

Positive Development, Sense of Belonging, and Support of Peers among Early Adolescents: Perspectives of Different Actors

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Abstract

Trusting relationships at school and within other social networks emerge as protective factors that are crucial to the positive development of early adolescents. School is one of the critical environments where they can develop a sense of belonging. This study involved 20 qualitative interviews with school staff and youth workers recruited from social services and high schools in Eastern Ontario and 12 qualitative interviews with adolescents 12-13 years of age attending some of these same schools. Deductive and inductive analysis of the transcripts clearly underscored the importance of the supportive roles played by peers, teachers and non-family adults in the lives of early teens. The proximity that results from listening to and accompanying early adolescents in day-to-day activities, and comprehending their issues, presents an opportunity for youth workers and school staff to better grasp how to become credible, trusted and legitimate in the eyes of young teens.

Keywords: early adolescents, positive development, sense of belonging, peers, school setting

1. Introduction

Trusting relationships at home, at school and within other social networks emerge as protective factors that are crucial to the positive development and well-being of early adolescents. Many authors suggest that research should address protective factors in a global context and focus more on such relationships and on feelings of belonging that tie adolescents to the milieux they favor (Bernat & Resnick, 2006; Hawkins, 2006; McNeely, Nonnemacher, & Blum, 2002). Moreover, the literature casts light on theoretical and empirical support for the sense of belonging within the school setting as a critical component of the experience and positive development of young teens (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004).

In that vein, this qualitative study was endeavored to find out more about important questions: What roles can be played by school staff (or other adults outside the young teen's family, like youth workers) and peers—two components of the sense of belonging at school—in the lives of early adolescents? What adult attitudes and behaviors foster positive relationships with early adolescents?

To foster a better understanding of this topic of interest, we focused on an emic, or insider's perspective, that is, we were interested in the opinions of those involved in this issue (Merriam, 2009). As such, we sought an approach that centered on the participants and what is important to them with the intent to move beyond a research-centered protocol (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). We thus sought the participation of various actors in a qualitative methodology aimed at understanding their own impressions. Accordingly, the points of view of two different sets of stakeholders—early adolescents 12-13 years of age, youth workers and school staff—will highlight diverse perspectives on protective factors present within the social network that tie to their environment these young people who are entering adolescence.

To examine the aspects of adolescents' social network, we will summarize in the following pages, the theoretical approach to the positive social development of young people (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins,

2004; Damon, 2004; Catalano & Hawkins, 1996). This article will also synthesize leading research on the sense of school belonging and two components thereof: positive ties with adults and with peers. We will conclude with avenues to explore in terms of intervention geared toward early adolescents' positive development.

1.1 Positive Social Development and the Sense of School Belonging

With respect to the positive social development theoretical approach, Damon (2004) advances that children or adolescents must essentially be viewed from the angle of their potential, motivation and aspirations in order to give them the chance to realize their talents (Hawkins, 2006). Following that path, their identity finds its form thanks to moral indicators through which they adhere to positive rules and integrate a sense of responsibility applied to themselves as well as to others. Catalano and Hawkins (1996) assert that this identity construction is grounded in the actual process of socialization. For those authors, this process is founded upon the ties that a child or adolescent manages to forge with people or centers of activity in his or her environment. The strength of each one of these ties depends upon: (1) the opportunities the young person seizes to engage in stimulating activities and establish enriching relationships; (2) the degree of involvement called for by these ties; (3) personal skills required; and (4) above all, positive reinforcements received within these relationships or activities.

When they establish ties, young teens take into consideration the costs and benefits of such choices, indicating a preference for close friends whose opinions hold the most weight. This model falls in line with the social learning theory, which sets out three modes of influence involved in the learning of pro or antisocial behaviors and which lies at the heart of the process of socialization (Bussey & Bandura, 2004). Early adolescents adopt the rules and behaviors that are characteristic of the people who, in their estimation, are most significant and influential. At the same time, young teens learn how to react by accepting instructions regarding appropriate conduct given by the adults who will exert influence on them because they are viewed as having legitimacy. Those learned behaviors become consolidated by positive reinforcements received from their environment. The young teens will adopt the behaviors that bring the greatest rewards, advantages or significant benefits and social success, that facilitate their integration into the group of friends, and that make them experience feelings of effectiveness and competence.

For such a positive social development, Lerner, Phelps, Forman and Bowers (2009) highlight: (1) positive social contacts; (2) a feeling of social integration; (3) an attachment to prosocial organizations; and (4) the ability to find one's way through various contexts. From this perspective, the school emerges as one of the critical environments where early adolescents can find their place. Although they face the potential of encountering negative influences, especially from peers, they can on the other hand develop solid relationships, become firmly rooted in such a center of life experience (Catalano et al., 2004) and develop a sense of belonging.

Faircloth and Hamm (2005) define the sense of belonging to school thusly: (1) a positive tie that early adolescents maintain with teachers and other adults who they believe appreciate and can support them in difficult times; (2) a positive network of friends among whom they feel appreciated; (3) participation in extracurricular activities, sports, and cultural activities, among others. Involvement in various extracurricular activities actually leads to a marked increase in the sense of school attachment (Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2007; Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan, 2010). When a sense of truly fitting in at school is present, it serves to stimulate improved academic performance as well as to moderate the adoption of risk behaviors (Libbey, 2004). On the other hand, it does not go so far as to stifle negative influences that cause major problems at home through adolescent years, nor does it address the resultant depressive reactions that can persist into adulthood (Herrenkohl, Kosterman, Hawkins, & Mason, 2009).

Given our intention to better understand certain aspects of adolescent social networks, during a time when such social support plays a dominant role in their lives, we will focus on two components (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005) described below: (1) positive relationships that young teens nurture with school staff or other adults who offer support; and (2) the influence of peers, which can also be seen as positive and enriching.

1.2 Positive Relationships with Non-Family Adults: School Staff and Youth Workers

Rhodes and Lowe (2009) advance that adolescents who maintain a positive development, despite occasional pitfalls, often attribute the ability to exceed their own aspirations to an adult outside their family who expresses a truly caring attitude toward them. These people, whether they be teachers, sports coaches/trainers, extracurricular organizers, or social service professionals, can be seen as mentors or role models.

In order to cast new light on the positive relationships that early adolescents may have with teachers or any other non-family adults, let us make a distinction between the notions of mentor and role model. A mentor maintains a

personal relationship with a young teen. In the capacity of confidant, guide or counselor, he or she actively provides support when the early adolescent is going through a difficult experience. On the other hand, a role model is someone the adolescent desires to imitate or match in terms of status, someone with whom he or she may or may not have direct contact. This role model or mentor may be of exemplary character or might be someone with limits who becomes more human because of them. This second type will have the greater influence given their tendency to appear more reachable (Vescio, Wilde, & Crosswhite, 2005).

The relationship sustained by adolescent and mentor is bi-directional: the adult really cares and looks out for the well-being of the young teen; in turn, the latter feels free to open up, becomes receptive, and then accepts this relationship founded upon trust (Zand et al., 2009). In order to reveal the emotional dimension of the relationship and define the spirit thereof, Zand et al. (2009) propose examples whereby the mentor is delighted when the young teen enjoys a happy experience and, from another angle, the latter is saddened by misfortune that befalls the adult. The young teen enjoys spending time with the mentor, having a productive conversation, and doing his or her best to follow the advice offered. It is through such activities that early adolescents can apply themselves to forging relationships with adults who become important in their lives.

Rhodes and Lowe (2009) present a nuanced view of these findings: it is unrealistic to think that such a person, no matter how well structured the program he or she may be in, can counteract the negative influences that are encountered throughout the years of adolescence. In this respect, Hurd, Zimmerman, and Reischl (2011) relativize the positive effects that vulnerable adolescents have with adults who are pivotal in their lives. Indeed, antisocial role models seem to exert a greater influence on young teens than do positive ones. Antisocial role models are in fact associated with an increase in violent expression on the part of these early adolescents and on their favorable attitude toward the use of violence as a symbol of strength, even power.

1.3 The Influence of Peers

It is well known that belonging to a peer group, another aspect of fitting into an environment like school, occupies such a predominant place in early adolescent life that friends often have a greater influence than parents. Newman, Lohman, and Newman (2007) frame the precise concept of sense of belonging to a peer group thusly: (1) affiliation with the group; (2) the importance that young teens assign to being part of such a group; and (3) the fact of being appreciated within the group and feeling pride as a result. Brown and Larsen (2009) specify that a peer group defines itself as an association of mutually equal people; they share the same lifestyle thereby acquiring prestige, social status, and power in the estimation of other adolescents. As a result, young teens with the most developed social skills have a better chance of belonging to a peer group that enjoys a high level of prestige in the eyes of others of the same age. The desire to belong to a group of friends can influence the behavior of early adolescents even before they become members; they take on the comportment of their peers to ensure acceptance. The wish to be popular among others and the favorable reputation that emerges therefrom both serve to modulate their relationships.

Brown and Larson (2009) are of the opinion that adolescents influence one another in either a positive or negative fashion. This relies on the combined processes of selection ("someone like me") and socialization (interinfluence). On one side, young teens experiencing difficulties in their personal lives congregate with others in the same situation (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Sieving, Perry, and Williams (2000) propose that the influence that can be exerted by the "in group" to demonstrate at-risk behaviors (contagion) applies to a significant degree to the youngest teens given the fact that they are more "with it" in the eyes of their peers. From an opposing view, adolescents generally have an unfavorable perception of their peers' behaviors, believing they display antisocial comportment without a sense of responsibility (Perkins, Graig, & Perkins, 2011).

2. Methodology

We favored a qualitative approach to research in our current objective because it allows delving into the experience of the participants to provide insights into social issues with the purpose to address and propose solutions to their betterment (Thyer, 2012). We also favored qualitative research in this study as it gives a voice to individuals who are often unheard or underrepresented (Shaw & Ruckdeschel, 2002). More specifically, we concur with Arnett (2004) that adolescents' voices are missing in research and that they have much to tell and to contribute, if we actually listen to them. Therefore, to examine the aspects of early adolescents' social network, our study focused on the perceptions of young teens, school staff and youth workers to gain a clearer understanding of some risk and protective factors affecting Francophone youth, a linguistic minority in Eastern Ontario. The province of Ontario being predominantly Anglophone places the Francophone region of Eastern Ontario in a linguistic minority context.

2.1 Participants

We sought an insider's perspective, that is, the perspective of those directly involved with the issue of positive development of Francophone youth in linguistic minority context. In agreement with current literature (Gallé & Lingard, 2010), we recognize that teens, along with school staff and youth workers are at the crux of an important issue. Even more so, they, themselves, represent integral and respective aspects of the issue we are interested in. Consequently, we drew on a view that is not only emic, but also multiple. Specifically, 32 participants offered their views in two distinct phases of this project. The first stage was carried out in 2007 and involved 20 qualitative interviews with school staff and community youth workers recruited from social services and French high schools. The second stage took place in 2009 and consisted of 12 qualitative interviews with students attending the same schools.

Of the 20 professionals, 10 were recruited from social services agencies: 4 were community workers (police officers and youth organization staff); and 6 were school personnel (principals and teachers). In line with the gender distribution in schools and counseling professions, 5 of the 20 professionals interviewed were men. These various professionals were employed in the different municipalities in Eastern Ontario and proportionally represented the population distribution.

The teens interviewed included 6 boys and 6 girls aged 12–13 years, all in grade 7. As for the parents, 5 mothers and 1 father were interviewed. The 12 families involved in the study were mostly middle class. One family was headed by a single unemployed mother. Four other families had incomes that were above average, given that both parents earned professional salaries.

2.2 Procedures

Recruitment letters were sent to youth workers in targeted French high schools and social services as well as all grade 7 students attending the above-mentioned schools and their parents. Following this, the snowball sampling method (Mayer & Deslauriers, 2000) allowed us to reach other participants with characteristics representative of the communities we were interested in, in terms of job type, length of employment and gender for the youth workers and school staff, gender for the teens, and income for their parents.

The participants were contacted by research assistants and invited to take part in an interview that explored: (1) the psychosocial issues experienced by teens of the targeted communities; (2) the region's resources; and (3) the issues specific to living in a linguistic minority situation. These interviews took place at the school where the participants were recruited, were conducted in French by research assistants, and lasted one hour on average.

2.3 Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and uploaded and managed with N-Vivo 9. Content analysis was used to examine the data and understand what they meant to the participants (Krippendorff, 2012). Over the course of several readings two trained research assistants identified interview segments that highlighted nuances and connections in participants' meaning. Specifically, this process of intricate interpretation followed a systematic plan, which consisted of gathering participants' responses relating to a theme and examining everything that was said about it (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This plan included: (1) reading 20% of the interviews, (2) identifying the emergent themes, (3) validating these themes with the interviewers and the principal investigator, (4) building a coding scheme and defining each code, (5) validating the coding scheme with the interviewers and the researchers (6) applying the coding scheme to the interviews, and (7) validating coded interviews between coders and with the interviewers and the researchers. Importantly, the research group met monthly, to consider the meaning and importance of themes and passages for the participants and with regard to the research endeavor.

2.4 Trustworthiness

Several means were employed to maximize the trustworthiness of the results presented here. First, we sought transparency by providing a clear description of the procedures used to collect data and analyze results (Creswell, 2007). We also ensured a frequent reflective debriefing forum and consensus validation with a broad range of expertise in fields of education and social work throughout the study (Huberman & Miles, 2002). We ensured that the results reflect the participants' words by providing numerous quotes from their transcripts, thus enhancing their credibility. Furthermore, we shared the research results with school staff and community youth workers to confirm and interpret the validity of the results (Laperrière, 1997). We also triangulated the data by accessing various perspectives by consulting school staff, social workers, community workers and teens (Atkinson, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

2.5 Limits of the Study

As with other qualitative studies, although the saturation level of the data and the uniformity of the results were achieved, theoretical generalization must be approached with considerable caution (Pires, 1997) in view of the small number of participants in this study. The profound insights provided in the interviews, the clear consensus among the two subgroups, and the concordance with the major articles on the topic strengthened the validity of this study (Laperrière, 1997). Nevertheless, it remains difficult to predict with any accuracy the dynamic forces prevailing in other linguistic communities. Moreover, keeping in mind some leading research on adolescent development, the results of these interviews with the 12 and 13-year-olds are sometimes general in nature as the participants are less inclined to make cause-and-effect links or explore them in depth because concrete thought is in development; through their gradual progress toward abstract thought, a capacity for introspection becomes evident that will eventually blossom in a later stage of maturation (Cloutier & Drapeau, 2008).

3. Results

The transcripts presented in this article were analyzed inductively; close attention was paid to the themes that emerged as meaningful to the participants. Namely, the importance of the peers, the quality of the relationships with adults who can be perceived as mentors and their sense of belonging to their linguistic minority school all emerged as issues and important protective factors in the young teens' social network that ties them to their environment.

To begin, we present the analysis of the interviews conducted with the 12 adolescents 12-13 years of age as they are the primary actors in this study. At the same time, we explore the first component of the sense of school belonging as defined by Faircloth and Hamm (2005), i.e., positive relationships with peers. It appears that friends are the number one concern of young teens and that ties are built through activities and lifestyle. We then analyze the teens' point of view as to how an adult can foster the development of a positive relationship with them, and finally we present the professionals' perspective on that relationship.

3.1 Teens' Perspective

The teens we met in this study shared noteworthy elements with regards to the development of relationships and the sense of belonging in the school. A central theme in their interviews is the importance of peers in their life. The next pages detail the place peers occupy in their life and the shape it takes in their daily activities.

3.1.1 Peers: The Number One Concern of Early Adolescents

It appears that having friends, and feeling welcome, accepted and at ease with them, are indispensable to the social experience of early adolescents. In the interviews the teens mentioned repeatedly how important it is to have close ties to reliable peers, and to experience these in abundance, to feel they are part of a complex environment such as junior high school: "I have my best friend, and I got other friends too, but when a bunch of them are sick, it gets me down and I'm like, 'Who am I gonna have lunch with now?'" (Adolescent 8). They emphasized that it is not vital to belong to any one specific group *per se*, as long as they do have a circle of friends: Contrary to the research of Brown and Larson (2009), the young teens interviewed did not place their relationships with peers in the context of a desire to be popular or laying the foundation for a favorable reputation in the eyes of other adolescents. Rather, they expressed a need to be associated with people similar to themselves, to be accepted and to live with a sense of belonging. They also described numerous situations in which they defended, supported, or counted upon their friends. One of them related: "I don't criticize my friends. If my buddy doesn't feel good, I'll boost his morale and after that he's going to feel OK" (Adolescent 11).

During the interviews, the young teens brought forth the fact that extracurricular and other activities play a central role in developing their friendships because it allows to bring out the best in their peers, see each other in a different way, and take pleasure in shared leisure interests. These activities give them a sentiment of feeling at home at school. The whole course of action whereby young teens spend time with others similar to themselves points to a combined process of selection (people like oneself) and socialization (interinfluence) (Brown & Larson, 2009). Whether it is a gathering of early adolescents with the same interests or a copycat adoption of each other's lifestyle trends, Perkins et al. (2011) corroborate this view through the body of research that examines negative peer pressure and how it leads to the adoption of various at-risk behaviors. The exact opposite, i.e., the solidarity referred to by young teens in the last section, exists all the same and is an element that is often overlooked: "If you look at young people playing hockey you can see just how they motivate each other" (Youth worker 4).

3.1.2 Positive Relationships with Adults

The interviews with the young teens indicate that they also placed considerable importance on having positive relationships with adults who truly care about them. When expressing appreciation (or lack thereof) for their school, their comments related almost exclusively to the relationships they maintained with both the staff and classmates.

Even if the adolescents in this study expressed themselves less explicitly than the adults we met, the interviews offered deep insight into the nature of their ties with adults, one which favors constructive relationships and facilitates the adolescents' feeling of being at home in an environment. From the outset, the young teens indicated how important it was to sense a willingness on the part of social services and school staff to relate to them. In conveying their sense of belonging, many described their teachers as "fun," "funny," "chill" or "cool." It seems that an ability on the part of the professionals to maintain easy-going contacts with early adolescents is instrumental in reaching out and connecting with them. These teens stressed the importance of accessibility on the part of the adults. From a social angle, a nuanced attitude toward the rite of passage of adolescence paves the way for adults to be responsive toward young teens: "He understands how we feel (...). He can tell when I need something" (Adolescent 8).

The interviews underscored also how important it is that adults be attuned to the needs of early adolescents in order to establish positive relationships and sustain an element of credibility and legitimacy in their eyes. These young people related how they appreciate adults who really listen to them, understand them, and can be flexible in serving their needs. "I like my teachers a lot because they listen to us when we want to talk about stuff..." (Adolescent 10). They also take adolescents' concerns seriously, praise good work and point out tactfully what can be improved, and know how to be supportive. These young teens thereby sense and appreciate the fact that the adults demonstrate a real caring attitude toward them. In return, such openness predisposes the teens towards accepting and nourishing relationships that may well become rooted in a foundation of trust (Lerner, et al, 2009) and eventually transforming this relationship into that of mentor (Zand et al., 2009). Mirroring the literature on positive social development of youth (Damon, 2004; Catalano et al., 2004), adolescents appreciate it when adults acknowledge their potential, and when they work with them to find new avenues to explore, talents to develop, and skills to acquire.

3.2 Perspective of Adults

The 20 adult participants offered several elements that can be applied to creating a productive relationship with early adolescents. These include greater sensitivity to these teens' daily issues and needs, and their active presence through activities. In essence, they served to complement the sentiment shared by the young teens.

3.2.1 Heightened Sensitivity to the Daily Issues and Needs of Early Adolescents

The importance of building a close and trusting relationship with teens seems undeniable for all the youth workers and school staff interviewed. It is crucial for teachers to have a good understanding of the students, their strengths, problems, and needs. "You work with teens; you have to have a relationship with them" (School staff 11).

All the adult participants repeatedly talked about the value of being present and receptive, the need to be highly sensitive to adolescents' daily lives and the issues they face, in order to create positive and productive relationships with adolescents. We noted a significant effort to understand the needs arising from these relationships, by listening to the primary persons involved, i.e., the perspective expressed by the young teens themselves. This involves being in tune with adolescents. Some of them suggested that the very nature of the relationship between a non-family adult and a young teen is not cut and dried. There seems to be a fine, even blurry, line between the friendship and the positive relationship that the participants strive to build with early adolescents in order to foster their development. They try to achieve an appropriate level of sensitivity and caring in creating a sense of belonging to an environment, whether school or elsewhere. For example, one teacher explained this by saying "They're not our friends. But even so, I can't just be a machine spewing out knowledge. I have students who still come back to see me, even after a few years; somehow we mattered to those students" (School staff 11).

To connect with teens in their daily lives, the respondents placed emphasis on supporting them through structured activities. One participant stated, "This becomes a way of helping them and also of motivating them. It's important. Trying to find out what it takes to motivate them" (Youth worker 18). Their comments are consistent with the literature (Dotterer et al., 2007; Durlak et al., 2010), which highlights that participating in out-of-school activities contributes to stimulating a sense of belonging to a social network.

These adults were also sensitive to the balance between human warmth and authority in their relationships with early adolescents. They began by recognizing adolescents' resistance to the position of power or dominance of adults. As one participant explained, "What struck me the most this year was the refusal to accept that anyone could be in a position of authority over them. (. . .) 'The teacher hassles me, so I hassle her.' " (School staff 20). Our analysis of the data clearly brought out the concepts of acceptance, respect and tolerance on the part of the respondents, whether in school or in the community. Aware that adolescents need a framework, they manage to moderate their position of authority to give precedence to being a figure that is legitimate and supportive. "Why do you do that? You don't do it when you're in other situations. When you're with us as part of a school family, when you volunteer, you're super cool and really nice, but when you hang out with your chums..." (Youth worker 3). The respondents' comments suggested the importance of finding a medium between the authority conferred upon them by their social roles and the bonds of friendship with adolescents in order to develop an alliance based on trust: "Having a teacher or someone in authority at school watching over them offers a good safety net" (Youth worker 12). As such, these adults view the adolescents as caring people; their contacts therefore resemble the relationships that mentors strive to build.

In addition to taking the time to listen to adolescents, school and social services staff participate in activities, both during and outside of school, be they cultural or sports-related. It becomes an occasion for building upon initial contacts, forging more solid ties, and nourishing a feeling of belonging within the school (Dotterer et al., 2007; Durlak et al., 2010). To summarize, these strategies bear witness to the commitment that school and social services staff have made to the adolescents, both in terms of social integration, as well as their overall well-being.

4. Discussion: Toward Early Adolescents' Positive Social Development

The objective of this article was to identify the perceptions held by 12- and 13-year-olds and youth worker/school staff on aspects of their social network. The multiple perspectives employed in the collection and the analyses of the data reflect the value we attribute to participants' credibility and knowledge of the issue we were interested in. This also reflects our acknowledgement that adolescents, along with school staff and youth workers, are at the heart of this topic, they are integral to the issue we are interested in (Gallé & Lingard, 2010). We thus elicited the opinions and the impressions of those directly involved and concerned with the positive development of Francophone youth in linguistic minority context (Merriam, 2009)

The interviews clearly underscored the importance of the supportive roles played by non-family adults and peers in the lives of early teens, such people being essential to the sense of belonging to the school or other milieu. These young people do not think about the negative pressure that peers can exert in this phase of life; moreover, they stress the importance of friendships and of the support adolescents offer each other. According to Perkins et al. (2011), the negative brushstrokes with which the media often portray adolescents, as well as the scientific literature that regularly focuses on negative pressure among adolescents to adopt at-risk behaviors, also serve to nourish jaded negative perceptions. These authors support intervention in a positive way that is rooted in favorable social norms that, dare we say, are founded upon the solidarity the young participants insisted on. This is in keeping with Perkins et al. (2011), Wolfe et al. (2012) and Hall, Rushing and Khurshid (2011) who use evidence-based results to advance that adolescents can learn to assume prosocial habits and then be strong enough to resist negative pressures. We would add that such positive norms emerge from the manner in which teens view their own relationships.

As for ties with non-family adults, their importance has been clearly indicated in this article. The presence and sensitivity pointed out by both the adult and adolescent participants in this study were of considerable value. To this effect, Lerner et al. (2009) state that in order to mature towards positive social development, young people must: (1) perceive and appreciate relations of confidence established by adults in their immediate environment; and (2) participate in various prosocial environments such as school or recreational activities (e.g., sports or arts). The proximity that results from listening to and accompanying early adolescents in day-to-day activities, and comprehending their issues, presents an opportunity to professionals to better grasp how to become trusted and legitimate in the eyes of young people, thereby facilitating entry into their sphere. Indeed, ties with an adult "ally" or a mentor are bi-directional: the adult reaches out to the youth and cares through concrete gestures; and the latter must accept and become deeply involved in the relationship (Zand et al., 2009). The stability of the ties that adults successfully set in place depends on the possibilities that young teens perceive for stimulating activities to share (a cornerstone of daily adolescent life according to our study) and for initiating fulfilling relationships (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996). The adolescents take the costs and benefits of their choice relationships under consideration, and hold to account the opinions (positive or negative) of people whose views matter to them. With regard to vulnerable adolescents specifically, Garraway and Pistrang (2010) illustrate that

adults and young teens need to have come through comparable life experiences and challenges, and that these similarities serve to strengthen relationships and nourish emotional bonds. The young person will then be more inclined to discuss problems in a real spirit of trust and to receive support without a deep fear of negative judgments.

All the same, the entire discussion about the positive contributions of non-family adults towards helping adolescents find their place and enjoy their social network at school and elsewhere does not in any way, according to Rhodes (2002), negate the ever crucial role that parents play in the lives of their children. In the same vein, all the professionals interviewed cited the importance of parental support and collaboration in the development of young teens and the realization of their dreams. Accordingly, this article has focused on one side of the coin, the tangible part that school, community and social fabric can assume in promoting the positive development of young teens and in supporting their parents: "Yes, there are still many others in the community who'll help their young people, even if it's not someone from their own family" (Youth worker 3).

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