

Common Ground: Reintegrating Kids Into Our Communities

Written by Laura Grace Weldon

Friday, 01 June 2012 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 15 August 2013 09:10

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I'd read that nursing home residents benefitted enormously from contact with therapy dogs. During and after dog visits, these elders were more alert and in better moods. So I figured, why not bring my baby to a nursing home?

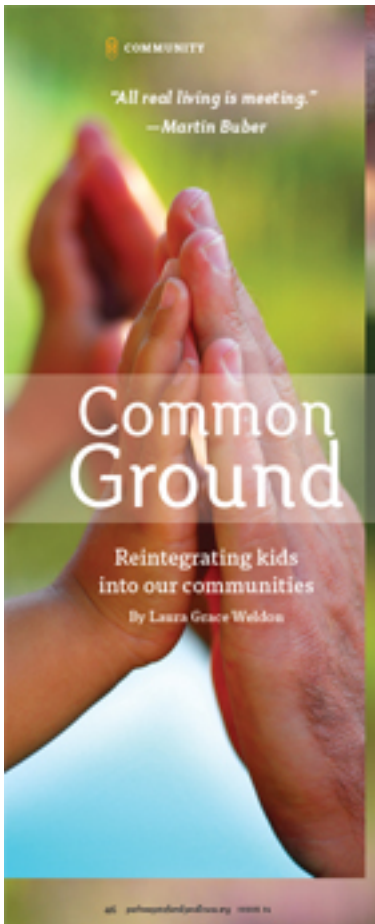
I contacted the nursing home around the corner. The administrator was enthusiastic. Then I talked my Le Leche League friends into forming a nursing homebased playgroup for our infants and toddlers. They were somewhat wary, but agreed to give it a try. Finally I got a local store to donate a carpet remnant for our little ones to crawl and play on. Between visits, the nursing home could roll it up for storage. We were ready.

We met regularly at that nursing home for several years. Our babies grew into toddlers, and the elders became our friends. Residents' families and staff members often told us that our visits stimulated memories, generated activity, and even inspired people who were mostly mute to say a few words. We were awed. Something as simple as our presence there, sitting on the carpet playing with our children, made a difference to people whose once full lives were now constricted. We benefitted, too. We learned the value of advice given by people older than our grandparents. And we noticed how completely our toddlers accepted the physical and mental differences around them with natural grace.

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I'm still not sure why the very old and young are kept apart from life-on-the-commons. Vital and engaged communities are made up of all ages. Children have fewer opportunities to take an active part than almost any adult. This shortchanges everyone.

Throughout history, the young of our species have learned by getting involved. Children long to take on real responsibilities and make useful contributions.

This is how they advance in skill and maturity. Unless, that is, we restrict them to child-centered activities.

Young people are also drawn to seek mentors. They want to see how all sorts of people handle crises, start businesses, make repairs, settle disputes, and stay in love. But today's young people are largely kept from meaningful engagement with the wider community. They're segregated by age not only in day care and school, but also in most spheres of recreation, religion, and entertainment. When we keep kids from purposeful and interesting involvement with people of all ages, they are pushed to find satisfaction in other (often less beneficial) ways. Meanwhile, our communities are deprived of their youthful energy and innovative outlook.

It doesn't have to be that way. There are ways to reconnect children with our communities.

Involve children by giving them real input and responsibility in civic groups, churches, co-ops, CSAs, arts associations, clubs and neighborhood organizations. Perhaps a child is a dedicated rock enthusiast, but the

local lapidary club only accepts adult members. Propose a youth adult/child membership, giving that child the same (age factored) opportunity to build social capital in the club. A similar approach can be taken with organizations that refuse to take youthful volunteers. Offer to give your time in partnership with the child, a two-for-one volunteer bargain. Adult advocates are often necessary to pave the way for genuine youth involvement in many groups.

Give children contact with the workplace world. They need to know people with a range of hobbies and careers. Seek out those who are passionate about their work, bird watching, farming, the Civil War, engineering, astronomy, haggling, geology, MacGyvering, wood carving, drumming...well, you get the idea. Something vital is transmitted when one person's enthusiasm sets off a spark of interest in a child. We're rarely turned down when we ask to learn from others. People who love what they do can't help but inspire kids and, they often tell me, the kids reignite their hope for the future of their work.

Help local businesses tune in to children's interests. For example, a bakery might hang children's art on the walls, make meeting space available for a kids' chess club, host lemon & cookie contests, open the kitchen for tours, offer apprenticeships to aspiring young pastry chefs, teach parent-child baking classes, invite painters

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to explain the science of yeast and flour, give cupcakes as prizes for youth community volunteer hours, etc. Businesses that are truly engaged in this way inspire loyal customers, and also enrich the community.

Create age bridging partnerships, as we did with babies and nursing home residents. Nonprofit organizations are great places to start. One successful program, called Girlfriend Circle, started due to coincidence. A group of women at a senior center often told a volunteer that they had no hope for the future because children "neverday" are rude. The volunteer offered to set up a tea party for the ladies that included her daughters and their friends. At that first event the girls were seated between their older grandmothers. Everyone enjoyed a lesson in etiquette origins. Then they took part in a Q&A to learn about one another. After sharing refreshments, both age groups were eager to meet again. The Girlfriend Circle met bi-monthly for several years, finding their friendships infectious and rewarding.

Include young people in civic affairs, giving them genuine input into programs and policies. This works in Hampton, Virginia. Young people take leadership roles by holding conferences and open forums, advising municipal divisions, and helping to run the Hampton Youth

RECONNECTING CHILDREN

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"Community involvement is a path to wholeness."



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