

THE MEGAPHONE!



[busting **GANG** myths]

Promoting the voices of Manitoba's children & youth

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**"TRAUMA
CHANGES
CHILDREN."**

OCA Children's Intake Assessment Officer

A LABEL'S WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS



Michael Champagne, an inspiring advocate for youth and central organizer of Winnipeg's Aboriginal Youth Opportunities! (AYO!), a grass-roots movement that exists to counter the effects of gang activity in the North End, speaks extensively on the concept of labeling. He challenges

citizens to examine pejorative labels in order to reclaim youth from under them. He talks proudly about his own labels: Cree, Shamattawa, child in care, North End, and says he sees hope, even when other people might assume bleakness and label him: hopeless, no good, probable gangster. Darlene MacDonald, Manitoba's Children's Advocate asks service providers to remember that acting out behaviour of youth involved with child welfare often can be linked to earlier trauma the child has survived. Responsibility lies with the service provider to build positive rapport with young clients, even with the most challenging youth.

In her article, *Dismantling Stereotypes About Adolescents: The Power of Positive Images*, Sheila Clark (2002) suggests, "widely held views and popular notions about adolescents are generally negative in nature."¹ The author suggests that the optimism of youth should be valued and acknowledged as a way to encourage its growth. At a minimum, Clark notes that professionals who work with youth should challenge themselves to closely examine the labels they ascribe to young people, and recognize that **NEGATIVE BIAS IS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN YOUTH ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOURS.**

As a worker you hold a key. How are you engaging with youth to **understand** & **support** them?

Focus on a **YOUTH'S STRENGTHS** by asking:

1. What positive characteristics and strengths have you noted in this particular youth?
2. Have you considered implementing any strategy or action plan that would build youth capacity?
4. Is there anything more that you believe should be done to foster youth strengths that would protect them from gang influences?
5. What are the specific motivators for **this particular youth** to consider gang membership?

Adapted from <http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/crimeprevention/publications/docs/gang-prevention-youth-strength-based.pdf>



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BUT... WHAT CAN I DO?

"WE CANNOT REDUCE GANG VIOLENCE WITHOUT REPLACING THE LOST INCOME AND JOBS WHICH GANGS PROVIDE TO MEMBERS"

Totten, 2009

BECOME AN ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE!

Service providers are in a position to be able to advocate for more effective prevention strategies for youth. When advocating for changes to service delivery it is important to remember that:

GANG INVOLVEMENT OFFERS MORE THAN JUST A PLACE TO BELONG...

"Outcomes are consistently better when youth are partners in the development of their treatment plans"

...RESEARCH SHOWS THAT... one of the many reasons people become gang involved is that it can offer income to support an individual and their family, especially in communities where poverty is a central concern. "Gang related activities offer employment and a good income; we cannot reduce gang violence without replacing the lost income and jobs which

gangs provide to members. Quality programs include those that confront low educational attainment, unemployment, poverty, unstable and crowded housing conditions, high residential mobility and substance abuse."⁴

Dr. Mark Totten is a respected researcher on the issues of youth gangs, with a special focus on Aboriginal youth gangs.

"YOU KNOW THOSE DAYS...

WHEN YOU'RE PROMISED SOMETHING THAT MEANS A LOT AND RIGHT WHEN THE MOMENT COMES THAT PROMISE IS BROKEN"

Excerpt from a poem by a youth in care

BECOME A MENTOR FOR YOUTH!

Dr. Totten advocates for an individualized approach to programming: "Research demonstrates that **OUTCOMES ARE CONSISTENTLY BETTER WHEN** youth are partners in the development of their treatment plans, and work on issues that they define as relevant"⁵.

Totten further summarizes volumes of research in suggesting the most effective treatment plans for high-risk youth are long-term, non-institutional, highly individualized, intensive (2 or 3 times per week for five or six months), regularly monitored to ensure youth participation, and provided by professionals who the youth perceive as "...fair, compassionate, trustworthy, and personable"⁵.

Adolescents are developing physically and emotionally throughout their teenage years. When they become involved in unhealthy peer groups or activities, they can be supported and reclaimed by their communities given the right environments. "Although many at-risk youth have endured traumatic experiences, young individuals are generally resilient and can lead productive and fulfilling lives, provided they are surrounded by supportive leaders who supply intrinsically meaningful ways to develop personal strength and positive values"⁶.

SOURCES

- 1 Clark, S. (2002). Dismantling stereotypes about adolescents: The power of positive images. *Adolescent Health*, 2(5), 1-4.
- 2 Image Source: <http://s230.photobucket.com/user/svinjce/media/labeljarsnotpeople.jpg.html>
- 3 Bhatt, G., Twee, R., Dooley, S., in partnership with The National Crime Prevention Centre, Public Safety Canada (2010). Strength-based approaches to youth gang prevention in B.C. <http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/crimeprevention/publications/docs/gang-prevention-youth-strength-based.pdf>
- 4 Totten, M. (2009). Aboriginal youth and violent gang involvement in Canada: Quality prevention strategies. *Institute for the Prevention of Crime*, 3, 135-156
- 5 Totten, M. (2001). Maltreated kids, violent adolescents: Is there a link? Discussion paper prepared for Family Violence Prevention Unit, Health Canada
- 6 Image source: <http://www.leftfootforward.org/2011/11/record-neet-figures/>
- 6 Brendtro, L., & Larson, S. (2004) as cited in Preston, J. P., Car-Stewart, S., & Northwest, C. (2009, p. 153). Aboriginal youth gangs: Preventative approaches. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 4(2), pp. 152-160.

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