

# Youth's Perception of Mattering, Being Valued and Connecting to their Community

## Highlights

**Youth Mattering Definition** Youth's perception they are respected, trusted, valued, cared for by others, and able to make a difference in their community.

**Why it's Important?** Multiple studies demonstrate perceptions of significance and mattering to others is related to lower depression, anxiety, hostility, suicide and greater overall psycho-social wellbeing and adjustment in both adolescents and young adults. (Rosenberg & McCullough 1981; Marshall 2001, 2010, 2011; Taylor and Turner 2001, Dixon 2008, 2009; Tovar 2013; Whitlock 2004, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2014.)<sup>1</sup>

### Foundational *related* Theories and Research

- Belonging and attachment theories (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs)
- Identity and role formation theories (Erickson)
- Mattering to significant others and society (Rosenberg and McCullough)

### Recent Studies

In the past twenty years, the youth development field has incorporated the construct of "mattering to others" into its principles and themes of empowerment, connectedness, resiliency and best practices in youth programing.

Youth are empowered to the extent they feel valued, feel that others view them as resources and make contributions to the a larger whole . . .  
Scales & Leffert ~ Search Institute

- Connectedness (Resnick - connection to others and social institutions, are protective factors from adolescent problem behavior)
- Positive Youth Development framework (National Academy of Sciences, Pittman and Learner – The Five C's model including contribution)
- 40 Developmental Assets Model (Search Institute - Assets work synergistically. Youth who feel valued and useful by the community (*proxies for mattering*) are more likely to show multiple positive outcomes e.g. better mental health, higher self- concept, sense of optimism and less risk behaviors.
- Connection to community, belonging and mattering (Whitlock, foundational study on youth-community connectedness and mattering, provides insights and recommendations.)

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<sup>1</sup> Full report includes citations, recommendations and appendices. See, "Youth's Perception of Mattering, Being Valued and Connecting to their Community: A Summary of Literature and Best Practices", Becky Judd, 09.13. 2016.

## Considerations

- Youth's perceptions of significance and mattering are deeply imbedded within the family and cultural context.
- Youth develop based on their experiences across multiple social domains. The number of sectors youth feel connected to is more important than the specific domain in which connectedness occurs. This is an important implication for communities where changing the family context is less changeable than other contexts (Borowsky 1999).

Youth can feel like they matter or are valued by people they know at home and at school [*or in youth programs, clubs, sports*] -- but may be treated with hostility or ignored by strangers in the community.

This disparity can greatly undermine youth sense of connection to and feeling valued by the larger community.

Peter Benson

## Belonging, Meaning and Connection to Community (Whitlock)

### Community Connectedness

The degree to which youth perceive that they and other youth are cared for, trusted, and respected by adults, individually and collectively

This definition captures whether youth possess a sense of place, respect, and belonging that comes from believing that one and others like oneself are valued members of a society.

Janis Whitlock

Janis Whitlock has extensively studied adolescent's connection to schools and communities. Her research explores the multiple contexts for belonging and connectedness related to adolescent wellbeing and protection from self-harming behaviors.

Whitlock's initial studies explored why many young people believed that they were individually and collectively invisible to adults and adult systems. She conducted surveys, interviews and focus groups with 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders to explore student's perception of connectedness and belonging in their school and community.

Whitlock found youth connectedness to community (*potential proxy for mattering*) was influenced by:

- The nature and quality of youth-adult exchanges, among both known and anonymous adults.
- Perceived acceptance and being welcomed in public spaces (specifically businesses and adults on the street and in the neighborhood.)
- Availability of outlets for creative engagement, group involvement, and expression (that are developmentally appropriate.)
- Opportunities for meaningful involvement and input into community institutions, policies, and practices (well-advertised and highly visible.)
- Knowledge of community events and youth impact on community policy and practices.

## **Community-Based Best Practices to Increase Youth Mattering - Connectedness - Empowerment**

**Note:** The section excludes family and school based efforts to increase youth mattering and connectedness. There are not specific “best practice” studies examining youth’s perception of mattering and significance. There is a body of research related to increasing “youth connectedness, empowerment, and self-efficacy” through personal actions, within youth programs and community-wide strategies.

### **Personal (Community Member) Actions**

73% Anchorage adults connect with youth (not family members) through:

- their own children’s friends;
- as neighbors, and/or,
- the children of their adult friends.

*(Grading Grownups, Anchorage 2002)*

Specific suggestions from youth, themselves, may be found in the full report, see appendices, “Simple things community members can do to show youth you care and they matter. “

### **Intentional Developmental Relationships**

Five strategies to build positive relationships with young people (Roehlkepartain 2016.) Actions may range from simple gestures and exchanges to, one-on-one conversations with youth.

- Express care to young people.
- Support youth by working toward their goals and aspirations.
- Challenge and push youth to grow.
- Share power with young people, give them increasing autonomy and responsibility as they grow up.
- Expand their horizons.

### **Youth Program Best Practice - Resources**

While there is minimal specific research on formal programs to increase youth’s “perception of mattering and significance to others”, there is significant research on the best practices within programs that may lead to significance and mattering.

- *Community Programs to Promote Positive Youth Development*, National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002). The report identifies opportunities for self-efficacy and mattering, as one of eight fundamental features of a positive developmental setting.
- The Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality (2015) provides training for youth workers on best practices to that increases efficacy, mattering, and positive health outcomes.
- *Second Order Change* training increases Social Emotional Learning skills of youth program staff.
- *Positive Youth Development 101 Training* and an online PYD Handbook are provided by the ACT for Youth Center of Excellence.
- The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, has outstanding resources for organizations who want to develop youth-adult partnerships and incorporate authentic youth voice, leadership and engagement in decision making.

**Reminder:** It’s not the “program” itself, that increases connectedness, empowerment or perception of mattering to others. Rather, it is the intentional, formal and informal practices within the program, facilitated by a skilled youth worker (volunteer, coach, mentor, or teacher) that will increase youth feelings of connection, empowerment and sense of mattering.

## Community-Wide Strategies

Community mobilization efforts for healthy youth development typically galvanize around creating a new norm about young people. The new norm emphasizes engaging the whole community to, “view youth as resources to develop vs. problems to be solved.” This new norm views youth as healthy and capable of making constructive contributions to the quality of community life, rather than being inherently problematic in need interventions and management.

The best practices in community mobilization related to positive youth development may be found in the full report (see guidelines and recommendations from Advocates for Youth and the Search Institute.)

### Youth-Community Connectedness ~ Whitlock’s Insights & Recommendations

Whitlock’s study, *Places to Be and Places to Belong: Youth Connectedness in School and Community* (2004) provides recommendations to policy makers and practitioners, based on the youth surveys and focus group findings. Below are a few highlights the Anchorage Community Coalition may wish to consider (the complete list may be found in the full report.)

Connectedness for young people boils down to respect, the power to influence the conditions of their day-to-day lives and the sense that they mattered in school and community life . . .

Respect was not simply a by-product of a young person’s relationship with adults it was also a product of the silent norms, values and the system of treating in youth in institutions and public spaces.

Janis Whitlock

### Conveying Respect and Fostering Connection with Youth (Selected) Recommendations for Practitioners and Policy makers

- Create a “developmentally attentive culture” in school and community by targeting attitude change among adults – particularly those with regular but anonymous contact with youth such as business, police, and general community members.
- Create formal structures or forums for youth representatives to solicit input from their youth constituents. (Strategies to help youth represent a constituency need not be cumbersome. Help arrange focus groups, youth forums, town meetings or even youth developed and administered surveys periodically.
- Diversify the range of opportunities for youth to participate in community life; opportunities need not and should not be solely related to issues directly affecting youth.
- In designing initiatives, focus on the supports and opportunities that can create the greatest breadth and depth. (Focus on meaningful roles, creative engagement and positive relationships with adults.)
- Capitalize on the opportunities already provided to young people in schools [*and in the community*] by clearly advertising the roles youth play and the effects they have on school/*community* life.
- Actively recruit high-risk and/or low achieving youth for involvement in school and community level leadership opportunities.
- Increase the number of developmental supports young people perceive in school and community.
- Create engaging opportunities for youth of all ages in as many levels as possible.