



# Building Caring Communities to Support Families

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## What Is a Community?

Communities, from a social perspective, are highly complex human systems that are shaped by the actions of their members in response to internal and external, tangible and intangible forces. A community is a melding of cultural, social, political, and economic systems, into a more or less cohesive structure. Some of the structure is codified in laws and regulations and some is held by the community as a tacit understanding of “how we do things.”

Set in a natural environment, over time the community creates a built environment to suit its collective values. It is often the built environment to which people point when describing a community, but in reality the built environment is a reflection of a deeper and more intangible essence that binds people together into a common identity, purpose, and culture. These three aspects—identity, purpose, and culture, all social constructs—form the essence of a community. The stronger the identity, purpose, and culture of a community, the more tightly knit the com-

munity will be. This essence is created through the relationships invented during the rich interplay of the collective/social and geographic or natural history of a place, the shared values of people, and how people live, work, and play together (Nozick, 1999).

Communities are always changing because the relationships among the people in them are always changing. People grow and develop, move in and out of communities, and are influenced by the changing world around them. The constant merging of beliefs, experiences, present conditions, and future desires for the community is constantly reshaping the ways community members live, work, and play together. People and how they work out their relationships with one another are what count in developing a strong sense of community.

## Why Do Families Need a Supportive Community?

Families and communities have a symbiotic relationship in that families, as part of the com-

munity, collectively create the cultural, social, political, and economic infrastructure of the community from which families draw invaluable support. Very much like their built environment, families construct a complex social and cultural system that makes their survival more likely and their lives easier.

In her book *Traits of a Healthy Family*, Delores Curran (1988, Harper Collins) shares findings from responses of 551 family practitioners as to traits most commonly found in families they considered healthy. Two of those traits, teaching respect for others and valuing service to others, indicates a recognition by families of the importance of community.

Parents teach respect for others and show the importance of service in the community by involving their family in community service and local family-oriented events. Volunteering at a soup kitchen or community benefit event or raking leaves for a neighbor can be family fun. These activities also teach values and help families connect to each other and the community.

Studies by the Search Institute have identified 40 concrete, positive experiences and qualities—“developmental assets”—that have a tremendous influence on helping young people to grow into healthy, caring individuals. “The asset framework includes everyone. Families, schools, neighborhoods, congregations and all organizations, institutions, and individuals in a community can play a role in building assets for youth” (Benson, 1997, p. 1). Specific developmental assets that indicate the importance of a supportive community include: developing caring neighborhoods with boundaries, fostering positive relationships with non-parent adults who are good role models, creating a caring school climate, molding a community that values youth and service to others, creating a safe place for kids to live, offering a variety of youth programs, cultivating positive peer influence, and promoting involvement in

the religious community. These developmental assets build youth who in turn contribute to healthy families, who construct lively communities, who produce developmental assets. It is a virtuous cycle.

Children at all ages need the positive encouraging relationships of three or more non-parent adults to fan “the hidden flames in kids that light their proverbial fire, get them excited, tap into their true passions, and energize them to reach their full potential”. Dr. Peter Benson of the Search Institute calls these hidden flames “sparks” in his book *Sparks . . . How Parents Can Help Ignite the Hidden Strengths of TEENAGERS* (2008). Every child needs a Sparks Team with his or her parents as Spark Team Captains. School and community members need to know each of their young people so well that they can nurture and benefit from each child’s spark (Benson, 2008).

Families need supportive communities to provide social ties, enhance health, teach values, and develop assets in children and youth. When living in a supportive community, a family can grow to its full potential and provide the best environment for children to grow into healthy, caring adults. And the act of bonding together in a community not only makes our physical and economic life possible in today’s world, it gives us the social interaction we need to produce optimum physical and mental health. A variety of studies over the years have shown that for health and well-being we need strong personal relationships and social ties with family and community (Seeman, 1996; Berkman, 1984; and Berkman and Syme, 1979).

### **What Are the Characteristics of a Caring Community?**

***Strong personal relationships.*** These include strong ties among family members, neighbors, schools, peers, youth workers, churches, family-serving agencies and organizations, and other

systems in the community. Strong relationships build cohesiveness and a sense of unconditional support within the community (Benson, 2008).

**Everyone is involved.** All ages of people must be involved to have a strong supportive community. In his book *Stopping At Every Lemonade Stand* (2001) James Vollbracht lists six “circles,” or layers, necessary to build a caring culture for families and kids. The layers include individuals, families, neighborhoods, communities, business and government, and elders.

**Common community values that are family focused.** Communities need to develop and maintain a consistent, ongoing, repeated message in support of families. They must be known for being committed to putting families first in all areas of the community. All parts of the community must consider the impact of their image and media message on families.

**Connectedness.** Connections provide pathways for information. These pathways begin within families and must then move to neighborhoods. Connections in neighborhoods are the building blocks of larger communities (Vollbracht, 2001, p. 73). Families need information to initiate actions that will revitalize their neighborhoods and communities.

**Families and youth are involved in community decision-making.** When community members are a part of the discussion and planning of what happens in a community, they will be motivated to become more involved in the building of community. Their motivation will inspire others and connectedness will grow. A sense of belonging, caring, support, and pride in their community will develop.

## How to Build a Caring, Supportive Community

Many creative steps can be taken to build caring, supportive communities. Parents may want to try one or more of the following:

**Build positive relationships.** Spend time together as a family. Share family meals together. Get to know your children’s friends and every family in your neighborhood. Volunteer for community activities and organizations. Host a block party or better yet bring people from your neighborhood together to organize a block party.

**Build a web of connectedness.** Invite your neighbors over for healthy snacks and lemonade on the porch. Introduce your neighbors to each other. Participate in community and neighborhood activities. Be active in your children’s school as a volunteer (Benson, 2008).

**Share positive stories.** When positive community stories are regularly shared, communities begin to include them in the core image of their community. Sharing positive stories can start a virtuous cycle of positive change.

**Cultivate a positive, consistent, ongoing, and repetitive message about families and youth in all parts of the community.** Work with organizations and media to use an “asset building” approach in their communication.

**Show families and kids that they are valued by their community.** Share your ideas with community leaders. Get involved on boards, committees, and commissions to be part of the community decision-making process. Create a “Celebrate the Family” week in your community.

**Cultivate intergenerational activities.** Volunteer at a nursing home. Help an elderly neighbor with tasks they need done.

**Plan time for your family to be together.** Look for free and low-cost family activities to attend. Ask community leaders to plan school, sports, and community activities so families can have evening meals together.

**Find safe places for your family to contact and build ties with other families.** Organize a family fun night at your children’s school. Host a neighborhood block party.

**Look for opportunities for your family to be involved in community service.** Volunteer to train a dog for the blind. Participate in community litter clean-up days.

**Seek out mentoring programs involving children, teens, parents, business, and civic groups.** Look for job shadowing programs. Sign up as a scout or 4-H youth leader, or coach a youth sports team.

**Educate yourself on community affairs and services available to families.** Find out where families find help with their various problems and concerns. Make a list and share it with friends and neighbors.

When these steps have been taken, you will begin to see an increase in your community's commitment to families. People will be engaged and involved. There will be greater commonality around community values. Old and new community traditions will become important and there will be a sense of community pride. You will have increased the level of caring in your community for supporting families.

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