



Are Children Really Our Future? Or Do We Need a New Perspective?

The best way to predict the future? Ask a kid.

BY BRUCE GLASRUD

It's an often-repeated platitude: "Children are our future." Yet, for the first time in history, the premise behind this statement is demonstrably flawed. Let's look at why that is, what it means for upcoming generations, and how we can chart ourselves a fresh course.

Children are not *our* future. Children are *their own* future.

In the late '70s, parents lamented the time children were spending on those early "twitch games" like Pong and Pac Man. Today, it's clear those games gave an edge to that now-called Generation X. Coming of age early in the computer revolution, the Xers learned to master a tool that's indispensable to business today. As a result, those "pong-heads" often enjoy better jobs than their doom-sayer parents.

Having learned little from that example, we continue to gripe about kids spending too much time playing computer games. We bemoan the violence in some of today's computer games. Yet, such games also provide kids the psychological hard-wiring for the next stage of evolution in our workplaces and society. We shouldn't rush to conclude that violent games

give birth to real violence any more than we assumed that playing Pong would produce unproductive, zoned-out zombies (an assumption that was once supported by several "scientific studies").

Aggressive though some of these current computer games may be, their underlying structure requires players to deal with a world of swirling chaos, not merely stylized mayhem. These games are teaching children rapid-response multi-tasking—one of the main skills we'll need in the chaotic environment of the next generation.

Moreover, in accepting the game's challenge, its players take on the mantle of hero. Against great odds, they battle to save our fragile planet from a churning mass of evil miscreants. They begin to imagine a real-life future in which they can help save the world.

The Millennial Generation coming up behind Generation X isn't merely growing up with computers. Many are practically born with a computer mouse in their hand. Early use of increasingly sophisticated computers along with constant media exposure are developing new brain synapse patterns that are well suited to the ensuing brave new world. As a result, the upcoming generation has

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an astounding leg-up on even Gen-X computer whizzes. They possess an incredible pool of knowledge about the future.

Yet few of us take advantage of that knowledge. Our premise that "children are our future" often leads us to diminish, rather than appreciate and draw upon, their potential. Thus, we have no legitimate strategy to help prepare our next generations. Instead of working with young people to develop such a plan, we rely on extrapolations of past models.

Those models no longer make sense. Remember, it's but a tiny blip in all of human history that we've had such a thing as a "teenager." Before that, people commanded armies at 16, held public office at 18, and ruled nations at 13. As society evolved, we somehow decided to keep our youth under adult wings for a longer time. This paradigm change has given adults unlimited opportunity to whine



about the behavior of these held-back humans. We complain that they try to grow up too fast, become sexually active too soon, don't value things, rebel, and otherwise misuse the extended childhoods we have so caringly provided for them. Somewhere along the line, we also decided to sentence our children to the lockstep conformity of age-cohort education. We confine them to 12 or more years of same-age peer groups. They enjoy scant opportunity to create their own naturally-selected peer groups, containing older as well as younger persons, which might make peer groups a whole lot healthier.

Our arrogance lies in believing we can retain the prerogative of raising children to maintain our social and work traditions. For most of human history, that prerogative was a given. It is no longer so.

Our children are much closer to the future than we are. For our own survival, not only must we defer to their better acquaintance with the future, we must harness their abilities to help us prepare for it.

It's time to rethink our generational social contract. We must grant our youth full rights and responsibilities in the planning, learning, and teaching spheres of their own destiny.

Despite our outwardly progressive characteristics, we often innately distrust the future. Thus, we often disrespect signs of change, especially if those clues come from mere children. Hence, we become disconnected with how our children must prepare for success in *their* future—with our help, or in spite of it.

Nonprofits are crucial renegotiators.

Nonprofits are uniquely situated to transform our generational relationships. Unencumbered by the entrenched attitudes in our educational systems and psychosocial boundaries of parenthood, they're

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well positioned to harness the untapped abilities of youth.

We won't be able to meet this challenge without considerable rethinking and risk-taking. Our youth-serving methodologies have changed little since the term "at-risk youth" crept into our vocabulary. We are all "at risk"! Let's get rid of those programs that try to do things *for* youth. Most of those programs have seen decades of failure. Instead, let's formulate ways to work *with* our youth. To do that, we must discard traditional mindsets and longstanding habits of generational interaction.

The recontracting launch point for nonprofits is at their governance and committee structure. Yes, many nonprofits already include youth on their boards and committees. Many have youth "advisory" committees or clubs to do volunteer projects. Too often, though, these efforts are terrific at tokenism but short on substance. The result is frustration for both youth and adults, leading to the downfall of many such experiments. To develop authentic youth leadership, we need to unlearn our present models.

Fit some round pegs into your square holes.

Toss out your board's diversity matrix with the requisite two Blacks, two Asians, two Hispanics, and two kids from the local high school or college. What you really need is cognitive diversity. You especially need it from your youth stakeholders. Invite young people to join your board and committees as participating members. Which young people should you recruit? Here are some tips:

- **Don't recruit so-called class leaders** or jock team captains. Leadership in school doesn't automatically translate into leadership potential outside of school. Besides, those folks are already maxed-out by other commitments.

- **Pass up those "top student" recommendations** from the school administration. Sure, these kids can pass tests. That doesn't necessarily mean they can think out of the box.

- **What you really need is that glowering, edgy "punk"** with the piercings and weird hair or that artsy, introspective "goth" kid dressed in black. Those "hip-hop" kids that walk around with songs playing in their heads would be good assets too. It doesn't matter which subculture the kid is in. All that matters is that they hang with a subculture. Subcultures express the creative trend drivers that will eventually percolate up to or mutate into mainstream culture. Subcultures can get you in on the ground floor of emerging trends, mores, and social systems.

- **Recruit kids that never get asked** to contribute to adult society. Those kids have the time, cognitive diversity, creativity, and other aptitudes you need to get in touch with the future. They also will be so honored by your invitation that they will have another body part pierced to commemorate the occasion. Hey, if they tattoo your organization's logo on their shoulder, you can figure they'll die trying before they ever miss a committee meeting!

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You need to be doing business as un-usual.

Extreme Sport—say hello to Extreme Allegiance! Remember, the best way to help kids resist getting into bad gangs: Build a better gang.

• **Don't forget that shy, quiet "geek"** with the nose stuck in a science fiction book. Science fiction has a wicked habit of becoming societal fact.

Diversify your organization's leadership pool. Invest in the development of untapped and underappreciated kids. It will reap rewards—for you *and* the kids—for years into the future.

The signatures of both parties are required on this contract.

Adult board or committee members need training in giving kids leadership roles. They must learn to treat their younger colleagues as equals, with fully vested rights and responsibilities. Or else those adults need to be shown their error or perhaps even be shown the door.

Youth members need orientation and training for their roles as well. Like the adults, they are products of their social environment. They come to you after years of marching lock-step in their age group. Most of their interaction with adults has come from parents, teachers, coaches, bosses, and other authority figures. Equality will be a whole new thing to them. Coach them on Robert's Rules of Order, your committee power structure, and member responsibilities. Depending on how your adult board members are adjusting, it probably wouldn't hurt to provide some assertiveness strategies to help them

deal with folks with the "you are so much like my daughter" syndrome.

Your organization must be willing to take a strong and passionate stance on this new generational interplay. If not, it will be business as usual when you need to be doing business as un-usual.

Who "represents" the future in your organization?

Simply giving youth voting rights in your organization isn't enough. You shouldn't pigeonhole young people as "youth representatives" any more than you should categorize people of color as "minority representatives." You need skill-sets, not population segments. The skill you need from youth is help in readying your organization for the future.

Make their role responsibilities concrete. Change your by-laws if you must. Give them titles if you want. Here are some loose examples for your organization to model:

• **Issue Inspector:** This kid does research on issues and writes "intelligence" reports to bring to your meetings. Just like doing a paper for class, except that the data actually get used for doing something!

• **Consultant on Cool:** This kid advises your organization on maintaining a "with-it" public image and avoiding outdated community impressions.

• **Eye-Spy:** This kid observes programs, services, and participants in other organizations and reports on what your "competition" is doing so you can benchmark your own efforts.

• **Fast-Forward Fanatics:** If an idea, program, or service is behind the times, even if repositioned with a catchy name, these kids call you to task on it. They then push, prod, and cajole everyone toward innovation. They're the perfect antidote to your "we've always done it this way" members.

The titles are playful, yet the contributions are as meaningful as those of the lawyers, accountants, and marketing professionals on your board. Give things a try! At the very least, you'll be more up-to-speed on emerging issues, more informed about your competition, more image-savvy and proactive in developing future leadership. The larger benefit will be in helping our children plan their own destiny. ■

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These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, 800-424-7367, www.snpo.org.



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