Introduction

The ideas I want to discuss today come from my experiences designing, running and evaluating programs for adolescent girls and their families. These experiences provided many different sources of information: interviews, diaries, drawings, and letters revealing the myriad facets of girls’ lives; conversations and observations in homes, schools, centers, clinics, and streets of communities across the U.S. and in several other countries, as well. I have used all these data to study what works and what doesn’t and, most of all, to help me understand why.

My primary focus is on girls who become teenage mothers because I know them best, but equally because the truths revealed by their lives connect to such a broad range of developmental and practice concerns. Let me emphasize, however, that the public, politicians, and the press continue to fit from one over-simplified, one-dimensional youth crisis to another-teenage pregnancy, school failure, drug abuse, gangs, and so on-when, as you know, these have so many common roots. Adolescent childbearing is not so much the problem as it is the symptom of what has gone wrong in the lives of girls who become teenage mothers, both before and after they give birth. The only way to prevent this and other developmental detours is to build up the strengths and talents of young people and build on their potential for commitment, caring and leadership, especially when they are growing up with many risks and few resources.

The solutions lie not in programs by themselves but, rather, in using programs to transform-to enrich and broaden-the environment in which development takes place. Recognizing that much of what needs to be done needs to be done on the societal level, still, certain things can be accomplished by those who know and work with young people but it will require a shift in perspective and in approach. The time, has come to form new partnerships in our efforts to help youth find new and more productive pathways to adulthood-not just partnerships within our own worlds of schools, health and social service organizations, and community institutions, but partnerships with a much broader universe of people and places as well. Let me begin by telling you about meeting a young woman whose story started me thinking about, and searching for, these new pathways.

Donna was 20-years-old when I met her and the mother of a four-year-old child. She had attended a model program for adolescent mothers that was part of a multi-site demonstration. My co-researcher was looking at the young women who had done well in this program—that is, those who stayed to complete their high school education and job training, and I was studying participants who had dropped out before completing the program. Donna had left after only eight months, without getting her GED or starting the training part of the program. Thus, according to the research criteria, she had “failed.” After interviewing her, however, I came to believe that it was as much the program’s failure as hers. Indeed, in a number of ways, Donna was a success. She was providing a stable and stimulating environment for her daughter and had-on her own-permanently ended a long and self-destructive relationship with a violent man. She was also finishing her GED at a nearby community college. Yet, she was still unsure of her future direction in terms of career, and no one anywhere had provided guidance that fit her interests and talents. Tall, attractive and very distinctively dressed, Donna was an enterprising and artistic young woman. On very little money she managed to create a warm, interesting home for herself and her child, and to design and make her own unique clothing and jewelry. The training opportunities offered by the program she had abandoned were mainly for dental or medical assistants, cosmetologists, or computer operators.

Now I ask you-where is the fashion industry in the lives of creative young people like Donna? Where are the training opportunities for designers, managers, or buyers-to-be in national retail chains such as The GAP or The Limited; or in the large fashion stores of her state such as Macy’s, Nordstroms or Neiman Marcus? Where are the apprenticeships and job shadowing or mentoring programs to stimulate and nourish the aspirations of high school age youth and offer them a vision of what they could do? For that matter, where are the arts programs that used to be part of junior high and high school curricula? Every time a school district drops art (or drama, music, sports, or any special interest club, group, etc.), they “lose” five or 10 or 20 young people who could use the skills and knowledge gained there to lift themselves up. But more about this later. Let’s return to the lives of girls who become adolescent mothers.

Girls’ Lives

In addition to the more obvious negative forces impinging on the lives of girls growing up in poverty, there is a cluster of underlying, intertwined factors affecting their development and lessening their ability to do right for themselves. These are the hidden
dimensions of teenage childbearing—the indirect, but powerful, determinants of motivation and behavior. Given their influence, most of the current debate on teen pregnancy is absurdly naive and short-sighted, both in terms of why adolescents have babies and in terms of the incentives society can provide for them to take more productive routes. Today, there is time to focus on only one of these dimensions but it is a defining one because of its role in obstructing personal development and change.

Even girls with a great deal of potential can be held back by psychological barriers which prevent them from seizing and making use of educational and vocational and social opportunities. These barriers are created by the experience of growing up and remaining strongly embedded in troubled families without meaningful sustained exposure to other ways of being, and other kinds of people.

I have written extensively on the developmental effects of sexual abuse and will not go into this issue today, except as it relates to the need for healthier pathways for youth. In the years before adolescence, to control a girl’s body is to control her mind; in this way, inappropriate sexual socialization acts as a kind of “brain-washing,” shaping the girl’s sense of who she is and what she can do. If her first lessons of sexuality are taught through force, coercion or trickery, her capacity for self-efficacy is affected—that sense that she controls her own destiny and can, by her actions, make a difference. Although boys also suffer such abuse, they tend to externalize their feelings, identifying with their abusers and often becoming sexual predators themselves. Girls, on the other hand, are more likely to internalize negative messages about themselves and continue to find themselves in the victim role. As one girl said, “Girls, I think they don’t give a care because they get sexually abused and they will go around just jumping into any other boy’s bed ... After it happens they feel so cheap and sleazy and they don’t care about life anymore. (They think) They are hurting me, so why shouldn’t I hurt myself? They don’t care. Why should I care? So they will go out and, you know, ruin their lives more.”

This is just one way that premature and exploitative sexual socialization affects later self-competence by creating a defeatist attitude. Another way is by diverting the girl from the key developmental task of the school years—to acquire the range of skills necessary for success in the world beyond home and neighborhood—first, the world of school, then that of society. If a girl’s experiences rob her of the energy and motivation for this task, the price will be high in terms of industry, efficacy and pride—and she may spend the rest of her life paying for it. Here is how another girl puts it: “I feel so sick for the way I grew up. There are so many things I’ve been through that I never should have. I always feel like going back to the age of 12 and doing it all over again. I hate the fact of having sex so young. I would like to forget that part of my life. Too bad I can’t. I should have stayed in school and went to college and went on to be somebody.”

Used by others to serve their own needs, with little concern for her as a person, aspects of her identity are affected. “Who am I?” asks the adolescent: “Someone who exists to meet others’ needs,” answer those who have been so used.

The experiences of the years before adolescence shape a girl’s self-image and notions about who she is and what she can do. Without the base of skills in her social and intellectual portfolio to hold her on course, she is ill-prepared for the many challenges of adolescence itself. This is especially true in communities where there are many risks and few positive alternatives for young people; many who exploit them and few who shield and protect them; and where there are few adults who actively guide them forward and many who wish to divert and to hold them back. Certainly, sexual abuse is a harmful experience for privileged girls as well; but, and this is the point I want to stress, those girls have greater access to hobbies and sports and lessons and therapy; they have more educational opportunities, role models, and domains for developing competency. All these “external” factors can be used to compensate for their “internal” difficulties. Thus they are less socially isolated and locked into the troubles of home. Programs cannot break the hold of girls’ negative past and present life circumstances without serious sustained efforts to expand girls’ horizons; and they cannot do that unless they expand their own.

The disadvantaged young women I know are continually exposed and re-exposed to forces that mitigate against their choosing and sticking to positive routes to a productive adulthood. Thus, what others objectively view as opportunities and options-positive alternatives girls could be choosing instead of early motherhood—are not subjectively, psychologically available to them because (1) the emotional risks of setting themselves apart from emotionally significant people in their lives are too frightening; (2) the rewards are too far off and vague; (3) the foundation of necessary experiences and skills is absent, as are (4) the adults to consistently guide, support, and give them psychological permission to follow other paths—that is, to dare to live different, and possibly, better lives than those around them. Think of what it means to be the first woman in your family to finish school, go to college, move away from the neighborhood, have a job, etc.

These conclusions are based on a phenomenon I call “failure at the moment of potential growth” whereby the young woman drops out (of a program, or school, or training), or she becomes pregnant, on the brink of a significant, positive change in her life. Often, this change concerns something she seemed to have wanted for herself, or at least to have said that she did. I began to wonder if this overtly self-sabotaging behavior meant the young woman was not psychologically ready for change if it represented being different than significant others—her sisters, friends, and especially her mother-those who confer and validate her sense of identity. Fear- ing she may jeopardize her connection to these important attachment figures, the young woman may fail on the brink of success. In this way, dropping out or becoming pregnant may serve as (unconscious) escape mechanisms for young women who are not emo-
otionally ready to step into unfamiliar territory and risk “losing” those on whom they depend for emotional sustenance. Thus, there is a special meaning of adolescent childbearing in relation to being unprepared for such change.

In spite of (or, perhaps, because of) a depriving or difficult relationship with her mother, many a girl still longs for maternal love and approval and keeps, often fruitlessly, searching for it. One dare not gamble with such an insecure, tenuous attachment. Interestingly, I have observed a number of successful adolescent mothers who managed to find a more enabling mother for themselves—someone who would help them raise themselves up and furnish them with the guidance, modeling, and encouragement they knew they would need to move up and out in the world. Here two young mothers describe their perceptions of how their partners’ family life differs from their own:

“He has someone to sit down and ask, ‘How do you feel today?’... How are things going with you? I don’t know too many people to ask me those questions... It’s basically on me to sit down and say to myself, ‘Well, are you O.K. today, Andrea? How do you feel?’”

“Lou’s mom, his sisters, they’re all really nice to me. They work hard constantly. Always working. [Lou’s mom], she’s really nice. She’s a church lady. I think [she] really raised them up good... She did a good job. I wish I had a mom like that.”

These young women have found themselves not only new partners but new and better mothers (and families) as well. They know (intuitively, if not always consciously) that such relationships are key ingredients in the construction of better lives for themselves and their families.

Just as a failure at the moment of potential growth can indicate anxiety about the emotional consequences of change, self-sabotaging behaviors may also signal the girl’s awareness that she is unprepared to successfully make (and maintain) a transition to a different kind of life in terms of her education, social skills, experience or exposure. We need to take a hard look at what we expect any intervention to do and ask: Were participants’ experiences sufficiently transformative so that now they are truly equipped to do something other than what they are already doing? There is a great deal of talk about helping disadvantaged adolescents to “feel better about themselves” but, in reality there is no feeling better that is not based on being able to “do better” as well. Does the girl really have a new repertoire of valuable skills she didn’t have before? How well are these skills consolidated, and can they be flexibly used in a range of settings to help her set and realize new goals? How motivated is she to improve and use these skills? Ambitions based on competencies can be fulfilled; they are the rudders for keeping girls on course through the turbulent years of adolescence and young adulthood.

There is also plenty of talk about how issues such as teenage pregnancy are complicated, but are they really so difficult to understand? All young people need real grown-ups to help them become decent human beings and contributing members of society. All young people need a web of caring adults as protectors, mentors, models, teachers, guides. All young people need adults who hold and reinforce high expectations for them, personally helping them acquire the skills to meet these expectations or finding and linking them to others who can do so. Young people need even more support if their struggles to succeed make them different than most of the people they are growing up with and around.

For the disadvantaged adolescent girl, achievement often means traveling to a new land, a place she may have little in common with others. It therefore requires the will and ability to identify and become attached to, new reference groups; to find and bond to new, emotionally significant others—those who are successful in wider worlds beyond home and community; to do as one girl says she does, “I look for respect and encouragement to better myself.” Change calls for potentially risky transformations in her relationships with family, friends or partners, and even though success does not really estrange her from them, she may unconsciously fear that it will. At the same time, if she is determined to move ahead, she may deliberately distance herself from those she feels are holding her back, almost as if she believes that becoming a winner requires separating herself from losers—even when these are people she cares deeply about. Perhaps also, in her struggle to succeed, she must defend herself against similar weaknesses in herself. Distancing can therefore be interpreted as a marker of the young woman’s sense that she must change partners to change herself—whether such partners are friends, family, or mates. It also signals a need to see herself as different (and, yes, perhaps better) than others in order to do so.

“Ray was immature as far as growing as a person. He didn’t want me to grow and I refused to let anyone stop my growth. He didn’t want me to go to school. He was real aggressive, be liked to fight. He fought me once and I refused to get into a relationship where I was afraid... He was a fool. I’m glad I didn’t marry him.”

“I was to myself. The girls... around me...I think all of them are silly. These are the type that run after men...they got baby after baby.”

“We need to move cause nobody likes me. They would pull me down...they think I’m conceited cause I go to school...I stay to myself... because I’m always on the go. I try to stay away from a bad environment...trying to get in school and work. It’s only to better myself. I don’t want to live over here. I got in school and got a certificate to work computers. I won’t have nothing if I just sit.”

Recognizing that there are a variety of motives underlying teenage childbearing, still its role as a means of escape from challenges or changes is an important one. To turn back at a moment of potential growth is to avoid—at least temporarily—not only the risk of failure because one is unprepared but also the risk that one’s success may alienate significant others—perhaps forever. As one young woman observed:
“I think when one person’s not doing good, then you know it’s really hard to see someone else doing good... A lot of people just discourage me.”

Consider for a moment how a well-meaning program for young mothers might inadvertently compound their social isolation and lock in cycles of self-defeating behavior. Here, three adolescent mothers discuss, in positive terms, the fact that they and their fellow program participants had certain things in common and were all equal.

“Everybody was in the same position; everybody had kids, everybody was on aid, nobody was better than anybody else.”

“I really felt comfortable in my surroundings... We were all equal. Nobody was different.”

“You were with a bunch of girls that were having the same problems as you. They were young and had babies.”

Yet, their behavior gave ample evidence that these programs, where they had felt so comfortable, had had little real impact on their lives, being unable to counteract the powerful forces holding them back in the past and continuing to do so in the present. If one does not have something else they want to do and are now prepared to do as well, if nothing has really changed, why not have another baby?

It goes without saying that we want young people to feel good about themselves but, as noted earlier, they must be able to “do good” as well. While feeling comfortable may be a necessary first step, it does not provide a sufficient foundation for taking the next step. Meaningful change requires the risk of moving beyond the familiar. If those working with young people do not see their mission as expanding their horizons, who will?

New Partners in an Extended Environment

Sixteen years ago, I directed a National Institute of Mental Health-funded research and demonstration program for mentally ill mothers and their young children. My colleagues and I continued to follow these families for a number of years and found that some of the children were doing quite well in spite of being raised by mothers with serious psychiatric problems. In trying to isolate factors underlying these children’s achievements, one maternal childrearing variable stood out; the mother’s capacity to seek and use outside resources on her child’s behalf. Mothers of successful children had created an extended environment by introducing their children to what the wider world had to offer. Recognizing that a range of other adults—teachers, coaches, tutors, recreational counselors, religious leaders, neighbors, etc.—possessed a range of skills and interests that they did not have, they sought these people out and actively encouraged their children to learn from them. At the same time, these mothers also reduced their children’s isolation by encouraging them to socialize with their peers outside the confines of school, inviting schoolmates over to play (even in preschool), and allowing their children to spend time at these children’s homes as well. At the other end of the spectrum were the mothers who subtly, but steadily, thwarted their children’s attempts to move beyond their orbit and develop themselves as separate individuals. As these children approached puberty, they were markedly less competent in terms of school, and in terms of social relations with adults and other children.

This situation has, I think, a number of parallels to work with youth growing up in difficult circumstances. The young people we work with need different types of assistance and perhaps different kinds of people to provide these in addition to ourselves. Although educators and medical, mental health and social service providers, community youth workers, counselors, juvenile justice officials, etc. all have many gifts to give, no single individual or discipline or institution has all the skills—and all the contacts in the various arenas of education, occupation and avocation—to help youth discover and develop a range of interests and talents.

We willingly and ably provide case management around problems that call for psychological or medical or educational or legal intervention. What about another type of “case management”—one that links young people to theater groups, photography classes, summer internships, special interest clubs and camps, entrepreneurship opportunities? What about finding other people beyond our sphere to create and sustain their commitment to such initiatives? Creating environments that genuinely promote potential rather than simply preventing or treating problems calls for new sets of players and possibilities, and it calls for these on much more than a sporadic, drop-in-the-bucket basis.

Having spent much of my career in the field of human services, I know they are not the sole vehicles for solving poverty’s problems. The youth we care about are not only our children, they are everyone’s children. Sad to say, “everyone” does not yet realize it. This is partly because we have allowed ourselves to take on what should be a shared responsibility but it is mainly because, as a nation, America is so strongly wedded to the ethic of “every family for itself,” “every person for his or herself.” Those not directly concerned with youth who need all the encouragement, exposure and assistance they can get see them as other people’s problems and other people’s failures. The writer, Barbara Kingsolver, goes to the heart of this matter in her essay, “Somebody’s Baby,” when she describes the outpouring of letters to the newspaper when her city voted on a school budget override:

“I don’t have kids, a typical letter writer declared, ‘so why should I have to pay to educate other people’s offspring?’

The budget increase was voted down, the school district progressed from deficient to desperate, and I longed to ask that miserly nonfather just whose offspring be expects to doctor the maladies of his old age.”

Later she writes:

“Here in the land of plenty a child dies from poverty every 53 minutes and TV talk shows exhibit teenagers who pierce their flesh with safety pins and rip off their parents every

Frankly, I don’t know exactly how to go about it but something must be done. We must engage new partners in our efforts to open the eyes of youth to new ideas, people, settings and experiences—beyond the boundaries of their current world. Organizations, industries, groups and individuals from “outside” have indispensable roles to play in directing the energy, idealism and talent of youth in positive ways. Looking at other societies, we frequently find that the adults have as their responsibility to (gradually) introduce and socialize youth into their future roles. Here we often allow that to happen by default: That is, we leave those grown-ups leading the least productive, most destructive lives as the dominant role models for kids growing up poor—those adults and those paragons of virtue they see on TV.

Lately, I’ve been investigating a wide range of initiatives for preadolescent, adolescent and young adult women, both here and in other countries. Although naturally these initiatives reflect the social and economic contexts of the community or country in which they take place, all basically deal with the same developmental and psychosocial themes. Many offer useful insights about bringing in new partners on behalf of youth. Let me give some examples.

Several years ago, I visited a program for street girls in the northeast region of Brazil, an exceptionally poor part of that country. The program provides first rate social and psychological services for a very high risk population and a safe haven away from the violence around them. The project’s founder and director, an outspoken lawyer, advocates for these girls with health and governmental authorities and tries to educate the public about the realities of their lives—on television, in speeches, etc. Most importantly, she is committed to their acquiring useful, marketable skills as alternatives to the dangerous work of prostitution most are engaged in—otherwise, she knows they will remain on an accelerating downhill course. Within the program, there is education and occupational training for the girls but, equally, girls are brought out beyond the walls of the program; and beyond the boundaries of the favela to be advocates for improved living conditions for the poor. In this way, the program develops girls’ caring and leadership capacities which they then deploy through organizing and social action on their own and others’ behalf. To those who say to her, “Why bother, there are few jobs and no future for the poorest of the poor in this country and city,” the director counters, “by the time these girls leave here they are changed women and whatever jobs there are, they get, or they create them for themselves.”

I have also met some extraordinary people working with and for girls in Kenya, as well as Brazil. Many of these youth leaders are educated women from the privileged upper classes in these countries. For example, one of the founders of a very innovative program for street girls in Kenya is a former high ranking member of the government who left her post to do this work. Interestingly, she is also a lawyer by training. Her partners in setting up the program were women from the fields of social work and health/family planning. The point here is that these adults are there psychologically and these girls know and appreciate it. They also have power and access to people and resources that open doors for these girls. Although it is critical that adults from the community be involved (and employed) in programs for youth, young people’s sources of inspiration and assistance need not always be similar to themselves.

Looking beyond our own walls, we need to ask, for example, what can we do for creative young people? And here I mean “creative” in the broadest sense. Certainly, there are many talented youth who could be successful chefs or designers, landscape architects, photographers, artists or artisans—youth who need only a chance to refine, extend, enhance and use their talents. Perhaps they will only use their talent as launching pads for forays into wider social and vocational worlds, taking money earned by what they create to pay for further education or training. Perhaps new skills and interests acquired as entrepreneurs will eventually lead them into the world of business, or who knows where? Even a micro-enterprise such as designing and selling T-shirts or jewelry can provide an adolescent (or preadolescent) with rich experience. In the process of creating and producing products, girls learn how to manage and save money; how to provide and take pride in quality goods and services; and how to present themselves to the public and compete in the marketplace.

So many young people do not fit the mold like the young mother I described earlier. So much potential unseen, untapped, and ultimately unrealized is a senseless and tragic loss for our communities and our country. Authentic self-sufficiency is based on sustained exposure to a range of people and possibilities, and sustained, positive experiences that enable one to develop as a full human being. Such a person can indeed make a job as well as take a job.

When girls have more to lose than to gain by a pregnancy—when they see other ways of being, they will have other aspirations. When they have a chance to gain the skills and supports to realize these aspirations, they will think before they act unwisely. When they are exposed to different versions of productive adulthood, and have opportunities to try on a variety of occupational identities and practice the skills these call for, fewer girls (and boys) will be lost. Young people growing up in disadvantaged circumstances need many more chances to develop their dreams and capabilities as future engineers and electricians, craftsmen and cartoonists, scientists and sales managers, and so on.

As I said earlier, I do not know how to do what must be done, but we have to start somewhere. At the Ounce of Prevention Fund, we are starting by engaging people active in the field of women’s economic development and with business leaders and entrepreneurs, exploring how their work with adults can inform our work with girls from five to 20 years of age. Then, we can combine such initiatives with those I have described earlier to create whole new opportunities for our young people...
economic development approaches with our traditional social service, child and adolescent development, health and family support approaches to create new models that promote leadership and skills development for girls and young women.

The new models will offer pre-adolescent and adolescent girls opportunities to spend meaningful time in a variety of work settings and to participate in cottage industries, entrepreneurial and micro-enterprise initiatives. New experiences will not be limited to the world of work alone. There will be sports, arts and cultural activities, workshops, field trips, and hobby groups to help girls develop a range of interests and competencies. These interests and abilities may indeed be transferable to future employment settings, but they are also the same skills and competencies that all people need to do well throughout their lives and to feel good about themselves.

Service providers, especially those who work with young women, tend to be maternalistic. This plays out in a too strong focus on our participants’ needs for nurturing and their roles as victims rather than on them as strong and effective young women for whom we have high expectations. They may need to do more for themselves in order to feel genuinely better about themselves. We can move from the notion of services as instruments of change to the creation of environments where girls become the instruments of change in their own lives-normalizing, development-enhancing settings for youth doing well and for those already at risk. But we cannot, and should not, do this alone. In doing so, we inadvertently compound the social and physical isolation that keeps so many young people from moving forward in healthy, productive ways. Think of everyone and everything that could be brought into what should be a shared vision and shared enterprise. The young people we work with need the same things that everyone else’s sons and daughters need to grow up strong and smart and sure. Let’s not let everyone else forget that these are their kids, too.