

Kids rise to the occasion when they are believed in

Newspapers are full of awful news that keep us afraid. Especially in the past 8 years, our culture has been motivated more by fear than by hope. The bad stuff is what makes the news and the media seems to be our 21st century guardian. The broad perspective often gets lost as all the good things that are happening end up in tiny blurbs on a back page, if written about at all. So I was surprised to read an Op-Ed column in The New York Times touting the accomplishments of many teenagers. I had to pass it on.

On May 11, Nicholas Kristof sited some pretty amazing teenagers who had been motivated to get involved and help others much less fortunate. One teen, who was so sick she missed school for an entire year, spent her year raising funds to build a school in rural Cambodia. Another is touring this country and soon China under the tutelage of Al Gore to lecture on global warming. Two other teenagers moved by the genocide in Darfur have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars from over 400 schools.

Another, in an effort to fight Malaria in Africa, organized a dance to raise money. These efforts have spread to a nationwide campaign to buy mosquito netting for the beds of two million African children. And I just learned of a local teen, who designed and sold tee shirts to help raise money for Greg Mortensen's project to build schools in rural Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Projects abound, often organized in schools but just as many start as the brainchild of one whose enthusiasm spreads to many others. We have all heard stories of even elementary school kids getting behind an effort to help others in need.

I can't help but think that so many of the teens we hear about who are lost and floundering, doing poorly, causing disruptions in schools by acting out and showing disrespect to themselves and others would be helped greatly by getting involved helping others, working on a cause of some kind. Detentions, suspensions, threats of punishments, critical, shaming words and demands only keep these kids focused on their problems, spreading feelings of disappointment and hopelessness instead of enthusiasm. We do no good by interjecting more negativity into their lives, further convincing them of what failures they are. They wouldn't be acting out to begin with if they felt accomplished, good about themselves, and confident of their abilities.

It may seem counter-intuitive to give responsibilities to frustrating, lethargic or acting out children or involve them in a cause. We have been brought up to believe that they must pay for their bad behavior. Our desire is to retaliate when we are hurt, inconvenienced, or disrupted by a child, and we want them to suffer. This is the root of punishment, what we believe stops future

bad behavior. How long do we need before we get it that this doesn't work? What these children need is to be believed in. Goodness knows it's not easy to take an acting out child and turn them into a selfless volunteer helping starving children, but we do know that working for a greater cause often gets people out of depression, out of their own small lives.

We need to lift children, especially teenagers, out of their problems, not make them worse.

Wouldn't giving children and teens jobs that help the school community work better than more detentions, where nothing is learned. A personal sense of accomplishment propels them more positively into constructive adult lives.

One of the teens cited in Kristof's column said, "A lot of people say that teenagers aren't thinking about the greater good. But when you give teens a chance to help, and they know their contributions will make a difference, then they help a lot." Think what changes could take place if this became a mission statement for a school—or a family for that matter.

Kids need to have a purpose—a sense of "I can". In rural America, less than a hundred years ago, children of all ages had to help run the farm, milk the cows, work the fields, or the family wouldn't run. They weren't praised for it, nor given a prize at the end of the week; the work was simply expected, children were given important tasks they could handle, and more often than not, they rose to the challenge. The prize was a sense of accomplishment and being valued as an important worker.

First we must get out of our reward and punishment mindset. We have to believe in the innate desire of children to be successful, to cooperate, and to contribute. Our schools have to stop keeping children in from recess as a punishment for not getting homework done. Talk about counter-intuitive! It's often the children who need *more* physical activity who are the ones who cannot be motivated to sit and do math-facts or fill out worksheets. Let's give them tasks they see a purpose to and feel competent doing rather than assignments that often re-enforce incompetence.

This is a tall order, but when we see pictures in the paper of children who have saved pennies for a cause, who have helped the homeless, made and sent packages to soldiers, helped a family in need, we see sparkles in their eyes.