

## Youth Extremism Series, Paper 3: Fostering the Well-being of Youth to Prevent Extremism

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### Introduction

Healthy psychological well-being and strong social connections to others are critical elements for young people. Having a strong sense of identity and confidence that others care for them can prevent extremist behavior while enriching their lives and strengthening their resiliency.

### Community, Local Connectedness, Belonging, and Attachment

Community interaction theory is a useful framework for understanding the role of youth engagement to the development of community, local connections, belonging, and attachment. This theory discusses how communities are made up of very different groups and interests, and when these groups come together to discuss collective interests, communities become more adept at handling challenges and taking advantages of opportunities (Wilkinson, 1991; Bridger & Alter, 2008).

This ability of a community to act on the behalf of its members is called community agency (Brennan & Luloff, 2007; Bridger & Luloff, 1999; Luloff, Bridger, & Krannich, 2003; Wilkinson, 1991). When scholars use this theory, they consider community development as more than improving the physical living situation in an area; it includes improving the relationships between people living in the local area. Interdependence then, rather than individual or programmatic success, is a sign of a strong community and the more community members interact and rely upon one another, the deeper and more authentic their relationships and communication become.



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### Youth Shaping Civil Society through Interaction and Social Networks

Community interaction theory highlights the importance of social interactions and networks in the development of a robust civil society. Since youth are core members of any community, their civic engagement can lead to stronger interactions among community members. Social ties and social networks are an essential part of fostering and sustaining this civic engagement (Claude et al., 2000). The types of community-based social ties youth have, and how strong these ties are, impact the way youth feel about their community and their willingness to engage in that community (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990).

Community ties take different forms (strong and weak; formal and informal; through organizational involvement or casual interaction), each of which shape the conditions for youth civic engagement and community development in different ways (Chaskin et al., 2001). Strong ties, such as those among family and close friends, are intense, frequent, and developed over long periods of interaction. Alternately, casual friends, acquaintances, and coworkers, with whom youth do not have intimate relations, also serve a vital function of connecting youth with the wider society. These 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973) represent an important resource. Through increased social networks and interaction with weak ties, youth become aware of issues that are in need of action and encounter opportunities to participate in community change (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). Therefore, while strong ties are needed to feel attached to one's community, weak ties are also needed to expose youth to new issues and ways they might use their time and talents in their community.

## The Central Role of Social Supports

One way in which youth feel strongly attached to their community is through having strong social supports. For any young person, being able to enlist social support is a core part of their capacity to function, thrive, and contribute to society and is an important deterrent for violent or extremist behavior. Accessing others in a young person's social network – including family, friends, acquaintances, and adult leaders-- can provide robust social support. Social support is important for positive youth development since it buffers stress and facilitates coping and well-being (Cutrona, 2000; Dolan & Brady, 2012; Tracy & Whittaker, 1990). Having strong social support can help youth avoid engagement in radicalism and extremism. The types of support available for young people typically include tangible, emotional, esteem, and advice assistance, all of which can occur through political and social civic engagement activities involving youth (Dolan, 2012).

Cutrona (2000) identifies four main types of support. First, 'concrete' support reflects practical acts of assistance between people--for example, watching a sister's young baby while she goes shopping. It has been noted that too often this need for basic practical help is either missed or underestimated by professionals (Holt & Dolan, 2010; Sanderson, 2012). Second, 'emotional' support includes acts of empathy, listening, and generally 'being there' for someone in times of trouble (Cutrona, 2000). Third, 'advice' support includes both advice and reassurance towards another (Cotterell, 1996). Fourth, 'esteem' support reaffirms another of their personal worth. It is important to recognize that there are variations in the quality of support. These variations include the closeness of the relationships (Cutrona & Cole, 2000), the reciprocal nature of the relationships (Eckenrode & Hamilton, 2000), and the durability and longevity of the relationship (Tracy & Biegel, 1994).

Extremism thrives in settings where youth are disengaged, disenfranchised, and unintegrated within their communities. When high unemployment, poverty, and cultural isolation are common, extremism has more opportunity to thrive. Youth undergo important identity development in late adolescence and early adulthood, and settings of disadvantage can create pathways of opportunity for extremist behavior. This does not happen overnight or in a vacuum, however, and there are ways to equip young people to stand up to extremism. Fostering community ties, community attachment, and social support for young people is an important way to help them combat the temptations of extremism by incorporating their identity and self-narratives within a positive community context.

### Growing Social Supports through 4-H Enterprise Gardens in Africa

Founded in 2000, 4-H Ghana engages 9,500 youth in agriculture and health programs through strategic partnerships with local ministries of agriculture and education in eastern and northern Ghana. 4-H Ghana developed an Enterprise Garden model that is used by 4-H groups in other African countries. [The 4-H Enterprise Gardens](#) serve as learning laboratories to effectively integrate the science of positive youth development, agriculture and innovative partnerships. Youth plan, plant and manage a food-producing, in-school (for youth age 6-18) or out-of-school (for youth age 18+) garden, gaining practical, hands-on experience and providing income and food for their communities. Youth also develop business plans to grow their enterprises. By strengthening their agricultural and entrepreneurial skills, 4-H Enterprise Gardens position youth as leaders in their communities. This ensures that the gardens become self-sustaining while promoting and growing local youth-led businesses. A survey of 4-H Enterprise Garden participants in Ghana, Kenya and Tanzania showed that: 80% of respondents want to pursue agriculture as a career; 80% of respondents want to pursue agriculture at the tertiary level; and 83% of respondents are interested in staying in school because of 4-H.

## Recommendations

- 1) Communities and community leaders should create and host meeting places and settings where youth are not only allowed but encouraged to contribute their perspectives about community life.
- 2) Intergenerational connections between youth and adults in their communities should be encouraged. These relationships can help ground young people in understanding the history of their locations and cultures and remind them that they are not isolated from social life, but are a continuation of generations that have lived before them. Older adults can provide youth with friendship, mentorship, and informational resources based on their longer life experiences.
- 3) Policy-makers interested in advancing initiatives to prevent youth from extremist behavior should consider that youth are integrated parts of the communities in which they live. Economic development policies to reduce unemployment, educational opportunities to provide career advancement for youth, and community development initiatives to bring together different groups to solve local issues are all less obvious, but critical ways in which youth extremism may be prevented.

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