

Kids These Days – the Power of Community

By Dr. David Rideout

Some kids don't become elite athletes, no matter how hard they try. But that's okay; there are plenty of other ways for children to achieve self-esteem and confidence.

Some new mothers don't have a relative nearby who can teach her how to cope with a fussy baby or how to relate to a child in a way that will ensure healthy childhood development.

Some children need help conquering life's challenges—from milestones like walking, talking and reading—to knowing how to control their emotions and make lasting friends.

We all need support, but sometimes we have to look beyond our own families to find it. And we usually don't have to look very far, because our communities are filled with caring people and organizations dedicated to helping children and families reach their full potential.

Across our region are countless community organizations and volunteers who fortify the vulnerable people among them. Many communities have a provincial Family and Community Support Services Centre that offers a range of programs that support healthy development and strong parent-child interactions. As well, Parent Link Centres can help with parenting education, early childhood development, family support, developmental screening, and referrals to services within the community. That might include food banks, toy lending libraries, language or reading tutors, Big Brothers/Big Sisters or home visitation programs where a nurse can help a new mom care for her newborn baby or reduce risk factors that may arise from parenting alone.

Some places even have a community kitchen where people can share costs of groceries and cook meals together. Or hot lunch programs to ensure no child goes hungry at school. Or fundraising campaigns, clothing donations, book lending and sports equipment swaps. Or Native Friendship Centres that open doors to cultural awareness and support for Aboriginal children and families.

Sports organizations provide recreational opportunities for youth with their peers. Pairing older kids with younger kids can provide opportunities for leadership. And many local businesses chip in with contributions to sports activities in their community. Sometimes larger corporations contribute locally too, such as Canadian Tire with its JumpStart program dedicated to removing financial barriers so kids from ages 4-18 have the opportunity to get involved in sports. They do this by assisting with costs associated with registration, equipment or transportation in over 70 different activities.

All those measures make big differences for kids by helping address problems that can put them and their families at risk. Addressing these issues can then lessen the need for more intrusive child intervention services. It may also mean that children have more adults in their life so they can build relationships with trusting mentors. And have what every child needs: someone who's cheering for them.

The real power of communities is that they create environments where the youth of today are empowered to be successful—and in turn grow up to be parents who create healthy environments for the next generation of youth. And so on.

Dr. David Rideout is a former teacher, principal, and school board superintendent. He is a father of two adult sons and the Regional Director of North Central Region Child and Family Services. Feedback or comments are welcome and can be sent via email to david.rideout@gov.ab.ca.