A Case Study of the Effects of Parenting Practices on Positive Youth Development

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Systems theories can be used to describe the complex dynamics that influence a young person's development. These theories are based on the concept that individuals do not develop in isolation, but rather through transactional interactions with their environment (Cox & Paley, 1997). Furthermore, a person's development cannot be understood outside of the context they exist (Cox & Paley, 1997). An example of a systems theory is the bioecological model of human development which defines multiple levels of interactions that impact the individual (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). These levels include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) describe the microsystem as those direct proximal interactions with the developing individual, which would include the family.

Parents are important members of a child's microsystem and their decisions can have both short and long-term impacts on a young person's development. Bradley and Caldwell (1995) proposed a framework to understand the impact that parents have on their children's development. The authors identified five basic investments that parents make including safety/sustenance, stimulation, socioemotional support, surveillance, and structure. Safety and sustenance encompass the physical well-being of the young person by providing such things as shelter and nutrients (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004). Stimulation investments involves the choices in providing environments that benefit development (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004). This could include choices surrounding which toys are available to the child and which youth programs the child is enrolled. Bradley and Corwyn (2004) describe socioemotional support as the efforts towards responding to the child's emotional needs. An important aspect of this investment is the time and energy spent in helping children develop their emotional regulation skills (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004). Surveillance encompasses the level and types of supervision parents give their

children (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004). Finally, structural investments comprise of the decisions around routine and the needs to balance the other four areas of investments (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004).

Importantly, the youth development leader should utilize the strengths in a young person's family to help encourage positive youth development. In fact, integrating family, school and community efforts is one of the eight essential features of positive youth development programs identified by Eccles and Gootman (2002). This paper will analyze the positive youth development and family situation of one young person, Joey (name changed for confidentiality), highlighting the parenting practices that have influenced his development. In addition, several recommendations for youth development leaders concerning supporting and partnering with parents will be discussed.

Joey's History and Family Dynamics

Joey is a 20-year-old white male. An important factor in Joey's history includes his entrance into kinship care. Joey was originally placed in foster care when he was in elementary school due to abuse and neglect. He was quickly returned to the care of his mother. Later, when he was 15-years old he entered kinship care, a form of foster care, due to his mother's addiction relapse. He was placed with his grandparents for eight months before being permanently placed with his aunt, whom he still lives today. He currently receives support from his aunt, uncle, and grandparents. Before entering kinship care, Joey was doing poorly in school and he admits to experimenting with alcohol and marijuana. After being placed with his aunt, Joey began to do well in school and reports surrounding himself with more positive peers. He started participating in extra-curricular activities such as school clubs and community youth programs include The Mockingbird Society.

Joey's Positive Youth Development

Joey is a charismatic young person who enjoys hanging out with his friends. Together they play video and board games. Joey also has close connections with many of his family. Joey has his high-school diploma and no criminal history. Currently, Joey has 2 part-time jobs and is working towards returning to college. He hopes to have a career in the social service field. Joey likes advocating for others, especially with The Mockingbird Society. The Mockingbird Society is a non-profit advocacy organization that works with children, youth, and families to advocate for policies that will ensure that every child has a safe and stable home. Joey became involved in Mockingbird programming after being referred by a caseworker. His aunt also encouraged Joey to participate in Mockingbird activities and would provide reminders of meetings and transportation support. He has been participating in Mockingbird activities for over four years.

The positive youth development framework of the Five C's can be used to describe Joey's development. The Five C's of positive youth development include competence, character, connections, confidence, and contribution (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004). It is important to note that positive youth development is not a single end goal, but rather a natural process (Hamilton et al., 2004). When analyzing Joey in his youth development he is on a positive development trajectory. In the category of competence, Joey has the basic knowledge and skills to function in both his social and work environments. Critically, he knows strategies that help him gain new skillsets. Joey strives to do what is right and just which shows appropriate levels of character. His relationships with his family and friends show a strong degree of connections. Joey is also secure in his self-efficacy in most of the activities he participates which shows his confidence. Finally, his willingness to advocate for others and give back to the community highlights a positive trajectory in the contribution category.

Parenting Practices

Joey consistently states that his trajectory changed when he entered his aunt's household because of her parenting practices. She provided Joey with an authoritative style of parenting by giving him expectations, such as doing well in school, and helping him reason through and be successful in meeting those expectations. Authoritative parenting styles are associated with higher levels of positive youth development including higher levels of self-regulation (Hauser-Cram, Nugent, Thies, & Travers, 2014). His aunt ensured that Joey completed his homework, was enrolled in positive youth development programs (including Mockingbird), and that she always knew his whereabouts. In effect, his aunt provided all five basic parental investments identified by Bradley and Caldwell (1995). His aunt's household provided adequate safety and sustenance. There was food in the kitchen and the house was clean and absent of hazards. By enrolling him in positive youth programs she provided beneficial levels of stimulation. She made herself available to Joey to discuss what was going on in his life, helping him develop coping strategies. She invested significant time and energy in providing Joey socioemotional support. In addition, Joey was required to inform his aunt of where he was and had to keep curfew. This is example of appropriate levels of surveillance for a teenager. Finally, Joey's aunt provided a level of structure that he had previously not known. There were regular times scheduled for school, family, and friends. She met Joey's needs by balancing the investments in safety/sustenance, stimulation, socioemotional support, and surveillance. Joey repeatedly talks about how it was the structure that his aunt provided that made the difference in his life.

Recommendations for Youth Development Leaders

Joey's case is an example of the significance that parenting practices can have on the development of young people. Importantly, this knowledge can help youth development leaders

design and implement programming to benefit their participants. First, as evidenced by Joey's

case, increasing positive parenting practices can be beneficial even for individuals in older

adolescence. Therefore, youth programs that target pre-teens and teens should consider

including parent education and skill-building activities. An example of this would be a

workshop that encouraged parents and youth to come together and discuss supervision

expectations. This activity would provide multiple benefits including building stronger

relationships between the youth and their parents. The goal of the activity would be to support

parents in investing appropriately in the socioemotional support, stimulation, surveillance, and

structure of their pre-teen or teen.

Another takeaway for youth development leaders is the importance of the investments of

stimulation and structure for young people. As shown in the example of Joey, the efforts his

aunt put forth in providing a stimulating environment that had appropriate levels of structure had

a positive influence on Joey's development. Youth development leaders can work together to

ensure that there are a variety of programs available for the youth in their community. Just as

important, youth development leaders can help inform and educate parents about the

opportunities available to their children. Parents are the gatekeepers of the activities and

programs that their children participate. Helping educate parents about the available programs

and assisting with connecting parents and youth to beneficial programs is an important role for

the youth development leader. This can also help support parents to provide structure for their

children, by having a regular set of activities that the youth participates.

A final implication for youth development leaders is the need to understand the family

dynamics of the participants they serve. The youth's family structure and transitions between

different structures can have an impact on their developmental outcomes (Magnuson & Berger,

2009). It is necessary to understand that the adults that are providing the parenting practices may

not be the biological parents. Youth development leaders should be conscious of the population

they serve and use inclusive language when doing outreach to children and their families. An

example of this would be to use the term 'primary caretaker' instead of 'mother' or 'father.'

Youth development leaders should work to partner with all parent or parent-like figures in the

child's life.

Conclusion

Young people do not develop in isolation, rather they develop within their environment.

As such, youth development leaders need to be conscious of all the contexts that their

participants exist, which includes their home life and their interactions with their parents and

parent-like adults. The impacts of parenting can be seen through examining the case study of

Joey. Joey's trajectory moved towards positive development when he was exposed to the

positive parenting strategies of his aunt. Youth development leaders should support and partner

with parents and parent-like adults to increase the positive youth development of their

participants. This can be by including activities for the youth and parent to do together during

programming, referring families to different programs, and being inclusive to all significant

parental figures in the youth's life. In focusing on incorporating family efforts into

programming, youth development leaders are providing one of the essential components of

positive youth development contexts.

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