

# Reaching Teens: Preparing You to Become the Kind of Adult Young People Need in Their Lives

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## ■ The Primacy and Power of Relationships

Human relationships are the key to building strong, successful youth and to healing those who have endured hardships. Certainly, when their homes offer safe, secure, and sustained relationships, children thrive. But can a relationship outside a home, especially if the home did not offer what the developing child needed and deserved, make a difference? And can relationships still make that much of a difference to teenagers? Yes, when they are safe, secure, and sustained. Yes, when they are thoughtful and intentional. Yes, when they help young people be seen the way they deserve to be seen.

●● Our aim is to prepare you to become one of the adults who can surround youth with the protective and nurturant relationships they deserve. Welcome. ●●

Dear Cecily,

*There is probably nothing harder than properly expressing gratitude to someone who has changed your life. There is no way I can ever express or even quantify the impact you had, in both big and small ways. But I will try to thank you and tell you how you have changed my life and, through that, my children's lives and the lives of so many other children and families for whom I now try to change the world.*

*Have you ever experienced what it feels like to not belong somewhere? To feel the pain, loneliness, and shame of feeling like you are being judged, like you are unwanted, like you are less than others? I hope for most, that feeling is specific to time-limited situations. However, for me, like too many children who have been system involved, being labeled and unwanted defined my entire childhood and young adult life and limited my perception of myself and my concrete opportunities. I grew up in foster care, with a father who was incarcerated and a mother who was severely mentally ill. I spent most of my childhood moving through children's institutions, both behind bars in*

*juvenile halls and in other facilities...group homes and shelters that didn't have bars but still felt like kid prisons.*

*And like for so many youth who grow up in systems, my "history," whether it was my "placement history," my "hospitalization history," my "treatment history," my "delinquency history," or my "family pathology history," had never helped anyone to understand me better nor provided valuable insight into who I was. Instead, my history had served as a block, a wall, chains I tried to break free from time after time without success. My history had been a barrier to having a normal childhood and to gaining so many opportunities: it was used to make me ineligible for a family placement, to make me ineligible for housing programs, to make me ineligible to be in a normal, mainstream high school classroom where I could learn and make friends. I often fantasized about breaking into my social worker and group homes' offices and stealing and burning that horrible case file that contained what was supposedly the entirety of my life, my being, but, instead, actually was hundreds of pages of half-told stories, secondhand information, or speculation that once captured in writing seemed to become uncontestable fact. My history, rather than helpful, had often been harmful to anyone seeing my potential, supporting my progress, or helping me to set higher expectations for myself.*

*I feel lucky that I met you at 18, so you could get to know me beyond the labels and incidents you would have inevitably been presented with if I was still a minor. What if before you met me you learned that I had been arrested for assaulting group home staff and then was assessed to be such a serious threat to that staff's safety that I was hospitalized for 3 months? What if you heard that I had been diagnosed with multiple mental health problems and had spent my time in foster care in restrictive group homes, "psych" hospitals, juvenile hall, and special education classrooms? What if you heard that I had been arrested for prostitution several times before the age of 15? You would have probably thought you knew something about me from all that information; you would have imagined you understood details about my personality and my potential as a human.*

*Luckily, you got to know me, before the labels, so I could tell you the second half of the stories—that the assaults in my group homes occurred after I had reached my breaking point of tolerance and fear of a staff who was sexually abusive, that prostitution was the only way I had of being responsible and paying rent for a safe place to live as a child runaway, that the placements were the only ones that were available and I learned most of my "crazy" behavior in them.*

*What counteracts the darkness of feeling like your life matters to no one? For me, it was YOU and your ability to see me, not as a label but as a strong and resilient young woman who was more than her environment and her behavior. When we met, I was still struggling, having just "aged out" of my last foster care facility and enrolled in Job*

*Corps to get a GED and job training to survive. But you didn't focus on the struggle; you focused on the strength. The hope you had for me, the way you accepted me, the grace with which you helped me redefine the world and introduced me to human kindness and goodness opened up the world to me and helped me redefine who I was. I wanted to live up to the high expectations, respect, and kindness you held for me.*

*In quiet therapy sessions, you made me feel heard, feel like I mattered, and feel like I was worthy and special. You did not fixate on the parts of me that were broken and ugly. You did not see me as my prior social workers, therapists, and psychiatrists had: as a collection of the worst things I did on the worst days I ever had. You did not give me a diagnosis. Or at least not a clinical one. You told me I most needed friends and a MOTHER. You were the first one to acknowledge the hole that existed in my heart and soul without family and community. You knew that no therapeutic goal was more important than relationships and love. You gave me a place in this community to belong when I had never belonged anywhere or to anyone.*

*You met me when I was so unlovable, most importantly, to myself. You saw me as Jennifer, not a foster youth, not a delinquent youth, not a special education youth, not ANY label preceding the word youth. In your office, I was a whole person. In your role as my therapist, you modeled for me what I would someday do as an advocate, a mentor, and a mother. I'm sure I drove you crazy, but you let me learn how to grow up and navigate the adult world with your support. Your therapy hours included transporting and spending hours assembling my first furniture purchase...a ridiculous and complex wooden bed that was totally impractical but thrilling to someone who had never had anything of my own.*

*You never judged me. When I ended up struggling through the common situations that young adults who are alone in the world often do...living in a "drug house," being homeless in a semitruck, and then existing in a relationship where I was sad more than happy...you gently shared what a healthy relationship with your husband felt like, how being with someone who loves you could feel like a gift rather than a burden. You told me I deserved to be happy.*

*When I work with policy makers now who want to coldly quantify outcomes for our children and youth into avoidance of homelessness, lack of dependence on public assistance, college degrees, and employment, I repeat what you taught me before I understood what you meant. None of that matters if they are not happy. If they are not loved. If they do not belong. If they do not feel free. That is always the end goal.*

*You gave me something good and kind and powerful to grow into becoming. There is nothing more transformative in our lives, in our families, in our communities, and in the world. I try to channel you in the world as an advocate, as a community member, as a mother. When I held my first baby in my arms, I knew I wanted to be the kind of mother you are. My children will never know what they owe you for teaching me the*

*power of love. Even though I had never had a mother or a road map for mothering, I knew I wanted to be like you when I grew up: connected and present and always full of love and light and smiles.*

*You saw the power in what was possible in me. Your hope and kindness allowed me to grow into an advocate who is able to resist and work to change the world. I try to do that like you: kindly, with love and with hope and with seeing the best even in people where the worst is so obvious. When I look at broken systems, I refuse to accept they cannot transform into agencies who improve lives and improve communities. Just like you expected ME to transform. That kind of hope is contagious.*

*How can I ever thank you? It's not enough for what you have done for me and my children and likely their children as well, but I try to thank you by leading change in the same systems that I grew up in. I am now lucky enough to be in a position to change systems so they actually heal and support youth through love, relationships, and opportunity, rather than incarceration. As a lawyer and director of a national advocacy organization, I work across the country through litigation, policy reform, and system advocacy to infuse systems with the same powerful hope that you invested in me. Your hope for who I could be pushed me from GED, to community college, to law school, to leader. Your hope for me resulted in a life for myself and my children that no one, including me, would have ever thought realistic or possible. Your hope planted the first seeds of my current work each day to build new approaches that recognize children's beauty, complexity, and humanity. The way I see youth today and advocate for them is exactly the way you saw and advocated for me.*

*It is easy to see someone's value once they have their life together. Easy to be a member of the fan club when they look shiny and pretty. What is so difficult and extraordinary and CRITICAL is to be people like you who see the hearts, ideas, and souls in all of us who are hard to see behind messy circumstances and behaviors. People like you who embrace those of us who have been told we don't belong, whether because of our background, skin color, language, immigration status, criminal record, or mental or physical health condition. People like you who become fan club members ONLY because we are a human who matters and who deserves compassion.*

*I regularly have people tell me that I have helped them imagine a different vision for our children and our systems. That work of transforming our systems started with you having a different vision for me that dismissed labels and embraced potential. I am so grateful. Thank you for all that you have done for me, for all that others like you do daily, and for the love, kindness, and real help you provide to youth, families, and communities. Love is justice in its truest form, and there is no greater gift you could have given me.*

*Love,  
Jennifer*

—Jennifer Rodriguez, JD; Executive Director of the Youth Law Center; and Reaching Teens Assistant Editor for Foster Care Professionals and Families

## ■ The Imperative of Building Youth

The science is clear: childhood is a time of profound emotional, social, behavioral, and physical development. Adolescence is the second window of astoundingly rapid growth and development. If we are to build the next generation of adults prepared to lead us into the future and to repair our world, we need to develop children and adolescents to their full potential.

It is equally clear, however, thanks to the relatively new, but robust and building, literature on the effects of trauma, that when children and adolescents experience toxic levels of stress, it affects their bodies, behaviors, and developing brains (see Chapter 36, *The Impact of Trauma on Development and Well-being*). Furthermore, the field of epigenetics helps us understand that when young people's genes respond to challenging or traumatizing environments, the genes are altered and may pass along those changes to future generations. This changes everything. It means that we must protect, nurture, and build our youth as the key strategy for humanity to move forward.

The knowledge of how toxic stress and trauma affect youth holds potential to help us heal the rifts that have plagued humanity. We have long known that bad things have run in communities and that if bad things happen to a grandparent, they are more likely to happen to the grandchild. To explain these realities, simplistic explanations were created—we blamed the communities and families. This othering is the root of much of the suffering that has afflicted humanity.

*We stand at an inflection point in human history.* We now know that in communities under stress, in which families experience marginalization and oppression, adult stress is magnified, and adults, therefore, must focus on basic survival issues. This may increase the prevalence of trauma-inducing circumstances and may interfere with adults having the internal resources and time to fill their vital role in creating nurturant, secure relationships with their children. Children struggle. The cycle continues.

“Victim blaming” could stop if we all agreed that we must commit to protecting every young person, to giving adequate resources for every one of them to develop, and to supporting the families and communities in which they are reared. In sum, our future depends on us taking an intergenerational approach that supports the families and the communities who surround the children. Fostering the healthy development of our children *and adolescents* is the key to our future. *Reaching Teens* is, at its core, focused on preparing you to be one of the adults who can surround youth with the protective and nurturant relationships they deserve.

The italicized phrase *and adolescents* in the above sentence is laden with meaning. Not too long ago, childhood was considered a holding pattern for adulthood. Adolescence, itself, was a relatively recent concept. (To learn more on this topic, see “Adolescence in Historical Perspective” by John and Virginia Demos, doi:10.2307/349302.) Now, it is universally understood that the first 3 years after birth is a profoundly important time to optimize development. For many years, however, too many people thought it was too late for adolescents. Worse, adolescence was seen as a time of storm and stress—a period to pass or survive. Some people still view adolescence this way. Now the science has converged with our experience to underscore that the second decade after birth offers a critical window to optimize development and to heal from hard childhoods.

## ■ The Need for a Course Correction

The trauma-sensitive movement is leading the way in understanding how toxic stress affects children and adolescents. Among many of its contributions, it has helped us react to behavioral challenges differently. It calls for us to change our lenses from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What happened to you?”<sup>1</sup> It calls for us to summon the empathy needed to better understand human behavior, especially when it stems from enduring hardship. However, empathy in isolation can have unintended consequences if it inadvertently leads to lowered expectations or standards. Some agencies who have implemented trauma-sensitive practices shared that staff with heightened empathy sometimes found it more difficult to also hold young people to the standards essential to implementing positive youth development principles. This holds potential to create an internal conflict within staff or disagreements between youth-serving

professionals practicing trauma-sensitive care and those implementing the core principles of positive youth development.

There are 3 other ways in which the current discussions around trauma can backfire.

1. As we advocate for people to understand how structural forces such as racism can traumatize marginalized communities, we run the risk of introducing another undermining label that might be applied to those communities—that of being “traumatized.”
2. As we advocate for people to understand the potential effects that trauma has on human beings, we run the risk of leading them to believe that the fate of people who have survived trauma is determined. That the worst thing that ever happened to them became them.
3. As we help people understand how hardship can lead to challenging behaviors, we run the risk of leading them to believe that people who have been through traumatic childhoods are inherently damaged.

Importantly, the points made above, about the unintended consequences of trauma-sensitive practices as currently implemented at many sites, are not based on robust evaluation research. They are based on more than 30 visits that I (KG) have paid to youth-serving agencies and scores of conversations with their leadership and staff. It is also important to underscore that these points should not be interpreted as criticism, because *Reaching Teens* is fully aligned with the trauma-sensitive movement. Rather, the major driver behind the production of this second edition is to correct for some inadvertent missteps so that this burgeoning knowledge can be translated fully into productive action.

## ■ A Course Correction: The Integrated *Reaching Teens* Approach

### Drawing From the Best of 3 Models

*Reaching Teens* strives to be trauma sensitive in its entirety. In fact, the *Reaching Teens* Trauma-Sensitive Model holds as a central imperative to integrate positive youth development principles, resilience-building strategies, and the knowledge we have gained about working with people who have experienced trauma and hardships. It is this integration that ensures we will offer the accountability critical to growth and maintain the high expectations that generate self-reliance and confidence. It is this integration of models that gives us hope; we trust that under the right circumstances, people can recover from hard lives.

It is an integrated model that includes what we’ve learned from

- Positive youth development
- Resilience-building strategies
- Trauma-sensitive practices

It is a model that calls for restorative rather than punitive practices.

We believe the following paragraph summarizes the model. It is intended to capture all the above bulleted models without using jargon. It acknowledges that this is a balancing act between empathy and accountability and that achieving that balance is a continual work in progress, but when the work is approached intentionally, we can get closer to the ideal.

**We know young people need safe, secure, sustained relationships to thrive. We even know that such relationships can allow them to heal from hard pasts. We must guide them so that they are accountable to being their best selves. When we do so, they must know that our high expectations are rooted in our caring. Ideally, our efforts at accountability must enhance, rather than disrupt, our protective relationships.**

## Acknowledging That Suffering Is Universal and That Marginalization Is a Unique Trauma

*Reaching Teens* is a toolkit that recognizes structural racism and the undermining forces of low expectations but commits to preventing a new label from being applied to already marginalized communities. In sharp contrast, it must recognize the inherent strengths of individuals, communities, and cultures. It must

underscore that struggling has no demographic but recognize the reality of struggling unique to communities of color. It must also recognize the strengths within those communities. See Box 42.1 in Chapter 42, The Traumatic Impact of Racism and Discrimination on Young People and How to Talk About It, for a 10-point model that strives to do all this.

## Seeing and Expecting the Best in Young People

The *Reaching Teens* Trauma-Sensitive Model acknowledges pain but sees the best in people (Box 1.1). Four key principles describe the model. These ideas are developed fully in other chapters and are presented here only for orientation.

The first principle requires clarification. “Knowing what is about you and what is not about you” is a key boundary. This boundary is not intended as a barrier to engagement or as a wall between us and suffering. Quite the opposite. It allows us to draw nearer. As we understand that disruptive or unpleasant behavior, even if directed our way, is not really about us, we can maintain our objectivity. We can maintain the radical calmness (see Chapter 41, Radical Calmness) so key to co-regulating (see Chapter 39, Supporting Youth to Build Their Self-regulation Skills) with youth. If we can’t apply this principle, we will grow defensive, and that is when the real barriers go up.

It is a model that does not believe in determinism. It is rooted in resilience and recovery. Yes, it is true that the odds of poor outcomes are elevated when a young person is exposed to toxic stress. But that doesn’t mean that these things will happen. It means that these youth are deserving of our focused attention and of our ensuring they have as many protective forces in their lives as possible. They deserve nothing less.

### ■ Serving All Young People, By Building on Their Strengths

*Reaching Teens* is about using strength-based communication to serve all young people. At first glance, if one were to look at the contents, it would seem that this work focuses on young people who have endured the hardest lives, because of the environments in which they grew or the emotional or behavioral struggles that have been part of their journey. While it is true that we directly address youth who are deserving of our most focused attention, it would be a mistake to think that the strategies offered apply only to them. Remember that our goal is to develop safe, secure, and sustained relationships with young people. When we create spaces that allow those relationships, all youth thrive. When we apply core developmental principles, such as seeing young people as the experts in their own lives and communicating with them in a way that ensures their thoughtfulness and wisdom is elicited, every young person benefits developmentally.

### ■ *Reaching Teens*: Rooted in Positive Youth Development Principles, Committed to Building Resilience, and Universally Trauma Sensitive

Chapter 10, Navigating *Reaching Teens*, offers strategies to using this large body of work. Here, we want to orient you to some core philosophical underpinnings of this work, as well as some writing conventions that may set us apart.

#### Box 1.1 *Reaching Teens* Trauma-Sensitive Model

1. Knowing what is about you and what is not about you
2. Changing the lens with which we view behavior from “What’s wrong with you!” to “What happened to you?”
3. Seeing people as they deserve to be seen, not according to labels they’ve received or behaviors they’ve displayed
4. Giving control back to people from whom control has been taken away

## We Really Feel Good About Young People! It Is Our Connection With Youth That Positions Us to Guide Them

Key to our connection is that adolescents know we genuinely like them and that they consider us worthy of their trust. Sometimes to advocate for youth, we need to refute undermining cultural narratives about them. We must portray them as they really are. And we have to remember that we do this work because we enjoy it. And while it can be trying, it can also be a source of vicarious resilience.

### Thriving Is Our Goal

While we guide youth to avoid risk behaviors, our greater goals are to prepare them to thrive and to position them to be fully prepared to lead us into the future. Youth thrive when they have strong, healthy connections with adults who believe in them unconditionally and hold them to high expectations. Ideally, youth have those connections with their parents. When they do, healthy connections with other adults expand that protection. When they don't, healthy connections with other adults take on a critical importance.

### We Support Parents and Communities

Our interventions and programs occupy only a singular space in the lives of youth. Sustained impact, therefore, is much more likely to happen when they return to families and communities who meet their developmental needs. Parenting an adolescent can be challenging, but parents remain the most important force in young people's lives. Therefore, we can do the greatest good by supporting effective parenting and advocating for the resources that strengthen family connections and build healthy communities.

### We Are Unapologetically Love Focused

*Reaching Teens* goes so far as to define *love*.

*Love is seeing someone as they deserve to be seen, as they really are, not according to a behavior they might be displaying, a label they might have received, or what they might be producing.*

This is because being loving is an active process any of us can achieve. For clarity, we do not suggest casual use of the word *love* because it can be misunderstood and too many people have used the word while being exploitative. It is not the word that matters here; it is the action we care about. One more point: we speak of love, not liking. Liking is far more subjective. You don't have to like all the young people, although we hope you like working with them. But you need to love. If you listen hard enough, it will be easy to find what you love in a person.

### We Know Adolescence Is a Time of Growth and Healing

Ideally, healthy development is supported from early in infancy. When it is not, adolescents are still capable of healing and do so best when caring adults both trust in the capacity of adolescents to right themselves and offer appropriate support and guidance.

### We Believe in a Universal Approach That Supports All Teens' Development

When we work with youth who have experienced trauma and are exhibiting acting-out behaviors, it is important to approach them with the unspoken mind-set of "What happened to you?" rather than "What's wrong with you!" In fact, because trauma is so prevalent and we never know someone's full past, it is wise to approach all youth with this nonjudgmental, supportive mind-set. Furthermore, because we believe trauma-sensitive practices are supportive of the development of *all* youth, we believe in applying these principles universally. That will make *all* youth feel safer and be better prepared to thrive. Once the environment is universally safe, secure, and nurturant, youth deserving of your most focused attention, because of the hardships they have endured and environments they have navigated, will come to your attention.

## We See Young People as the Experts in Their Own Lives

Seeing young people as the experts is a core youth development principle. It does not imply that they know everything, nor should it dictate to you how to serve them. Rather, it means that only they understand the circumstances and complexities of their lives. They know what is really going on and control how much content they choose to disclose to us. It is particularly critical that you apply this principle to youth who are system involved. They tend to be genuine experts in the complexities of systems and how to assert themselves within them. The wrong message to take away from this principle would be “kids are experts, so get out of the way.” In fact, young people value adult wisdom and need us to help shape their lives. The principle simply means we partner with them as we stand beside them, because we’ll never be impactful if we don’t incorporate their real-life experience into our plans. When adults genuinely listen to young people’s views and recognize that they are the experts in their own lives, it empowers them to make healthy decisions.

## We Know Young People Must Own Their Own Solutions if They Are to Be Long-lasting

Telling youth what to do often backfires. Talking down to them is offensive. One of the greatest myths about adolescents is that they can’t be reasoned with. To the contrary, when we know how to engage them calmly and respectfully and to guide them in a developmentally appropriate way, they are capable of wise decision-making. Beyond that, when they arrive at their own conclusions, they own the solutions. This gives them the increasing sense of control that supports healthy adolescent development and is trauma sensitive, and when they own the solutions, the lessons have great staying power.

## We Support Self-reliance

If our goal is sustained impact, young people need to walk away from our encounters feeling that they retain the power and knowledge. That means that we must help young people develop their own ideas. It is hard work to choose to have the kind of intentional boundaries that prevent the rescue fantasy and leave the power of change squarely on the shoulders of the young person. The reality, however, is that our time with any young person is limited. But young people always have themselves. We support them with whatever relationship scaffolding is necessary for them to believe in themselves but do so with an eye to them authentically seeing themselves, rather than relying on us.

## We Address Risks

Youth thriving can be thwarted by undermining behaviors. However, each and every youth has inherent strengths to be recognized and developed, and the best way to address risk may be to build on these existing strengths. Furthermore, most risky adolescent behaviors (substance use, self-mutilation, violence, internet addiction, and a host of other problems) serve at least partly as coping strategies that help youth manage uncomfortable stressors. If we help youth develop a repertoire of alternative coping strategies, we will diminish their need to turn to these worrisome quick fixes. And in so doing, we support their sense of control over their lives.

## We Use a Language Convention That Places Blame Onto Circumstances, Not Youth

We do not put labels before the youth (eg, homeless youth, traumatized youth, foster youth, drug-using youth) because we want to underscore that young people are young people first, not defined by the circumstances they have navigated or behaviors they might display. And most important, there is no such thing as an “at-risk youth.” There are, however, young people who are navigating risky environments. We hope this will become the convention all youth-serving professionals and services use. We are certain we make mistakes in this work, much as you are likely to during this transformational phase. Apologies in advance.

## We Pull No Punches in Speaking About Undermining Forces

Multiple forces affect well-being and drive health. Poverty. Exposure to violence. Explicit prejudices as well as implicit biases. Structural racism and classism. Anti-immigrant fervor. Homophobia. Inequitable distribution of resources. These are issues often ignored. We don't think they can or should be. We call them out as uncomfortable truths. At the same time, we emphatically recognize that struggling has no demographic and that many undermining or toxic forces happen behind closed doors, unassociated with any demographic. In other words, we mustn't for a moment believe or suggest that just because individuals are not affected by any of the aforementioned forces, their struggling is less worthy of our focused attention and their well-being less deserving of our adamant advocacy.

## This Work Is Healing Centered, Not Disclosure Driven

Because we know that trust and safety builds over time, we do not expect young people to tell us all that is going on in their lives. Because we know many forces, including shame and stigma, or even fear, prevent disclosure, we do not push for disclosure; instead, we focus on relationship building so that when the time is right, we will be there. We offer services and information in a universal way—meaning to everyone—knowing that those who need the most will receive it, and as we promote well-being for all, we stem other crises before they strike.

## We Have Their Backs

Being relationship focused affects our interactions even when we are pleased. So many of us are natural cheerleaders. And that is great when all is going well. The problem is that when young people take backward steps, sometimes in response to tragedies or stressors beyond their control, we might never know. Their fear of disappointing us may prevent them from including us during those times they really need us. Cheerleaders have young people's fronts but not their backs. We have to learn to shift from saying, "I am so proud of you because \_\_\_\_\_," to, "Thank you so much for always sharing with me what is going on in your life."

## We See People as Plural

Many of the chapters in this work deal with specific issues a person might navigate—homelessness, foster care, juvenile justice. And within all topics, we underscore when youth who are marginalized or youth of color are disproportionately affected. There is a real danger to doing this. One could mistakenly begin to look at a person and see first the person's demographic or circumstance. It is imperative that we never forget that every young person is first and foremost a young person. The topic covered defines only a part of them, intersecting with all the other identities affecting their development and burgeoning sense of self. People are plural. For example, youth affiliated with the military are young people first—with all the hopes, dreams, and challenges shared by all adolescents. Youth who are gay, as another example, are so much more than their sexuality. The unspoken need of every human being: "See me...in my entirety."

## We Reject Labels

Diagnoses can be helpful. Labels are not, and some diagnoses can function as labels. In attempts to simplify our understanding of people, we can sometimes assign them labels—such as having an "anger problem." That affects how they see themselves and how systems view and interact with them. If you need a reminder on this or need help spreading the word, share Jennifer Rodriguez's letter that opened this toolkit. We mustn't let young people's worst behaviors on their worst days define them. Especially if those labels are "What's wrong with you!" labels.

## We Emphatically Believe That Youth-Serving Professionals Must Care for Themselves With the Same Level of Intensity and Fidelity They Care for and About Young People

We are asking you to be the sensors and protectors of children and youth. We are asking you not to avert your eyes to inequities and injustice. We are asking you to give more focused attention to youth who push you away or withhold the affirmation you've earned. For all these reasons, this work is more than hard; it takes a

toll on us. Therefore, we must care for ourselves. We are not speaking just of relaxing or working on hobbies. Self-care is itself hard work; it takes a real investment in reflection, insight, and intentional boundaries.

## We Believe in Relationships With Well-developed Boundaries

Boundaries create safe relationships for everyone. They prevent rescue fantasies. They allow us to go home and pay full attention to the other relationships in our lives—and come back to work refreshed, recharged, and ready to be there for others. Intentional boundaries do not separate us; they allow us to draw nearer more safely.

### ■ *Reaching Teens: A Toolkit That Is Not Enough*

We are exceedingly proud of this work and have invested years to bring it to you. But just as we believe youth are the experts in their own lives, we know that you are the experts in your communities. *Reaching Teens* is not designed to be applied formulaically; it is meant to be wrestled with. Your expertise matters. Our pilot community, Fort Worth and Tarrant County, TX, found significantly positive process outcomes by using the first edition of *Reaching Teens* (see Chapter 7, Building a Strength-Based Community to Support the Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health of Youth). However, we know that part of what worked was having a community fully committed to developing their youth.

## Building a Community Approach for Teen Success

In a world in which we seem to be increasingly physically nearer to each other, it seems contradictory that many of us feel more disconnected with our neighbors than ever before. Whether this is caused by the rising impact of social media and technology or something else, it is a paradox that communities and leaders must address. The key response to this challenge lies in our relationships with others, specifically trusting relationships. It is the bedrock of individual, family, and community success, and this concept is fully ingrained in this edition of *Reaching Teens*.

Research tells us that for any relationship to be successful, it requires trust. But how do you build trust and what does it look like? In Chapter 7, you can read the story of Tarrant County, TX, and how the community developed a multisystem approach to implementing *Reaching Teens*. But this community-based implementation was made possible in large part because the partners established a foundation of trust, one that was built over time. This key “lesson learned” is one that other communities and collaboratives can replicate and benefit from—building trust with each other as adults is just as important as building trust with our teens.

*I had the privilege of joining the Tarrant County, TX, community in 2009 as the new executive leader of Lena Pope, one of the leading organizations of the Mental Health Connection collaborative. It became clear to me, as a newcomer to the community, that it would take time to establish and build trusting relationships with the other partners in the collaborative—but this was time valuably invested. And it would require building cognitive trust and relational (or affective) trust to be successful.*

*Cognitive trust is generally the easier of the two to achieve. We can read someone’s biography or résumé and quickly judge whether that person has the experience, education, and background to be successful in a new role. This cognitive trust, though, is only one part of the equation. Relational, or affective, trust requires an investment of time and energy to build and sustain. Does this person care about me as an individual*

*or are they using me for selfish reasons? Will this person stay committed through the inevitable hard times to come or will they disappear when the going gets tough? These are the kinds of questions we inherently and sometimes unconsciously ask when determining whether someone is worthy of our trust.*

*The success indicated in Chapter 7, Building a Strength-Based Community to Support the Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health of Youth, of a community-wide implementation of Reaching Teens was possible because of the investment of time and energy to build trusting relationships among the adults so that we could effectively and compassionately serve the youth of our community. For any city, county, or state considering a community-wide approach to Reaching Teens, the first lesson is to invest the necessary time into building trust among the adults in the room before addressing needs of the youth.*

*The thing I find ironic about this approach is we know that to achieve the positive outcomes we want for our youth and families, we must first build a relationship with them. It happens every day—in classrooms, neighborhoods, juvenile facilities, foster homes, and more. But for some reason, we sometimes forget that foundation when it comes to the adults charged with building community collaboratives. The good news is we know how to do this—we simply need to remember to take the time to make it happen.*

*Trust matters—spend the time and invest the effort to build cognitive trust and relational trust as the first step toward a community-wide approach to teen success and then watch as that investment returns many times over in the success of our youth and their families. They are worth it and so are we.*

—Todd A. Landry, EdD; Chief Executive Officer, Lena Pope (Fort Worth, TX); and Cochair, Reaching Teens Committee, Fort Worth Mental Health Connection of Tarrant County Collaborative

## ■ Critical Closing Thought

*Reaching Teens* is a strength-based body of work. It is about developing all adolescents to their fullest potential. Even as we celebrate all that is good and right about people who have been through some of the greatest challenges, we must not imply that challenges are “good for you.” Development occurs best in the context of safe, secure, sustained, and nurturant relationships. Our goal is to have *all* young people benefit from those protective forces starting at very young ages and lasting throughout their development.

Welcome to the *Reaching Teens* community—a group of youth-serving professionals and community members who care for and about young people and who are willing to be intentional about being the kind of adults who will support *all* youth to thrive. This is not a new program being added to your overflowing plate. It is about the plate. It is about creating the scaffolding of meaningful adult relationships from which young people can securely rise to become their best selves. These relationships are the scaffolding on which all other programs and initiatives rest.

## Related Video Content

- ▶ 1.4 The Essence of Trauma Sensitive Practices. *Ginsburg*
- ▶ 1.5 A Trauma Sensitive Model That Holds Youth to The Highest of Expectations: Being the Adult Youth Deserve in Their Lives. *Ginsburg*
- ▶ 12.10 “Trust? What’s the Point?... I Guess It’s That People Kept Pushing.” Adolescent-Friendly Services Never Give Up on Youth. *Youth*
- ▶ 25.1 Covenant House Staff Share How Recognizing Strengths Positions Them to Support Progress. *Covenant House Pennsylvania*
- ▶ 25.2 YouthBuild Staff Share How Recognizing Strengths Positions Them to Support Progress. *YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School*
- ▶ 25.3 Young People Speak of the Power of Being Viewed Through a Strength-Based Lens and the Harm of Low Expectation. *Youth What Is Unconditional Love?. Ginsburg, Center for Parent and Teen Communication, Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (7:09)*