

Chapter 10

Anchoring and Empowering Children: A Child's Right to Participation Within a Healthy Environment

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*"We are not the sources of problems;
we are the resources that are needed to solve them".*

Voices from the World's Children
Children's Forum 2002

Introduction

I begin this chapter with the question, has the USA done enough to anchor all children living in the USA to the relationships, experiences, and opportunities vital to empowering them with the capacities necessary to exert their right to participation? With an estimated 13 million children living in poverty (Faas & Cauthen, 2008), 1.3 million living in homelessness (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (NLCHP), 2007), 8.5 million without health insurance (National Center on Health Care (NCHC), 2009), 92,854 incarcerated males (OJJDP, 2008), and 25% not graduating from high school, (President Obama, 2009) the answer to this question appears to be a resounding no.

With the plight of so many children, we have an obligation to act and move toward permanent change. To date, 193 of our global counterparts have chosen to do this exactly by ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), which contains 39 substantive and interconnected articles meant to anchor and empower all children to exert their right to participation (Hart, Price-Cohen, Farrell-Erickson, & Flekkoy, 2001; UN General Comment no. 12, 2009 (GC-12, 2009c)). It is important to note that the USA (Somalia also has not ratified the CRC but intends to do so in the near future) remains the only industrialized country to stand in contempt of this international social and moral consensus (Bedard, 2007).

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Thus, this chapter explains the benefits associated with socially, spiritually, and psychologically anchoring children living in the USA to the relationships, experiences, and opportunities vital to promoting their right to participation. I do this by indentifying the substantive articles related to a child's right to participation, explaining the concepts of social, spiritual, and psychological anchoring, highlighting research conducted by the Search Institute which demonstrates the significant benefits of anchoring children, and conclude by calling for ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child by the USA.

Participation and the Evolving Capacities of a Child

While the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child's (CRC) principle of "participation" is best understood through an evaluation of the relation of the 39 substantive articles within the CRC as a whole, Article 12 is recognized as specifically addressing a child's right to participation (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment no. 12 (GC-12), 2009). Article 12 asserts that children be afforded opportunities to express themselves, verbally as well as nonverbally, and to voice opinions in matters relevant to them (Lansdown, 2005). However, while it is acknowledged that adults respect and consider the expressions and opinions of children, this does not equate to granting them every wish or request. Rather, parents as well as other adults are encouraged to consider the relevance of the topic, maturity level, and if the matter under consideration is in the "best interest of the child" (Hart, 2002; Articles 3 and 18). Similarly, Articles 13–15 and 31 grant *all* children the right to expression, thought and religion, association and assembly, and play.

Because a child's right to participation depends on social environments providing equal opportunities for participation (GC-12, 2009c), it is relevant to briefly highlight the CRC's principle of nondiscrimination. Article 2(1) asserts:

States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's, or his/her parent's, or legal guardian's race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.

Each of the aforementioned rights is vital to promoting a child's *evolving capacities* (Article 5; Lansdown, 2005). Evolving capacities refer to the "processes of maturation and learning whereby children progressively acquire knowledge, competencies and understanding, including acquiring understanding about their rights and about how they can best be realized" (p. 8, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment no. 7 (GC-7), 2005). The evolving capacities of a child are influenced by the extent to which they are socially, spiritually, and psychologically anchored to healthy relationships, experiences, and opportunities (Lansdown, 2005). As we see later in this chapter, the more children are anchored to the relationships, experiences, and opportunities vital to exerting their

right to participation, the more likely they are to thrive and be protected from risk. Thus, in accord with the theme of this text, child participation depends in large part on being raised in a socially healthy environment.

Social Anchoring

We turn now to an explanation of *social anchoring*. Social anchoring refers to grounding children in healthy families, other adult relationships, and communities (Garbarino, 1999). According to Melton (2005a), a leading child rights scholar in the USA, these social anchors are at the heart of the CRC (see preamble, articles 4, 18, 26, 28–29, 30, 31). As he explains, “individual rights (i.e., participation) lack meaning without social relatedness and social cohesion” (Melton, 2009). The family stands at the forefront of this assertion (GC-7, 2005; Melton, 1996).

Participation begins at birth when newborns and infants participate in reciprocal interactions in which their behavior appears to be indiscriminate but meaningful (Flekkoy & Kaufman, 1997; GC-7, 2005). For example, although they lack verbal ability, all infants, regardless of culture, communicate by engaging in survival behaviors meant to obtain responses from caregivers. The function of these interactions generally will lead to an attachment relationship which will predict healthy (or unhealthy) human development (Ainsworth, 1978; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005), consequently empowering them with the evolving capacities necessary for exerting their right to participation (GC-7, 2005).

Researchers have identified four attachment relationships influenced by the type of caregiving infants and children receive (*securely-attached*, *anxious-resistant*, *anxious-avoidant*, and *disorganized-disoriented*; Ainsworth, 1978; Main & Solomon, 1990). The most developmentally facilitative relationship is *securely-attached* – achieved through accepting sensitive and responsive caregiving. “Normal” infants who develop a *securely-attached* relationship will likely show considerably better psychological and behavioral outcomes, and therefore, will be better prepared to exert their right to participation. *Securely-attached* children are more likely to cope with stress effectively and less likely to develop depression, conduct problems, and to engage in alcohol and drug use, than children who are not *securely-attached* (Sroufe et al., 2005).

Beyond infancy, the influence of family remains stable. Children continue to need the protection, support, love, and guidance (preferably through an authoritative style of parenting) of parents as well as others. The Committee on the rights of the Child (GC-12, 2009c) recommends ratifying nations develop and promote parent education programs directed at teaching parents an authoritative style of parenting which has been found to be more respectful of child participation and the human rights of children in general. These programs should address:

- “The relationship of mutual respect between parents and children
- The involvement of children in decision making

- The implication of giving due weight to the views of every family member
- The understanding, promotion and respect for children’s evolving capacities” (p. 20, GC-12, 2009c)

Other Adult Relationships

Vygotsky (1986) proposed that child development is influenced through social and cultural interactions with parents, family, as well as others like nonrelated adults (Benson, 2007; Grossman & Bulle, 2006). Nonrelated adults (e.g., mentors, coaches, teachers, clergy, and family) influence a child’s “zone of proximal development” – the point between what can be learned on one’s own and what can be learned with the intervention of a teacher. This is significant because it is a mechanism for learning how to function both psychologically and behaviorally within society and to become empowered to exert the right to participation.

To illustrate the power of nonrelated adult role models, I offer a personal anecdote. My son, Eddie III, who lives with his mother in Nebraska, spent the summer with me last year. Shortly after arriving, I noticed behaviors indicating that he was suffering deficits in intrapersonal competence (e.g., poor self-esteem, low self-confidence, and depression). As a father who loves his son deeply, I contacted his mother to discuss my concerns. We agreed upon a strategic intervention to boost his self-esteem, confidence, and affect. Having read about the positive influence of *martial arts*, the first part of our plan included enrolling Eddie in karate classes with one of the sports most successful athletes – Jon Fonto. I should specify that I was not encouraging my son to gain skills to become violent with others but rather the skills necessary to boost his intrapersonal competence.

The second part of our plan included encouraging Eddie to apply for a part-time job through our community youth job center. Our intentions in doing this were to strengthen his job skills and financial competence. What I did not expect from his employment was the positive influence of an intergenerational relationship he developed with a well-respected community member and a long time resident of our community – an 80-year-old Syd Zinney.

Eddie’s enthusiasm for learning karate was exciting to observe. Equally impressive was the dedication and effort he put forth working for Mr. Zinney. As the next few months passed, I developed a deep level of respect and admiration for both of the men in my son’s life. Jon and Mr. Zinney made an incredible impression on Eddie. Jon challenged him physically and mentally, and with the effort he put forth in the dojo, resulted in earning a yellow belt. With Mr. Zinney, he learned valuable life lessons, to take pride in his work, and gained a deeper respect for me. Over the course of the summer, Eddie went from being depressed, and having relatively low levels of self-esteem and confidence, to a young man filled with pride and confidence, as well as joy. When he left to attend college, it was obvious he was taking an important “can do” attitude with him.

The influence of these experiences with nonrelated adults and the corresponding psychological and behavioral outcomes are not unique to those displayed by my son. A large body of research supports the psychological value of participation with

nonrelated adults (Benson, 2007; Cochran & Bo, 1989; Pretty, Andrewes, & Collett, 1994; Svedhem, 1994; Talmi & Harter, 1998; Werner, 1993). To illustrate, research has shown that relationships with nonrelated adults are significantly related to greater levels of self-worth and hope for the future (Talmi & Harter, 1998). Likewise, relationships with nonrelated adults have also been found to decrease feelings of loneliness, depression, aggression, and delinquency. Finally, research has also found that youth who develop meaningful relationships with three or more nonrelated adults for at least 3 years, are less likely to use alcohol and drugs, smoke cigarettes, and engage in juvenile crime (Benson, 2007).

Healthy Communities

Child participation depends on the social and economic health of communities (Barnes, Katz, Korbin, & O'Brien, 2006). For example, investigating the influence of social and economic stress on rates of child maltreatment, Garbarino (1976) found child maltreatment to be significantly related to inadequate neighborhood social support and economic stress. Another study reported that 97% of youth living in Chicago do not feel that the adults in their communities value or like them (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Research suggests that children who do not feel safe are less likely to participate when living in unsafe conditions (UNICEF, 2003), to view adults as dependable, to play, and/or to engage in cultural activities. In addition, children who feel unsafe are more likely to do poorly in school, isolate themselves from others, have less hope for the future, and engage in risk behavior, than peers who feel safe (Schwab-Stone et al., 1995).

What are the outcomes associated with living in a healthy community? A study evaluating the strength of 112 communities across the USA, found the number of community strengths (strong families, schools, community involvement, and positive peer influence) to promote child participation and positive psychological and behavioral outcomes (Blyth & Leffert, 1995). These findings are in line with research conducted by Theokas et al. (2005). Conducting exploratory factor analysis, they found ecological assets (e.g., family, community, and school) to predict individual asset accumulation (evolving capacities), which in turn was found to influence positive outcomes (school success, display of leadership, helping others, maintaining good health, delay of gratification, valuing diversity, and overcoming adversity; outcomes include youth who develop into citizens who contribute to self, family, community, and society). It was concluded that healthy communities provide youth with caring, safe and supportive environments, relationships that value youth, opportunities for participation, and set clear expectations for behavior.

Spiritual Anchoring

To fully understand the construct of *spiritual anchoring*, it is necessary to provide a basic definition of spiritual development. Spiritual development is defined as, the process through which human beings develop an inner self which transcends

the concrete superficial nature of the world in which they live to connect with a personal identity and divine spirit marked with purpose, meaning, love, compassion, and moral integrity (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003; Garbarino & Bedard, 1996). The outcome of spiritual development, of course, is spirituality.

Spiritual anchoring is addressed under Article 27 of the CRC which asserts, “States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, *spiritual*, moral and social development.” It is one component associated with promoting a child’s full personhood (GC-1, 2001), a personhood which is the goal of the CRC (Melton, 2005b).

Spiritual development is nurtured from birth and is first influenced by relationships with parents and other family members. Healthy spiritual development depends upon positive human experiences, meaning that threats to well-being such as poverty (Article 4), maltreatment (Article 19) and other forms of trauma can, and often do, severely affect one’s connection with the spiritual self (Garbarino, 1999). To illustrate, Reinert and Edwards (2009), found the experience of child sexual abuse to predict feeling less attached to God, as well as viewing God as unloving, controlling and distant. Of course, children are malleable, so when they are anchored in specific relationships, experiences, and opportunities the more likely they are to overcome adversity.

It is widely recognized by many cultures living within our nation that as children mature, one of the most influential ways of spiritually anchoring children is through participation in faith-based organizations (Lerner & Dowling, 2002; e.g., churches, synagogues, mosques). The value of participation within faith based organizations has been substantiated by Dowling, her colleagues (2004) who conducted structural equation modeling to account for the mediating effect of religiosity and spirituality in predicting thriving behavior among a sample of 1,000 youth (age 12). They found spirituality to be a predictor of thriving behavior; this relation was found to be significantly stronger when youth were participating in faith based activities.

One of the benefits of faith-based organizations is that they connect youth to older adults. The significance of intergenerational relationships to child development lies in the power of one generation passing to another: Knowledge and wisdom, skills, rules for behavior, and a value system; if we look at the influence of peers, these places allow children of the same value system to participate together in environments which are safe, conducive to developing faith in God, encourage and support play, and influence civic responsibility.

Schools (private and public) also play a powerful role in spiritual anchoring. Considering the extensive amount of time children spend in school, it is vital that we recognize these as places meant to influence the development of the “whole child” – including spiritual development (Articles 27 and 29; Hart et al., 2001). In regards to the aims of education, General Comment No. 1 from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2001, para 12) states,

Article 29(1) insists upon a holistic approach to education which ensures that the educational opportunities made available reflect an appropriate balance between promoting the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional aspects of education, the intellectual, social and practical

dimensions, and the childhood and lifelong aspects. The overall objective of education is to maximize the child's ability and opportunity to participate fully and responsibly in a free society. It should be emphasized that the type of teaching that is focused primarily on accumulation of knowledge, prompting competition and leading to an excessive burden of work on children, may seriously hamper the harmonious development of the child to the fullest potential of his or her abilities and talents.

The last sentence of the previous quote implies that teachers, administrators, and policy makers should leave competitive activities on the field, and look to the wide body of pedagogical literature illustrating the value of cooperative learning and self-competition in promoting spiritual as well as cognitive and socioemotional development (GC-12, 2009c; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1998; Scales & Taccogna, 2000). Cooperative learning is a method of teaching which brings students together as teams to work toward achieving a common goal. One of the main benefits of cooperative learning is that it encourages social interactions between students, who due to personal differences (e.g., cultural, race, ability level, and age), may have never participated with each other. In terms of outcomes, which are healthy for the spirit, cooperative learning fosters relationship building, problem solving, and conflict resolution skills, enhances self-esteem, instills an appreciation for diversity, and promotes prosocial behavior. Basically, it takes the focus away from "me," to a focus on "we." But there is a place for "me" in the classroom.

Although I was well known among my family and friends as a fierce competitive athlete, I was never more competitive than I was with myself in the classroom. This self-competitiveness began in the fifth grade when my class had the unique opportunity to be visited by the Minneapolis Fire Chief who came to speak with us about fire safety. Like many of my classmates, I had boyhood dreams of becoming a firefighter, so I was awestruck by his presence. Before he left that day, he challenged us to complete a fire safety activity which required developing a fire safety and evacuation plan for our homes. The extra credit assignment was divided into two different levels of accomplishment. Those who accomplished the first level earned a silver captain's badge, whereas those willing to do the extra activities required of the second level, earned a gold fire chief badge. I put all of my effort into successfully earning the gold badge.

I am convinced that the fire safety activity and corresponding external reward served as the impetus for my goal setting personality. However, this was not about the external reward, but rather the spiritually significant intrapersonal feelings I gained from challenging myself and becoming successful. You see, despite the physical and psychological abuse I was suffering at home at the hands of my parents, my accomplishments in school helped me feel good about myself. This internal drive motivated me to work harder, and to eventually reach a point where I could help others. In addition, these feelings helped me to realize that my life had meaning and purpose.

My purpose for telling this story is to illustrate the power that teachers and community members hold within the context of our classrooms. These honorable people have the power to influence spiritual development through interaction and instruction focused on nurturing the souls of our children. Thus, the classroom

should not only focus on the core academic areas of reading, writing, science and math, but also should stimulate the whole child through activities which promote spiritual development; spiritual development which when combined with a socially healthy environment is likely to psychologically anchor children (GC-1, 2001).

Psychological Anchoring

The culmination of social and spiritual anchoring is referred to as *psychological anchoring*. When children are socially and spiritually anchored, they develop the psychological resources necessary to actively cope with risk factors which may compromise becoming empowered to exert their right to participation (Garbarino, 1999). To illustrate, analyzing data from a sample of at-risk youth ($N=2,226$), Molnar, and his colleagues (2008) found greater social support to be negatively related to aggression and juvenile delinquency, suggesting that social support from nonrelated adults influences empowers children with the evolving capacities necessary to avoid participating in aggressive and delinquent crime. Similarly, conducting structural equation modeling to test social control theory (which suggests that juvenile crime is associated to a lack of social connection and deficiencies in intrapersonal competence) researchers found high self-esteem, positive school attitudes, prosocial behavior, purpose in life, and prosocial bonds to protect youth from juvenile delinquency; fear of harm, victimization, and abuse in the home were found to predict juvenile delinquency (Dukes & Stein, 2001). These studies illustrate that the more youth are socially and spiritually anchored, the greater likelihood they will be psychologically anchored, and consequently protected from developing mental illness and engaging in behavior which may compromise their right to participation. To illustrate the true power of psychological anchoring, we turn now to the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets.

The 40 Developmental Assets: The Manifestation of the Human Rights of Children

For over five decades, the Search Institute – a nonprofit organization – located in Minneapolis, Minnesota has been conducting research evaluating child and adolescent development. Consequently, surveys of approximately 3 million students across the USA in grades K-12 reveal that there are 40 developmental assets vital to promoting child well-being and preventing risk behaviors (Benson, 2007). These assets are the nutrients of a socially healthy environment, and therefore, are vital to promoting the participation rights of children.

The 40 developmental assets are both external and internal (Benson, 2007). External assets include the anchors of *support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time*. These external assets account for the extent to which youth are anchored in healthy relationships, experiences, and opportunities. The remaining 20 internal assets are categorized under a *commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity* (see search-institute.org for a full list of the assets). These internal assets reflect the CRC's emphasis on a child's evolving capacities. Research strongly suggests that the more youth are socially, spiritually, and psychologically anchored, the greater likelihood they will thrive, and be protected from risk.

Thriving is a process of “adaptive developmental regulation which results in young people who move beyond their own self-interest and place value on, and commit to, action supportive of a social system promoting equity, democracy, social justice, and personal freedom – leads to prospering” (p. 22, Lerner & Dowling, 2002). Thriving involves a healthy change process resulting in developmental regulation which serves to counter many of the at-risk behaviors and negative outcomes (e.g., violating the rights of others, incarceration, drug and alcohol use) experienced by many youth today, moving them closer to reaching their true personhood. Again, a personhood is espoused by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Melton, 2005b).

The Search Institute has identified eight indicators of thriving: School success, display of leadership, helping others, maintaining good health, delay of gratification, valuing diversity, and overcoming adversity (Lerner & Dowling, 2002). Moreover, they have found a positive relation between level of assets and thriving indicators. That is, as asset levels increase, so does thriving. Conversely, the fewer levels of assets present in the lives of youth, the more they tend to do poorly. Scales and his colleagues (2000) found the asset framework to explain as much as 43% of the variance in thriving indicators, even after controlling for demographic variables. In addition, the asset framework has been found to account for as much as 66% of the variance in explaining overall risk behavior (e.g., alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs, sexual intercourse, depression-suicide, antisocial behavior, violence, school problems, driving and alcohol, and gambling; Leffert, Benson, Scales, Sharma, Drake, & Blyth, 1998).

It is worth mentioning that the vision of the Search Institute is similar to that of the CRC. Specifically, it envisions: “A world where all young people are valued and thrive.” In addition, it recognizes the following as “rights” of kids:

1. The “best interest of the child” should be strongly considered when making decisions and drafting policy (Article 3)
2. Poverty is acknowledged as the greatest threat to child well-being and should be subsequently eradicated (preamble and Article 4)
3. End all forms of discrimination (Article 2)
4. Promote the rights essential to human development – survival, protection, growth, and development. Children need to grow up in healthy families and communities (Articles 5–6, & 27)
5. Ensure access to a quality education (Articles 23, & 28–29)

6. Promote policies which protect children from the danger of violence, abuse, exploitation and discrimination (Article 2 & 19)
7. In accordance with the evolving capacities of the child, every child has the right to participation (Search Institute, 2008; Articles 12–15, & 31)

While the Search Institute and the CRC share common visions, they do differ in one fundamentally important way. The CRC is a legally binding international treaty meant to guide ratifying governments in legislating policy and programming (Melton, 2005b). In doing so, governments are required to place the “best interest” of children and families at the forefront of policy decisions (Melton, 1996). On the other hand, the Search Institute’s asset framework and research supporting it are the manifestation of the human rights of children. Meaning, in addition to being a tool for indicating the needs of children, the research is indicative of whether a society is respecting the human rights of children, particularly at the community level. Thus, it is logical to argue that if the human rights of children are being met within the USA, research should indicate that every child is being socially, spiritually, and psychologically anchored, and consequently thriving and not being exposed to risk (Melton, 2009).

Asset Research

Where do youth living in the USA stand in regards to average levels of developmental assets? A study, which includes 6th–12th grade students ($N=148,189$), found 17% of youth experiencing 0–10 assets placing them *at risk* for negative outcomes, 42% experiencing 11–20 assets making them *vulnerable* to negative outcomes, 32% experiencing an *adequate* amount of assets with 21–30, and only 8% were found to be *thriving* with 31–40 assets. These findings suggest that approximately 50% of youth across all sociodemographic groups are either at-risk or vulnerable to negative outcomes and risk behavior (Benson, 2007). More profoundly, this research strongly suggests that we are failing to ground a large percentage of children in the social, spiritual, and psychological anchors vital to promoting their right to participation.

How do at-risk and thriving youth differ in terms of negative outcomes? Research has found that students experiencing 0–10 assets are thirty-eight times more likely to report using illegal drugs than peers experiencing 31–40 assets; in terms of cigarette use, these same students are approximately ten times more likely to report using cigarettes than thriving peers. Similarly, 34% of at-risk students compared to 3% of thriving students were found to be engaging in sexual intercourse three or more times in their lifetime, and 62% of at-risk students reported engaging in three or more violent acts in the past year compared to only 6% of thriving peers. Finally, at-risk students were fifteen times more likely to report using alcohol than thriving peers (Benson, 2007; Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Sesma, 2004). I should state that these findings are almost identical to findings from previous studies conducted by the Search Institute (Benson, 2007). What these studies clearly demonstrate is that asset accumulation has the power to promote thriving behavior and prevent risk.

Power of the Assets to Promote

The assets have been shown to predict thriving behavior. In a study following the academic progress of middle school students ($N=370$) across time, researchers found a significant relation between the level of assets and GPA (Roehlkepartain, Benson, & Sesma, 2003). That is, students reporting 0–10 assets were found to have a GPA of 2.1, those experiencing 11–20 a GPA of 2.8, 21–30 a GPA of 3.1, and finally 31–40 assets a GPA of 3.3. Another study of inner city youth ($N=462$) found that youth experiencing 20–40 assets (placing them in the adequate to thriving range) were also participating and succeeding in school, valuing diversity, maintaining good health, delaying gratification, and participating in activities helping others (Scales et al., 2000). These findings mirror a Search Institute (2003) survey ($N=148,189$) which found only 4% of thriving students to be experiencing school problems compared to 44% of at-risk peers, and 88% of thriving students compared to 27% of at-risk students to be maintaining good health. On a similar note, 96% of thriving students compared to 62% of at-risk students reported helping others one or more hours per week (Benson, 2007). Other studies have found asset accumulation to predict better standardized test scores and school attendance (Benson; Connell, Halpem-Felsher, Clifford, Crichlow, & Usinger, 1995).

Power of the Assets to Prevent

Asset accumulation has also been found to prevent risk behavior. Using structural equation modeling to conduct a secondary analysis of Search Institute data ($N=200$), De Carvalho (2007) found thriving behavior and asset levels to be negatively related to juvenile delinquency. In other words, as the number of assets accumulated, thriving behavior increased and juvenile delinquency decreased.

Studies have found several specific assets to be negatively related to delinquency. In a study using the asset framework to test social control theory, which suggests that delinquency is related to a lack of social connection and deficiencies in internal assets, Dukes and Stein (2001) found high self-esteem, positive school attitudes, prosocial activity, purpose in life, and prosocial bonds to protect youth from engaging in deviant behavior; fear of harm, victimization, and abuse in the home predicted juvenile delinquency. Finally, after controlling for demographic variables, Leffert and her colleagues (1998) found positive peer influence, personal restraint, school engagement, time at home, resistance skills, and peaceful conflict resolution to account for 39% of the variance in explaining protection from antisocial behavior.

Several of the assets categories have been found to be important protective factors across ethnic groups (Native American, White, African American, Hispanic, Asian). In an aggregate sample of approximately 218,000 students in grades 6–12, the Search Institute (2003) found boundaries and expectations, commitment to learning, positive values, and social competencies significantly related to antisocial behavior, a predictor of juvenile delinquency. As implied, not all assets are relevant

to each ethnically diverse group, nonetheless, the asset research consistently shows that it is the accumulation of assets that promotes thriving and prevents risk behavior (Benson, 2002).

Assets and Economic Equality

This chapter would be incomplete without discussing the relation between economic equality, and thriving and risk behavior. While income level has been found to account for a small amount of the variance in explaining the interplay between asset accumulation, and thriving and risk behavior (Benson, 2007; Leffert et al., 1998; Scales et al., 2000), economic equality does matter. Research has consistently found that on average, youth living in poverty experience three fewer assets than their more affluent peers (Benson, 2007). This discrepancy stands counter to the CRC's emphasis on nondiscrimination (Article 2).

One way poverty (in particular, chronic, pervasive, and intergenerational poverty) may influence asset accumulation through its effects on a child's sense of safety (Asset 10) within the home. Poverty, parental stress, and a lack of parental social support have been found to predict child maltreatment and neglect (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998; Sroufe et al., 2005). A study of maltreated children found effects on social competence (an internal asset category) and self-esteem (positive identity) to predict internalizing and externalizing behavior at age 12 (Kim & Cicchetti, 2004). Another found fear of harm, victimization, and abuse in the home to predict juvenile delinquency (Dukes & Stein, 2001). These studies suggest that poverty is indirectly yet negatively related to thriving behavior, and a predictor of risk behavior.

Poverty also sends a socially toxic message that is counter to empowering children to exert their right to participation. That is, "within this land of wealth and social opportunity you are excluded." Garbarino (1999) highlights the psychological and spiritual toll of poverty during an interview with a young man serving life behind bars for murder. Garbarino is asked by Warren, "When you were growing up, were you poor or regular?" (p. 174)? Warren's question suggests the feelings of shame and inadequacy – feelings counter to the internal assets related to positive identity (Assets 37–40). Thus, poverty contributes to undermining the social, spiritual, and psychological anchoring of children (Garbarino, 1999), consequently preventing many children from being empowered to exert their right to participation.

"For evil to triumph it is enough only that good men do nothing"

Edmund Burke

We have been informed of the significance of the social, spiritual, and psychological anchors vital to empowering children to exert their right to participation. Thus, we have an obligation to act. For many years, we have seen study after study strongly suggesting that the well-being of many children is getting worse rather than better. Much of this research illustrated the plight of the mix of kids who

represent the 13 million living in poverty (Faas & Cauthen, 2008), 1.3 million living in homelessness (NLCHP, 2008), 8.5 million without health insurance (NCHC, 2008), 92,854 incarcerated males (OJJDP, 2008), and 25% not graduating from high school (President Obama, 2009). The major difference between previous research and more recent findings is in the strong evidence highlighting that youth from *all* walks of life are not only at risk for negative developmental outcomes, but they are also not being empowered to exert their right to participation.

For years now, child and family advocates have been calling for a permanent national family agenda (Benson, 2002; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Garbarino, 1992; Kamerman, 1996; Zigler & Muenchow, 1984). Because our current political system has the ability to undermine child and family-friendly policies which promote child and family well-being, we can bring about permanency in child and family protection through ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Bruyere & Garbarino, 2009). With a permanent blueprint for structural change in place, a child and family-centered national policy would no doubt require youth, parents, policy makers, and scholars to come together for one single purpose – to assure that our next generation of citizens, participate in the democratic process which assures the continuation of our society.

We have an obligation to act and move toward permanent change – to not do so would be reprehensibly irresponsible. Make no mistake about it; change will be slow. But for moral change to occur, it always takes people moving one step in a direction which is morally right. To date, 193 of our global counterparts have made this commitment to their children and families. Will we?

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