hawkins JD, et al. "Promoting Positive Adult Function Through Social Development Intervention in Childhood: Long-Term Effects from the Seattle Social Development Project." *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, 159(5): 469, 2005.
7. Wilson-Simmons R. *Positive Youth Development: An Examination of the Field*. Prepared for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, May 2006. ([www.rwjf.org/files/publications/other/PYDTopicSummary.pdf?gsa=1](http://www.rwjf.org/files/publications/other/PYDTopicSummary.pdf?gsa=1))
8. U.S. Department of Education. *After School Programs: Keeping Children Safe and Smart, 2000*. ([www.ed.gov/pubs/afterschool/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/pubs/afterschool/index.html))
9. Wielawski I. "Free to Grow." In *To Improve Health and Health Care, Vol. IX: The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Anthology*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006.
10. See Chapter Seven in this volume.
11. See Chapter Three in this volume.
12. Conwal Division of Axiom Resource Management, Inc. *Final Evaluation Report of the After School Project, 2006*.
13. Ibid. See also Proscio T. *Making the Most of the Day: The Final Report of the After School Project, 2006*. ([www.theafterschoolproject.org/RepoProg-list0.html](http://www.theafterschoolproject.org/RepoProg-list0.html))
14. Wielawski I. "The Local Initiative Funding Partners Program." In *To Improve Health and Health Care 2000: The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Anthology*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.
15. Hawkins JD, et al., 2005.
16. Tyler JL, Zeidenberg J and Lotke E. *Cost-Effective Corrections: The Fiscal Architecture of Rational Justice Systems*. Washington: The Justice Policy Institute, 2006.