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Youths need positive peer culture, caring adults

Civic leaders and parents in Battle Creek are stepping up to combat issues of gang violence in their community ("Parents take on gang violence," March 25), and for this they should be commended.

Parents Against Gang Members and the members of the Monday Morning Group are modeling compassion and a commitment to change by looking to resolve the issues of gangs and gang violence.

They are taking ownership of the problems and recognizing that a concerted effort is needed in order to change the future for many of today's youth.

This is an initiative we can stand behind at Starr Commonwealth, where our mission is to create positive environments where children flourish.

Many of the high-profile problems of violence in schools and communities are closely related to the issues at the foundation of peer bullying.

At the root of many gang formations, including those in Battle Creek, is a group of peers who attach themselves to one another and their deviant behaviors when allies in adults aren't available.

In many school districts and communities, the response is one of punitive, zero-tolerance practices that are often counterproductive. They serve only to further alienate adults from children.

A positive peer culture, however, can be a shield against school violence, just as fostering an environment of positive adult and peer bonds creates respectful alliances.

Substitute the word students for youth and think about how these recommendations for schools, produced by the U.S. Department of Education in collaboration with the nation's premier law enforcement agency, the U.S. Secret Service, could lead to a resolution of gang violence in Battle Creek:

- Mutual respect: In a climate of safety, adults and students respect each other.
- Connection to an adult: Each student has a connection to at least one adult.
- Problem-solving focus: Problems can be resolved without fear, shame or reprisal.
- Code of openness: Students bring serious concerns to the attention of adults.
- Peer helping: Students try to help friends and peers who are in distress.

Gangs and the violence associated with gangs are not new. They exist in communities where youth have operated beyond the positive influence of adults. But the natural reaction too often is to remove ourselves from the youth who become involved in such activity.

Negative peer cultures form where they encourage members to value delinquency and to act tough to impress one another. It's no secret that people do things as a group they normally wouldn't consider as an individual.

What we must do is help children to recognize their own values, teach them to remove themselves from intimidating peers and provide them with supportive, caring and concerned adults.

In order to counter the negative influences peers have over one another's thinking, values and behavior, we must:

- Reconnect all youth to caring adults. These respectful alliances encourage youth to develop their potentials and surmount challenging life problems.
- Create positive peer cultures for all youth. If existing youth groups are negative, the challenge is to create "prosocial gangs," according to author Arnold Goldstein.

Positive bonds to adults and peers are natural nutrients in environments where elders and young live in mutual respect. Positive Peer Culture is not a contrived program, but an evidence-based practice in place at Starr Commonwealth where all show concern, where no one has the right to hurt and where each is responsible for helping.

In order to truly change the values of the youth involved in gangs, it's important that we get closer to the young people involved, develop stronger relationships with them and prove that this is not an "us" versus "them" argument. This is about uniting a community to create a positive, safe environment where these youth can grow.

*This article is based on research for an upcoming book, "Respectful Alliances with Youth," by Larry K. Brendtro, Martin L. Mitchell and Herman J. McCall.*

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