Mentoring Intentionally: Focusing on Developing Gifts and Talents

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Abstract

Unfortunately some children in the world have been left in vulnerable positions that have harmed their well-being. When they have not received adequate care, they experience devastating consequences. Because of that, it has been important to understand what children really need in terms of support and care. The most important thing that these children need are supportive and caring relationships. Mentorship has been one way to provide care for at-risk children. What is even more important is mentoring intentionally. Children have specific gifts and talents and are uniquely made in the image of God. Through mentoring intentionally, by focusing on gifts and talents, vulnerable children and youth are provided with opportunities to grow and flourish.

Keywords: at-risk youth, children, mentorship, gifts, talents.

Mentoring Intentionally: Focusing on Developing Gifts and Talents

In the United States there are over 400,000 children in our foster care system. Of those fifty percent of the girls become pregnant by the age of 19. Our prisons are comprised of 74 percent former foster children, while 80 percent of those on death row are former foster children. Based upon these statistics, there is a major need for intervention (Royal Family KIDS, 2013).

One way of intervening is through child mentorship. It is necessary for children to have positive remodels in their lives that can build trust and demonstrate positive relational skills (Royal Family KIDS, 2013). When forming a mentorship program it is important to focus on learning and building social skills. Lawner, Beltz, and Moore (2013) wrote, "Generally, mentoring programs that focused on helping children and youth with their education, social skills and relationships were more frequently effective than those that focused on behavior problems such as bullying or programs aimed at reducing teen pregnancy" (p. 1). Also, programs that were long-term and showed commitment were more effective (p. 1).

In order to develop a mentoring program that will be successful, it is necessary for the program to be extremely relational. It is important for children to have a place of safety and support, where they feel valued and are encouraged to grow and develop into who they were created to be. By focusing on social skills and showing a strong commitment from the mentors, the children can learn the value of being responsible, faithful, and trustworthy. Furthermore, not only is it important to encourage and support children through positive adult relationships, it is just as important to invest in them and help them grow in their gifts and talents. By investing in their gifts and talents, the children are able to grow in confidence and self-esteem, as well as understand their worth and significance as individuals.

In this paper I will discuss the importance of mentoring intentionally by focusing on gifts and talents. I will address the current issues and problems that cause children to become vulnerable or at-risk. Additionally, I will explain what is missing in terms of assets for children, and what is needed to have an effective program that allows children to flourish and grow in their gifts and talents.

Personal Story

As an individual who has experienced abuse and neglect, reading the negative statistics about at-risk youth is overwhelming. Growing up in a single-parent home for the majority of my life, and living in poverty, was not easy for me. Especially in an affluent community with little diversity. When I assess my life I can only say that it is by the grace of God that I am where I am today.

My first few years of high school were rough. Balancing home, school, and emotions was difficult. I skipped and failed classes and did not really care--school was the last place I wanted to be. A turning point for me was joining the cheer squad my junior year of high school. My coach confronted me in front of all of the other girls and told me that I could do better, and that my actions had impacts on the entire squad. After this I started to care about school and the decisions I made. I realized that my actions were impacting others, and the next year I desired to achieve more. I joined Running Start, that is a program that allows you to attend community college as a high school student, and was even chosen to be cheer captain. With a new confidence and belief that I could accomplish more, I was able to handle work, community college, and high school athletics.

During my senior year of high school when my friends were filling out college applications, I was focused on high school and had no plans to further my education. A friend's

dad intervened and encouraged me to apply to an undergraduate program in Seattle, WA. Flash-forward eight years and I am now on the cusp of obtaining a Master's Degree. Without the intervention of my friend's dad, I can only imagine where I would be today.

The people who encouraged me at the time may not have understood the impact of their honest and encouraging words. They helped me to believe in myself. As a high school senior I never imagined the life I have now, but I was blessed with people who encouraged me and spoke truth into my life. This is why I think there is a value in mentors and positive examples in children's lives. It is important for them to have people that are cheering for them and people that believe in them so that they can move forward and accomplish great things.

There have been so many times that I wish I could have had a different beginning, had a different story, but I realize that where you come from and the difficulties you go through do not have to define you and they are not the end of the story. I have learned that transformation is necessary in order to move forward, letting go of lies and false beliefs, and having a renewed mindset. Groody (2011) explained:

> Discipleship challenges us to behold and love the world as God loves us in Christ. Only when we leave our baggage behind can our blindness be healed and our hearts transformed. The more we do so, the more we can make the arduous but rewarding climb that leads us to the promising views from the mountaintop. Then even our view of the valley is transformed by what we have seen from above. (p. 265)

The more I have been able to let go of the past, forgive, and allow God to transform me, the more freedom, joy, and love I have experienced in understanding that I was made in the image of God and a daughter of the king. When a person comes from a place of love, for me that is the

love of God, there is more confidence to try new things, and to grow and develop in the gifts and skills that God has given each of us.

My hope for vulnerable children and at-risk youth, is that they would be able to form positive relationships with mentors that can encourage them to overcome obstacles and become successful in life. My hope is that they would be able to discover their God given talents and flourish in who they were created to be.

Vulnerable or At-Risk Children

Who are the Most Vulnerable or At-Risk Children?

There are many different factors that can influence why a child is considered at-risk. It is important to understand who the most vulnerable and at-risk children are in our society. White and Wright (2003) explained, "Children at high risk are those whose well-being and development are imperiled to the extent that their life-chances, emotional progress and sense of self-worth and identity are all under threat" (p. 117). Essentially, those who are at-risk are vulnerable because there are factors that are keeping them from being able to live fully and abundantly into who they were created to be, which is one form of poverty. Myers (2011) described Ravi Jayakaran, a professional in Participatory Learning Action, and wrote, "Jayakaran pictures the poor wrapped in a series of restrictions and limitations in four areas of life: physical, mental, social, and spiritual" (p. 131). Without the ability to grow and develop, have access to basic needs, and maintain healthy relationships, children are left vulnerable to many of the dangers of this world.

In order to gain a better understanding of who these children are, it is important to listen to what youth have to say because they have a unique understanding of their peer group. When

asked who are the most vulnerable or at-risk children in communities, these were the answers

provided by youth:

> People that don't have a super great family life. It effects their school and family
>
> relationships. Some people do stupid stuff because their parents don't care as much.
>
> Some get into drugs. One kid I know got into fight with his step dad and went to jail.
>
> They just get into bad things. It impacts their self-esteem and effects their ability to make
>
> positive relationships in school. It can make them more defensive or not trusting. (A.
>
> Redding, Age 17, personal interview, February 15, 2014)

> The ones who have lost a family member close to them. People that have lost someone
>
> early on in their life. They don't get enough attention so they try to find it in other people.
>
> They try to get noticed by other people around them so they make wrong decisions like
>
> drugs and alcohol. (J. Walker, Age 15, personal interview, February 15, 2014)

> Maybe people who have parents that drink and smoke and people that have siblings that
>
> are doing bad stuff because they aren't being good influences to younger kids. For some
>
> it can effect school because it is hard to focus on what they really need to be focusing on.
>
> (K. Lewis, Age 15, personal interview, February 15, 2014)[1]

The answers the youth provided had a similar theme about what caused a child to be at-risk.

From their perspective being vulnerable or at-risk had to do with relationships. Loss of family

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[1] The names of the children interviewed have been changed to protect their privacy.

members or difficult family situations can leave a child vulnerable to seeking attention outside the family, this in turn can lead to devastating circumstances.

Why are Certain Children At-risk?

Another important factor to consider is why certain children are considered at-risk. This helps give a better understanding of what needs to change in order to help children succeed in life. Miles (2003) explained, "A useful tool when looking at causes for children being at risk is the 'But why?' flow chart. This chart helps people think about the root causes of problems they encounter—looking beyond the superficial answers that scrape the surface to more fundamental issues" (p. 115). This can break down the problem and reveal underlying factors such as sin, greed, poverty, or stress on family (Miles, 2003, p. 115-116), which can lead to exploitation, harm, or lack of care toward children, leaving them vulnerable.

Relationships have a great impact on a child's life. Broken relationships within the family, community, or social structures can have extreme impacts on a child's wellbeing. Much of what people want, especially children, are whole and healthy relationships that can encourage them to grow in confidence and self-esteem.

What Are the Real Needs For At-Risk Youth?

When identifying ways to positively intervene, it is necessary to understand what the real needs of children and communities are. That is why it is essential to understand a holistic view of what is lacking in the children's lives. The responses I received from youth about what caused a child to be at-risk, was the existence of broken relationships. Much of what was lacking in the lives of children at-risk was healthy adult relationships. Ruthruff (2010) wrote:

At new Horizons, we have learned that kids in the middle of chaos and without a

supportive community to surround them must have a surrogate community to foster the

idea of a "home" to run back to. Kids on the street need adults to help them define their identity in new ways. The kids have taught me that any strategy to deliver services to them must be highly relational. (p. 46)

In order to implement effective programs that are helpful to children it is essential to understand the value and impact of healthy relationships--especially with adults.

White and Wright (2003) mentioned that a lack of positive intervention has devastating impacts in the lives of children who are considered at-risk. They wrote:

Unless there is some positive form of intervention or support, such children are liable to move into some form of institutional care, be forced to fend for themselves (often by living on the streets) or withdraw into themselves at the expense of their own well-being. (p. 117)

It is clearly evident through both my research and the research presented by White and Wright that it is important to have mentors and support systems for those children.

Children also need to be able to hope for a better future so that they can move from a place of despair. Myers (2011) explained, "Envisioning a better human future is hard work for both the poor and non-poor. The web of lies believed by the poor has convinced them that there is no better future, at least not in this world" (p. 177). In order for children to grow and develop it is important for them to be able to have a new perspective that will allow them to envision a different story for themselves. A story that allows them to live fully and abundantly in who they were created to be.

Importance of Raising Awareness

Additionally, raising awareness is essential to bringing about change to a problem. In World Vision's video, *Most Vulnerable Children,* about children in Kenya, Kiarie (n.d.)

explained that people often do not consider the rights of children. Others who were interviewed shared that many orphaned or street children are at-risk due to exploitation and abuse, and it is important for the community to come together to support and advocate for the children. When this awareness is built then systems can change that will allow children to be adequately taken care of.

Building awareness is important both internationally and nationally. Martinez, Chandler and Latham (2013) wrote about grassroots advocates in California that wanted to change the zero-tolerance policy. The zero-tolerance policy overly punished students for issues such as tardiness and disrespect (p. 3). They explained, "A student suspended from school misses learning time, is left unsupervised, and has an increased risk of dropping out and becoming involved in the juvenile justice system" (p. 3). Instead of harsh punishment, they advocated for a new way of discipline that was preventative. Raising awareness of an issue can help bring change to communities that allow the children to flourish instead of treating them with disregard or lack of care.

Asset-Based Community Development

Asset Approach

Often times, when looking at a problem, it is easy to want to be the solution for people. What is more important, though, is that the people being served are able to become empowered. Kretzmann and Mcknight (1996) explained two different ways of solving problems for those who are in need. They wrote:

> The first, which begins by focusing on a community's needs, deficiencies and problems, is still by far the most traveled, and commands the vast majority of our financial and human resources. By comparison with the second path, which insists on beginning with a

clear commitment to discovering a community's capacities and assets, and which is the direction this guide recommends, the first and more traditional path is more like an eight-lane superhighway. (p. 23)

By identifying what the people being served have to offer, they are empowered and dignified. They are seen as having something valuable to offer and as being a part of the solution for their problem. Instead of viewing themselves as deficient or lacking, they are able to see potential in what they already have to give.

Search Institute (2006) identified 40 assets that are important for youth and their development. They separated them into categories of external and internal assets. The internal assets were commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (p.1). They explained, "For many people, the assets have become a source of ideas and inspiration in the face of frustration and even despair" (p. 1). When implementing programs to help children succeed it is important to consider what assets are necessary for their growth and development.

I learned what local youth thought of as positive assets by asking them. Lewis, age 15, said, "Some assets are clubs and stuff at school that people can enjoy together, these are helpful. Like sports and arts" (K. Lewis, personal interview, March 1, 2014). Lewis felt that extracurricular activities were important for helping youth. Furthermore, Walker, age 15, said, "Adults in schools helping kids are good, and clubs are good for kids. After school programs are also helpful" (J. Walker, personal interview, March 1, 2014). Reflective of the responses given by youth, it is helpful to understand the importance of positive adult relationships, clubs, and afterschool programs. They are valuable in creating a sense of belonging for youth.

Assets can be very impactful. They are necessary to help children grow and provide the support that enables them to grow in their self-confidence. Search Institute (2006) explained:

Surveys of almost 150,000 students in grades 6-12 (ages approximately 11-18 years) reveal that assets are powerful influences on adolescent behavior. Regardless of gender, ethnic heritage, economic situation, or geographic location, these assets both promote positive behaviors and attitudes and help protect young people from many different problem behaviors. (p. 3)

What Assets Are Missing?

It is important to understand what assets are lacking in a community so that problem behaviors can be deterred and children can develop positively. That will help towards finding a solution and helps improve the lives of youth. Benson (2006) explained:

But the gap between the ideal (that is, growing asset-rich young people) and the real (growing asset-depleted young people) is everywhere; in urban, suburban, and rural communities; in all fifty states; in every economic stratum; across major ethnic and racial groups, we are not growing kids rich in Developmental Assets. In fact, the majority of middle school and high school youth in the United States experience half or fewer of the forty Developmental Assets, and preliminary studies in other contexts suggest similar challenges. (p. 59)

There is a lack of adequate development assets that youth are able to access in order to help them succeed in life. That is not just for at-risk youth but for all youth. If all youth are not receiving adequate asset resources, then at-risk youth are even more limited in their ability to thrive and pursue their callings in life.

In order to gain a better understanding of how youth view access to assets in their community, I talked with Lewis and Walker, both ages 15. I asked them what assets they believed were missing in their community. Lewis said, "Some schools do not do a good enough job of being involved to help kids with their problems. Some do not try to help them out with their home lives" (personal interview, March 1, 2014). Walker said, "A lot of people with family problems do not have families that support them enough" (personal interview, March 1, 2014). Both of these responses showed the importance of having support for youth, especially those who have difficult family backgrounds.

What Makes Children Succeed

In order for children to thrive it is important for them to have their basic needs met. Relationships and community are key. Forbes, Luu, Oswald, and Tutnjevic (2011) explained, "Children's well-being depends on their relationships with others and the social, political, spiritual and environmental contexts in which they live" (p. 11). White (2003) discussed five essential needs for children to grow in love. They are Security, Significance, Boundaries, Community, and Creativity (pp. 123-126).

Security

It is important that children feel safe so that they feel free to develop, explore, and create. (White, 2003, p. 123). It is vital that children feel safe in all situations. It is important that programs and communities provide a place that allows children to feel free to explore their gifts and talents and to grow as individuals. It also helps them gain a stronger identity in who they are.

Significance

White (2003) discussed the importance of children feeling significant. He explained, "Vital to their development and wellbeing is the assurance that they are infinitely precious as

people-not because of something they have done or achieved, but because of who they are" (p.

123). It is essential for children to understand their worth or value so that they can grow in

confidence and self-esteem. Mentorship programs and community support provides children

opportunities to build healthy relationships with adults. Further, those opportunities build both

self-esteem and personal worthiness as well as helping them feel significant.

Boundaries

Boundaries are also essential for children to feel safe (White, 2003, p. 125). By setting

boundaries children are not only not only provided a safe environment, but also shown a model

of what it means to set safe and healthy boundaries. Furthermore, when there are safe

boundaries, the children are given a sense of security that allows them to be free to explore their

surroundings.

Community

Community is also valuable in order to foster growth. White (2003) explained, "Children

need to be and to feel part of accepting communities, especially faith communities. Childcare

cannot be divorced from the wider world of social relationships" (p. 125). It is important that

children have communities that they can grow in and be a part of. Mentorship and community

programs that provide a place for children to grow in relationship with their mentors as well as

participate and understand their value in the community is vital.

Creativity

White (2003) also explained the importance of creativity. He described children as being

creative and made in Gods image (p. 126). He explained, "We are to express ourselves with joy

and variety in movement, music, work and play" (2003, p. 126). It is imperative that children are

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able to express themselves through various creative outlets. It is also important that children are

given a chance to grow and develop in their gifts and talents.

Empowerment through Developing Gifts and Talents

In order to help children grow it is important to understand that we are all unique

individuals with distinctive gifts and talents that set us apart. Each of us have value and

something special to offer the world. In Ephesians 2:10 the Apostle Paul wrote, "For we are

God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for

us to do" (NIV). Many successful people have positive influences in their lives that encourage,

teach, and otherwise help them grow and develop their gifts and skills. Some on the other hand

do not. Some are treated so badly and have experienced unspeakable things, leaving them

restricted, voiceless, or angry. That can make it difficult to dream or hope, or live in any place

other than survival mode. Dreaming of the future or seeing personal value can often be a struggle

if people are being diminished or abused. My hope is that developing a program that will focus

on gifts and talents will help children begin to see their value, to dream for better things, and

obtain the tools necessary to begin mapping out how they wish for the story of their lives to look.

When I spoke with the mentorship director, Kim Smith, of Royal Family KIDS, she

stated that children who have experienced difficult circumstances, need encouragement and

positive reinforcement (K. Smith, personal interview, December 11, 2013). That is so valuable, it

always helps having people who provide encouragement and support. There is something

powerful that happens when you start to believe and have faith in yourself. Many children who

have experienced abuse and neglect have damaged self-esteem and distorted views of

themselves. Rewiring the way they see themselves and their view of the world can take time.

Children need positive affirmation and people that can empower and believe in them. Healy (2009) explained:

> Empowering literally means to "put in" or "to cause" power as derived from its Latin roots. The act of empowering children is a process of guiding them to feel and believe that they are powerful now as well as creating optimum conditions that mirror back to them these concepts.

Encouraging children to identify their gifts and talents would provide them with opportunities to put their abilities into practice. That has a two-fold effect; as they gain experience, they will also gain empowerment. Additionally, by understanding that they are gifted, and have certain strengths, the children are able to see the good in themselves. Winseman, Clifton, & Liesveld (2003) explained, "When we start focusing on our talents, we are more effective at our task and roles" (p. 21).

Some of these children may not even know their gifts, or have tried to fit into some other mold that is not what they were created for. Through a mentorship program that focuses on developing gifts and talents of children, the mentors can help encourage the children and tell them the good they see. They can do this by encouraging the children in their talents and skill sets. With positive support the children should be empowered to believe in themselves and pursue their goals.

What Makes A Good Program?

Developing Gifts and Talents

In order to form a good mentoring program it is important to consider how to encourage children and provide them with skills that would enable them to do well in life. One way of

accomplishing that would be helping them develop their gifts and talents. In doing so, the children would be able to grow in confidence, and know that they are uniquely made and significant. In 1 Corinthians 12:14-20, the Apostle Paul wrote:

> Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. (NIV)

Each child is unique, valuable, and made in the image of God. By providing children with opportunities to grow and develop in who God made them to be, they would be given a chance to grow in their self-confidence.

Furthermore, Winseman, Clifton, and Liesveld (2008) wrote, "naming our greatest talents sets us free to develop them and live through them" (p. 11). Helping children who are at-risk or vulnerable name their gifts can provide them with a new confidence and allow them to understand their value and worth.

Child Participation

Child participation is also important to consider when building programs that impact children's lives. Hart (1992) explained that young people are often not included in program development. Hart (1992) wrote, "Adolescents struggle to find meaningful roles in society. If they do not find opportunities to develop their competence in ways that are responsible they will

find others that are irresponsible" (p. 34). It is necessary that children's voices are heard and that they have choice in the projects they participate in.

When forming a program that focuses on developing the gifts and talents of children, it is crucial to hear what kinds of activities children would like to be involved in. Reddy and Kavita (2002) wrote:

Many of our interventions fail because we do not take into consideration each individual child and tailor our responses to cater to them. Further we do not enable children to recognize their inherent strengths so that they may build on these and use them to transform their situations. In order to do this we need to find ways to reach the inner child and assist children to recognize their strengths and assist them to overcome their shortcomings. It is critical to build relationships with children that are based on mutual trust, affection and most of all respect. (p. 13)

There is much to learn from children. They have many creative ideas; that, at times, get dismissed. Providing them with a safe place in which they could explore and dream would allow them to develop in areas that may sometimes be overlooked.

A Good Mentor

It is important to have mentors who can successfully develop a positive relationship with at-risk children. It would be ineffective to match children with someone who does not possess the qualities needed to have a positive impact on their lives. Qualities of a good mentor are: being committed, accepting, empathetic, supportive, honest, transparent, optimistic, and hopeful (Rowley, 1999, p. 20-22). Through those qualities, coupled with transparency and honesty, a mentor can set the groundwork for a committed, caring relationship.

Many of the qualities of a good mentor are also the qualities of a good leader. When I asked Jill Takemura, a staff member from Royal Family KIDS, about what she considered were qualities of a good leader she said, "The most important characteristics of a leader are: taking responsibility, admitting mistakes, humility, listening, respect for others, and the ability to follow. Mentors should show respect to kids and other club mentors" (personal communication, December 17, 2013).

Furthermore, acceptance and empathy are valuable as they teach children that they are worthy of respect and dignity. As Christ followers, we are to show this to a world of people who are constantly striving and beating themselves up because they never feel good enough. Especially these kids, who have heard the message of unworthiness too many times. Brown (2010) explained:

> There was only one variable that separated the people who have a strong sense of belonging and the people who really struggle for it, and that was that people who have a strong sense of love and belonging believe they are worthy of love and belonging.

Providing children with positive adult support that encourages them and believes in them, would ideally help the children see their potential and live fully and confidently in who they were created to be. Through mentor support and encouragement, mentors could provide children with opportunities to grow in their gifts and talents, and teach the children that they are significant and have value.

Improving Social and Relational Skills

Positive social and relational skills are also another important factor in helping children succeed in life. A good mentorship program should provide children with these skills. Mentorship is valuable because it helps build positive relationships between mentors and their

children. It is a time to be present with the children. To show them that they are worthy of attention and that their voice and life matters. Ruthruff (2010) wrote, "Hope is given when kids experience life-giving friendship in the middle of their chaos. The touch of Jesus is deeply relational and filled with acceptance" (p. 177).

Positive relationships are key for helping children develop and grow into mature, healthy adults. Wright, Budiardjo, Yewangoe, and friends explained, "Certainly good food and shelter are needed for healthy development, but our work needs to mirror God's own primary focus on relationships" (2003, p. 19). For many of these children, chaos is all they know. They are from broken families, have experienced terrible things, and often times they have no clue what is going to happen in their future. But, having someone in their lives to come along, to encourage, and to just be present can make a positive difference.

Furthermore, by engaging in relationship with these children we are able to help them learn how to handle difficult situations. In instances where a child reacts negatively or inappropriately a mentor can speak into their lives and model appropriate responses. The mentor can also show how their new behavior is not just more acceptable, but also beneficial. In a successful redirection of behavior, a mentor allows the child to know their feelings are valid and that they matter, while also providing healthy ways of interacting with others.

By entering into these children's lives and being a positive role model, mentors can help encourage the children in their gifts and talents. They can help build them up instead of tear them down, as many of them have experienced in life. Additionally, by providing children with healthy adult support, they can learn that they are worthy of love and belonging.

Creativity and Curiosity

Creativity and curiosity are also important to teach children. Many times children start to lose this as they cater to the needs of adults and those above them (Bornstein & Davis, 2010, p. 81). This especially happens when children are abused and feel worthless and that their voice is insignificant. It is important to allow children to have a safe place where they feel they can express themselves, a place where they are allowed to make mistakes and not have it all together, and give an opportunity for them to feel heard.

It is also important to build trust so that children feel free to be curious and ask questions. Curiosity allows opportunities for learning, and if children do not feel safe they will shut down and close off any opportunity for curiosity and learning. Curiosity and creativity are valuable for children to be able to live out their hopes and dreams, but those are smothered as children get older. Wagner (2008) explained that our current schools are not encouraging these areas in children's lives. He wrote, "Our nation's public schools are not contributing significantly to this country's capacity for creativity, imagination, and innovation—any more than they are developing the problem-solving skills of our students" (p. 75). That is tragic because those are the skills that enable people to thrive and grow, allowing great things to be accomplished.

Additionally, creativity draws out the talents that children inherently have. White (2003) wrote, "Children are essentially creative; they are made in the image of God. If they are to fulfill their potential they must be given opportunities and encouragement to create, to make, to shape, to dance" (p. 126). It is necessary for children to have a safe place in which they can play and express themselves. A mentorship program that encouraged creativity and curiosity would be extremely beneficial.

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Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

Critical thinking is another important skill for children and youth to acquire, especially those who are at-risk. When I spoke with Jill Takemura, one of the staff leaders of Royal Family KIDS, she said, "life is about learning how to face challenges and figuring out different options" (J.Takemura, personal communication, December 17, 2013). She further explained that many times if the children do not know how to problem solve or have critical thinking skills they can become disheartened and give up or settle (J. Takemura, Personal communication, December 17, 2013). Because several of these children have had to face many obstacles it would seem easy to become hopeless. Especially if they did not have the skills to problem solve. If the children understand that obstacles are a part of life and that they can think and rationalize differently than they have seen in the past, they will better be able to handle life's challenges. Furthermore, if they effectively learn how to problem solve this will help many of their relationships. For example, instead of blowing up and getting angry, they can learn to express how they feel and communicate why they are feeling that way. If they can effectively communicate they can figure out a how to solve the issue.

Joanne Zylstra works for Childcare Worldwide, an international program that provides child sponsorships. When I spoke with her about the value of critical thinking for children at risk she said:

Critical thinking takes us from naive to discerning and all of us need that. We all do things based on our own circumstances but if we can learn from others and learn from their mistakes then that is a good thing. (J. Zylstra, personal communication, September 9, 2013)

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Zylstra made a good point in that thinking critically provides opportunities to learn from others. Critical thinking can offer knowledge that can assist in learning from mistakes, and figuring out how to move forward and grow from what is learned. If children can build healthy relationships with people that can teach them life skills, then they will better be able to succeed in life.

Moreover, another valuable aspect of critical thinking is that it can help teach children to think for themselves. It can help them make positive decisions and not get swayed by peer pressure into things that may be harmful for them. Meredith Stamey, another representative from Childcare Worldwide, said:

> Critical thinking and problem solving help the children think for themselves. Not just believing what other people tell them. It is extra valuable for people that don't come from a privileged life. They don't have to be what people expect them to be, but can make choices and think things through. This can do with corruption, or mistreatment, making new opportunities. (M. Stamey, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Stamey made a good point when she explained that the children do not have to become what people expect of them. Often times at-risk youth are judged or labeled in ways that are harmful to their self-esteem. If they are able to gain a new perspective of themselves and hope for a something new then they can do better. If they are able to see their worth and value, knowing that they are talented and gifted and have something to offer, then they can thrive.

Leadership

Collins (2001) discussed the difference between a good leader and a great leader. When describing a great leader he explained that great leaders are humble and hardworking, striving for excellence. He also said that great leaders care very much about the next generation or people to follow being even more successful (p. 39). Leadership can be shown through mentors and

positive adult remodels. If mentors are being good leaders themselves, then they can show children the care and effort they are giving in order to help the children develop and succeed in the future, and then ideally the children can learn from the mentor's example.

Furthermore, leadership is an important skill to teach the children so they can take initiative in their lives and gain skills that will help them make decisions. Harkavy (2007) wrote, "You can't effectively lead others until you've effectively led yourself" (p. 182). That is essential. It is necessary for children to be able to lead themselves so that they can critically think and make positive choices for themselves. If they are able to lead themselves then they will not be looking to others, that may not be the best influences, to lead them.

Furthermore, when describing qualities of a good leader, Kathryn Greene, the Dean of Women from Royal Family KIDS, said:

> Important characteristics of leaders are problem solving, listeners, willing to listen to others opinions not assume right, courage to make a decision that is right, love people well, know weakness this can make a team stronger, humility, admit wrongs, and be willing to learn. (K. Green, personal interview, December 18, 2013)

It important that leaders care about the needs of others and are able to listen and care for the people that they are leading.

Service

Serving others is also another important skill for many of these children to learn. The reason for that is giving and serving can be extremely empowering. When I traveled with the Ugandan Orphans Choir the children received many gifts from their host homes. Their perspective of Americans was based solely on the generosity of their host families and they

became used to being on the receiving end of that generosity. At one point we talked with the children and explained that this is not the case for all Americans. We explained that there are some who are homeless here in America and some who are poor and cannot afford nice clothes or food or basic necessities. After that the children decided to give away some of the things they received because their bags were overflowing. Their situation allowed them to see that they are not only recipients of generosity, but can also extend generosity as well.

Furthermore, I talked with the Royal Family Mentoring Director Kim Smith and she said one of the activities children participate in is giving away food baskets to those in need at Thanksgiving. Many of the children could relate because they had received similar baskets from people (personal communication, December 11, 2013).

Additionally, I spoke with Katelin Takemura, a Royal Family KIDS staff member. I asked her why she believed service was an important aspect of the program. She said:

> Life is about love and one aspect of love is being selfless and serving people. In a healthy household children get to experience that from their caregivers. Children at risk may not get that experience as much, so to teach and to demonstrate service with at-risk youth is something that can be healthy and life giving and make them more loving contributors to our world. (K. Takemura, personal communication, March 15, 2014)

When service is an active part of a mentor program, children are able to learn more about what it is to love your neighbor and to consider the needs of others in the world.

Resilience

Being able to cope with difficult circumstances is an important skill for children to learn. Greener (2003) explained, "Because exposure to trauma cannot be completely controlled, it is important to support qualities that encourage coping in all children, regardless of risk status" (p.

44). Resilience is an important tool that children can benefit from. Resilience can enable children to manage stress and overcome hardship in their lives. A mentorship program that provided children with lessons and tools that helped them overcome obstacles would be extremely valuable.

I spoke with Nat Tillis, a staff member from the Royal Family KIDS, and asked how incorporating resilience into a mentorship program would be beneficial. He said:

> If we are not resilient then we are held to confining expectations and we allow our circumstances to define us. If we are resilient then we can rise above and be triumphant and overcome. A program that focuses on equipping kids to be resilient is going to help them overcome their circumstances instead of leaving them hopeless. (personal communication, April 12, 2014)

Resilience can teach children to rise above difficult circumstances. It can give them the strength to overcome hardship and hope for something better.

Hope

The ability to hope is also essential for children to be able to move forward in life, it is the difference between surviving versus thriving. The word hope, according to the Merriam Webster's (n.d.) dictionary means: "to want something to happen or be true and think that it could happen or be true". For many of the children that have experienced painful things, such as abuse and neglect, hope can be difficult. Groody (2011) discussed Israel being delivered from Egypt (slavery) and with that a new perspective on life was also necessary to escape bondage. He explained:

> At Sinai, liberation from the empire means something more comprehensive than simply *taking off* the shackles of Egypt. It means *taking on* a new mind-set, adopting a new way

of looking at the world, living out a different narrative in one's personal and communal

life, and ultimately learning to love as God loves. (p. 35)

Moving from despair to hope means having a transformation of the mind. Change in perspective

is essential and it can be difficult, taking trust and time. That is why developing a program that

helps the children know what they are gifted in is so valuable. Through encouraging them and

building them up, seeds of hope can be planted in their lives.

Goudzwaard, Vander, and Van Heemst (2007) described hope as the morning star. They

wrote:

The biblical image of hope is the morning star. The morning star often appears between

two and three o'clock at night, when the darkness is complete and the faintest sign of

morning is not yet visible. So small that it threatens to vanish, the star seems unable to

vanquish the overpowering darkness. Yet when you see the morning star, you know that

the night has been defeated. The morning star brings the morning in behind it, just as

certainly as Jesus brings the kingdom in behind him. (p. 176-177)

Hope can be hard to see in the midst of despair; but, by encouraging the children to grow and

develop in their gifts and talents, they are provided with a chance to dream. To hope for more

than what they have in their current circumstance. To gain a new perspective and vision of how

they could write their stories.

While talking with Berg, the International Director at Childcare Worldwide, she

mentioned the importance of children having hope. She said, "In order to help kids move out of

poverty, they need to have not only education but hope and to believe they can get somewhere.

Gifts and talents help them shoot for those goals" (T. Berg, personal communication, August 27,

2013). Hope is important for children to have. They need to see that there is something they can

strive toward outside of their current circumstances. They need to know that there will be some kind of light at the end of the tunnel. When this occurs there is a reason for transformation. There is a reason to believe in their dreams. There is a reason for them to try better in school, in their relationships, and in their communities. This will enable them to thrive.

Conclusion

Mentorship is such a valuable tool for reaching out to at-risk youth. It can help build positive relationships, teach children healthy social, academic, and work skills, and enable them to become successful adults. Even more important, though, is that the programs are intentional. By understanding what the children's specific gifts and talents are, mentors can encourage the children in those areas that they excel in. It is empowering for children to understand their personal gifts and talents. It can help them grow in confidence and strive for more in life. Mentorship that focuses on gifts and talents can help give children hope and teach them different ways of looking at the world. If they understand that they are not limited, and are capable of anything, their lives have the potential to change from being another statistic to accomplishing great things and becoming a positive community member.

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