

## **Lighted Candles in the World of Humanity:**

### **Education of Junior Youth**

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#### **Abstract**

One of the principle foundations of Baha'i teachings is universal education. Education is needed not only for the body and mind, but also the heart. Baha'u'llah's writings note that lack of a proper education unjustly deprives people of the powers and abilities that are rightly theirs. In recent years the Universal House of Justice has directed the attention of Baha'is throughout the world to the special educational needs of junior youth (i.e., those in the upper elementary and middle school age levels, ages 9 to 16). This presentation presents key points related to the needs of junior youth from biological, sociological, psychological and spiritual perspectives. Then it offers an overview and examples showing how Baha'i Junior Youth programs, effectively create the needed educational environments and socialization opportunities at the community level to nurture young people into happy, confident and fully pro-active citizens oriented toward the service of humanity.

Children are the most precious treasure a community can possess, for in them are the promise and guarantee of the future. They bear the seeds of the character of future society... (The Universal House of Justice, Ridvan Message 2000)

#### ***Introduction: Our Moral Duty to Junior Youth***

The first generation born in the Heisei era comes of age in 2009. They spent their childhood years in the 1990's and have never known a world without broadcast satellite TV, FAX machines, and the Internet. They spend their youth surrounded by the advancing technological means of global expression – cell phones, instant messaging, digital cameras, and You Tube -- but also within view of the corroding social effects of terrorist threats, AIDS and other pandemics, extreme poverty and global hunger in the presence of unimaginable wealth, environmental insecurities, as well as corruption and moral decay at all levels of society. The youth of today are the adults of the near future and the standard bearers of a more distant future as yet unimagined.

How have we, as adults, been helping today's children and youth to shape their lives? The Universal House of Justice Message for Ridvan 2000 admonishes, "...the seeds of the character of future society...is largely shaped by what the adults constituting the community do or fail to do with respect to children. They are a trust no community can neglect with impunity. An all-embracing love of children, the manner of treating them, the quality of attention shown to them, the spirit of adult behavior toward them – these are all among the vital aspects of the requisite attitude."

In this same message, the Universal House of Justice calls upon the Baha'is throughout the world to devote special attention – "creative attention"-- to those known as "junior youth, who fall between the ages of, say, 12 and 15." In other documents the age range is placed between 11 (or even as young as 9) and 16. So, roughly speaking, we are to look at the special needs of upper elementary and junior high school students. This is that age group referred to as "junior youth." Advertisers sometimes call them "tween-agers." They are no longer really children, in that they are developing a lot of their own skills and autonomy. But they are not yet independent young adults. Let us remind ourselves that Baha'u'llah has written that the age at which a person becomes accountable and answerable for his own choices and behavior (the so-called "age of maturity") is just 15 years old. So the years of rapid change preceding and surrounding this "age of maturity" hold special importance in many ways. In order to understand the special needs of this age group let us briefly recall and consider what happens to a boy or a girl during these years – physically, intellectually, socially and morally.

## **Characteristics of Junior Youth**

After the period of rapid growth that a child experiences between birth and three or four, the early school years of a child are relatively stable, with growth and body changes happening at a slower pace. Then suddenly, as girls and boys enter the period called puberty, they experience such rapid physical and emotional changes that they hardly know themselves. Some young people put on height so quickly that they may outgrow their clothes or shoes overnight. Their changes in appearance, vocal changes, hair growth and other signs of physical maturity may happen so suddenly that they hardly recognize themselves from day to day. Added strength and muscle skills enable them to attempt greater physical challenges. It is natural that children at this age may become more self-focused and moody, concerned about their appearance, their image and how they will turn out.

At the same time, they are beginning to have greater intellectual capacity. They can understand abstract concepts, and often enjoy playing logic and word games. They are fascinated with mysteries, magic and still love simple pleasures like eating ice cream or walking in nature. They can begin to express their own ideas if encouraged to do so. But they also struggle with the balance between making their own ideas heard and being stubbornly attached to them. Socially they are able to move around on their own, outside of the sphere of their family. So they begin to define a new identity that goes beyond their role as members of their immediate family. There are usually at least two clear aspects of their lives: the home and the school. Their school friends and teachers begin to be more important to their own definitions of themselves as someone who “can” or “cannot” do things. They begin to search for ways to feel capable in the context of a larger community. In this stage their moral development has shifted from simply responding to pleasure or pain (as a baby would), or responding to the feeling of love and belonging to the parents (as in early childhood stages), to a new level of moral development defined by their feeling of belonging to a larger group or community. Junior youth tend to define their moral values by the values of their community. In the future, they will grow beyond this stage to learning to find the locus of moral authority within themselves as related to a higher, wider and more universal sense of good or bad. But the junior youth is generally not at that stage yet. So the community becomes a very important part of his or her young life.

## **The need for connection to people and to meaning:**

A recent study was commissioned in the United States sponsored by the YMCA and Dartmouth College (YMCA, 2003) to try to find out why the young people of today, despite unprecedented affluence and opportunity, are also experiencing increased levels of psychological and social disorders. The project brought together researchers from a broad range of fields – from biochemistry and brain research, to sociology, psychology, anthropology and education. In their report, “Hardwired to Connect,” these researchers, the “Commission for Children at Risk,” noted that human beings are biologically “primed” or designed for connection to two things: connection to other human beings, and connection to meaning. “What’s causing this crisis of American childhood is a lack of connectedness – close connections to other people and deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning.” They noted that human communities and cultures across time have mobilized to help young people to channel their growing adolescent strength, energy and aggression into meaningful and positive social directions. Traditionally, cultures have also made concerted effort to define the meaning of and to set guidelines for the growing powers of youth, including sexual behavior, in order to prepare them for social roles that ensure the stability of family foundations and sustain optimum conditions for raising the future generations. Across cultures it has been recognized that morality in late childhood and early adolescence involves idealization of individuals and ideas. This is the time when young people are motivated by stories of heroes, and can be moved to heroic action in the wider society. Because young people can begin to understand more complex issues and are developing

wider and more varied social networks, they are looking for a new level of meaning – higher and wider than themselves. As noted by Gutman (ibid), their natural capacity for “awe, worship, and idealization” desires to be awakened and stimulated. If their own communities do not offer better alternatives, they may seek to fulfill their need to experience a sense of “awe” in accessible arenas like sports, arts and music, or in altered emotional states through alcohol or drugs, or anywhere that “risk” seems to offer reward. Scientific research has shown that if these biological, social and emotional needs are not met in timely and appropriate ways throughout the periods of a person’s development, the brain itself can become handicapped and distorted. The person will tend (at times alternately) toward two extremes – aggression or social withdrawal.

Throughout the world, in recent years, the traditional sense of community has all but melted away. Its local influence has been replaced by a pseudo-sense of community that is fostered by impersonal commercial forces of media and advertising. Young people are made literal targets of campaigns to convince them that their identity revolves around consumer goods and popular fads in music or fashion. The commercial forces have little interest in the moral development, long-term happiness or integrity of their young targets. A person who is left wanting more is the ideal for a market-oriented culture force.

But where is the meaning, and how does such a shallow interest allow for real connection? The cult of ego-gratification leads only to further breakdown in society and extremes of behavior. In 1988 the International Teaching Center of the Baha’i Faith sent out a special message concerning “...that group between the ages of 10 to 16”...“These years of early youth, in today’s world in particular are very difficult, but at the same time we see from the Sacred Writings that the capacity to grasp fundamental moral and spiritual principles by which the light of good character is made evident, is deposited within these children. This suggests that if thousands upon thousands were invited into the Cause, and assisted to become deepened teachers of the Faith, they could in turn rescue their peers.”

From the beginning of Baha’i history in the mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century, the idealism and energy of youth has been honored as a positive and necessary element of the whole social fabric. Youth have been called upon to be the bearer’s of the message of the unity of mankind, and the standards of equality, and justice suitable to this new age. While they are being educated and called to prepare themselves for excellence in their work or occupations and leadership in professions, young people must also be actively introduced to and involved in community life. In recent years, messages from the World Center remind us that the youth themselves, if given proper support and opportunities, will become the most potent force for positive social change in their own generation and for the future of mankind.

The Baha’i Writings suggest that “*lack of a proper education hath deprived man of that which he doth inherently possess.*” (Gleanings, ) This leads one to inquire about what is needed for “a proper education.”

Social science has, over the past century, been examining just this issue, and the fruit of the findings of thousands of studies bears out the very advice that the Baha’i Writings have provided during this same time period as Baha’i communities develop around the world. The Commission for Children at Risk, for example, has drawn attention to the qualities needed in what they called “authoritative communities,” that is, communities best able to support and nurture youth to become positive, responsible and contributing adults. (See Figure 1.)

- ❖ Multi-generational communities including children and youth.
- ❖ Treat children as ends in themselves (appreciated at each stage).
- ❖ Warm and nurturing.
- ❖ Establish clear guidelines and expectations.
- ❖ Have a long-term focus.
- ❖ Core work done by non-specialists.
- ❖ Encourage spiritual and religious development.
- ❖ Reflect and transmit a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person.

Figure 1. Characteristics of authoritative communities

It is worthy of note that a well-functioning Baha'i community that is engaged actively in its various core activities embodies each and every one of these qualities. These are the very kinds of activities that Baha'is are striving to develop wherever they live. Researchers at Search Institute, another US-based research organization, have combed over 1200 social science research reports and have identified 40 "assets" that are significantly related to the healthy social and emotional growth of children. (Lerner & Benson, 2003). They have organized these under four headings of "external assets" (conditions surrounding the child) and four "internal assets" (conditions which exist within the child). (See Figure 2, and the complete assets list at the close of this article.)

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| <p>External assets:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*<b>support</b> from parents, school and neighborhoods,</li> <li>*<b>empowerment</b> received from involvement in community tasks,</li> <li>*<b>boundaries and expectations:</b> clear and consistent guidelines from home, school and community,</li> <li>*<b>constructive use of time</b> (quality and balance in daily routines, including spiritual and religious activities).</li> </ul> <p>Internal assets:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*<b>commitment to learning</b>, (enjoys learning both formal and informal)</li> <li>*<b>positive values</b>, (commitment to virtues such as, honesty, caring, justice, etc.)</li> <li>*<b>social competencies</b>, (decision-making, friendship, appreciation of diversity)</li> <li>*<b>positive identity</b> (self-esteem, sense of purpose, etc.)</li> </ul> |
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Figure 2. General categories of the 40 assets

The Search Institute has validated the effects of the 40 assets in studies of over 200,000 young people throughout North America. They have found direct correlations between the NUMBER of assets present and positive behaviors. Figure 3 shows the data comparing the percentage of young people who develop and display leadership skills, habits of health maintenance (including resistance to temptation and peer pressure), social competencies that enable them to appreciate diverse kinds of people, as well as success in school in relation to the number of assets that are present in their lives.

| Promotion of positive attitudes and behaviors/ |                           |       |       |       |
|--|---------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
|  | Number of assets present: |       |       |       |
|  | 0-10                      | 11-20 | 21-30 | 30-40 |
| Leadership skills:                             | 50%                       | 65%   | 77%   | 85%   |
| Health Maintenance:                            | 26%                       | 47%   | 69%   | 89%   |
| Valuing Diversity:                             | 36%                       | 57%   | 74%   | 88%   |
| Success in School:                             | 8%                        | 17%   | 30%   | 47%   |
| School performance:                            |                           |       |       |       |
| GPA  | 2.1                       | 2.7   |       | 3.0   |

3.2 (Search Institute)

Figure 3: Relationship between assets and positive attitudes and behaviors

Figure 4 shows to what degree the assets protect against high-risk behavior, noting that the percentage of young people who become involved in risk-taking behaviors such as problem alcohol or drug use, violence or unsanctioned sexual activity decreases directly and dramatically in proportion to the number of assets they have in their lives.

| Protection from high-risk behaviors/ | Number of assets present |       |       |       |                    |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------|-------|-------|--------------------|
|                                      | 0-10                     | 11-20 | 21-30 | 30-40 |                    |
| Problem Alcohol Use:                 | 49%                      | 27%   | 11%   | 3%    |                    |
| Involved in Violence:                | 61%                      | 38%   | 19%   | 7%    |                    |
| Illicit Drug Use:                    | 39%                      | 18%   | 6%    | 1%    |                    |
| Sexual Activity:                     | 32%                      | 21%   | 11%   | 3%    | (Search Institute) |

Figure 4: Relationship between assets and risk-taking behaviors

In Japan, the life of the junior youth usually revolves around study and school-sponsored sports clubs. Caring friendship and nurturing family relationships are present for most. But it is in the area of community connection and empowerment that assets are poorest. In general, there is very little connection to the social life of the surrounding community for the majority of middle-school students. Opportunities to contribute to or be involved in the tasks that shape a community are few. Most students have very few contacts with adults or children in other age groups outside of school or family. A study of Junior High School students conducted by this author (Higgins, 2000) showed that one in six students had no special people in their lives who they felt they could talk to on a regular basis – not a sibling, a cousin, a parent or a relative of any kind, not a friend, a teacher, or any other adult.

A survey done in Yamaguchi with nearly 500 parents of 5<sup>th</sup> grade students and 2<sup>nd</sup> year junior high school students (Higgins, 2006) showed that although over 90% of parents viewed family support and school support as adequate, eight out of 20 (40%) of the external assets were considered “not adequately present, or not at all present” by at least one-third of parents. Less than 4% of parents felt that parent involvement in school was high enough. Over 70% of parents felt that there were not adequate role models for their children outside of their families. Surprisingly, 45% felt there were not adequate role models for their children within their own families either. In addition, 40% felt that their neighborhood was not very caring. Over half of the parents noted that the youth are given few or no chances to be used as resources in the community; they have few opportunities to serve others; and that rules of the school and neighborhoods were not consistent or fairly applied. At least one in three parents also judged that 25% of the internal assets were not adequately present. These missing assets included: engagement in school (75%), sense of purpose (51%), reading for pleasure (52%), achievement motivation (44.5%), cultural competence, particularly as it relates to interacting with people of different ages and backgrounds (35%).

### Baha'i programs for Junior Youth

In response to the call of the Universal House of Justice to remedy the general deficits in community life for the young people, Baha'is have developed a three-year program of community-initiated activities that are designed to give balance and harmony between physical, intellectual and moral training. The programs engage young people thoughtfully in three arenas: their home, school and community. A moral framework emerges through cooperative social,

physical, academic and moral education activities. In order to help junior youth become solid citizens, original integrated approaches to the special needs of this age group have been created. Moral responsibilities are cultivated in fun and engaging ways, while care is taken not to let unproductive, addictive or frivolous activity rob them of precious time and energies. Through Baha'i Junior Youth programs, junior youth are empowered to use their hearts, minds and actions to make a positive difference to society.

Ideally there are about 4 to 10 young people in each group. The groups are open to all junior youth - it is definitely NOT for Baha'is only. Junior Youth activities are one of the four core activities sponsored by the Baha'i Community that are open to all. Most such groups meet about twice a month for at least 3 hours. Young participants build and strengthen positive peer group influences through interaction in various purposeful activities under the guidance of a trained older youth or adult who acts as a facilitator of the group. In a cycle of activity that involves a balance of purposeful study and fun, they work and plan together opportunities to exercise social skills. They plan, find or create opportunities to serve the community in various ways according to their interests and resources. Examples of service-learning projects may include learning how to cook, or plan a community event, or learning to read stories, put on skits or play games with younger children, how to care for elderly in thoughtful ways, or any one of a number of environmental enhancement activities. As the youth prepare for and carry out such activities, they reflect on how their academic and social learning ties into the needs of society and to their own goals in life.

There are several elements woven into the program. One aspect is the creation of a meditative, inspirational or quiet period of reverence – a “sacred space” - using music or other devotional or reflection activities that provide a spiritual centering experience. There is a period of cooperative study time that exposes the junior youth to the language of moral discernment. In the first stage stories such as Aesop's fables introduce concepts and vocabulary. During the second phase youth read and talk about stories that compare their lives and challenges to a group of young people being raised in a different culture. Finally, their growing reading and communication abilities lead them to making their own declarations and commitments to social contribution in their own communities. Recreation, arts, music and games are very much a part of helping the junior youth to develop and exercise many aspects of their talents in a positive circle of friendship. The balance of these activities may come from the interests of the youth, as well as the pool of resources that may be available to them from the community.

Books that support the framework of the phased program are available in English and in Japanese: [Walking the Straight Path](#), [Breezes of Confirmation](#) and [Drawing on the Power of the Word](#). But the books themselves are only a small piece of the total program which involves much more self-directed social interaction between the participants. According to a facilitator of one program in Western Australia (Baha'i News, <<http://news.bahai.org/story/516>>), “It (the program) gives them the tools needed to recognize the moral issues underlying the choices they make.” “It also develops in the youth a power of expression.” At one level, there is a lot of local autonomy in choices of activities, but the manner and principles behind the selection is designed “to achieve specific goals including step-by-step problem-solving, nurturing virtues, and social awareness.” In the process the activities also foster improved academic skills by providing practice in practical settings and a social-service oriented motivation for learning.

It may be obvious by now, that the Baha'i Junior Youth programs multiply the assets that enrich a young person's life. They provide greater connection to community, enable young people to know older youth and adults outside of the sphere of home and school who can become mentors and role models for them. The programs provide them ways to broaden and build social competencies, encourage balance in use of time, encourage reflection, and give junior youth opportunities to contribute effectively to the surrounding community. They learn to balance idealism with discernment, and to move from thought to action. With practice, they learn that their plans and actions can and do make a difference.

This empowers them and gives greater purpose to their learning. It helps them put values and virtues into practice while channeling their dreams and ideals into positive and practical directions. Such activities build assets that enrich and strengthen the whole community, from the youngest to the most senior members.

The training program for facilitators of the programs began as an “add-on” to the core activities of active Baha’i communities. But now Junior Youth facilitator training is being woven into the main sequence of the study program of the Ruhi Institute, which aims to foster spiritually knowledgeable, and capable human resources to bring about a widespread change in culture. The facilitator training includes an understanding of the needs and special characteristics of youth, practical lessons in how to engage youth through games and interactive activities, group-building and communication skills, and consideration of ways to draw them into socially relevant activities of service-learning.

Such Junior Youth programs have been going for several decades in some communities such as Malaysia. A number of Baha’i-inspired programs exist around the world that incorporate the same or similar principles such as the Full-Circle Learning Program started in the US and the Peace Pack Program in Western Australia. Within the past several years Baha’i Junior Youth programs have been initiated successfully (even if not in complete form) in Baha’i Communities in Japan such as Takamatsu and Yamaguchi. If the effort is sustained, the program is self-renewing as the young “graduates” of these programs become dedicated teachers, leaders and facilitators for the next generation of junior youth. The fledgling efforts in Japan have already seen a number of shy youth turn into outgoing, articulate and valued “year-of-service” volunteers, budding musicians, children’s class teachers, and other active servants of social development in Japan and abroad.

### **Conclusion:**

Each generation of young people is created to carry forward an advancing civilization. Yet the capacities within them are dormant unless they are nurtured by “a proper education.” Dormant or underdeveloped spiritual capacities can become corrupted and misused. A proper education involves education of the heart as well as the mind and body. It requires the interaction of home, school and community. The assets of support, and empowerment within the context of fair boundaries and balanced use of time helps the young person to develop a sense of place and purpose within each as he or she moves from their nest of origin to take flight into the wider world. Baha’is are called upon to make service to junior youth a particular focal point of their service in this rapidly-changing period of history. The recommended methods directly build assets – especially those assets that are currently missing in the social fabric. A candle does not shine without an outside force enkindling its flame, a tree requires care in order to bring forth its best fruit. Abdu’l-Baha often offered prayers to heaven that whatever capacities we are given, will become useful in this world and a source of increase bounty in all the worlds beyond. But to train our capacities in order to be sources of guidance for others requires that we arise and make efforts. We know what we must do – we must only arise to do it.

May these souls be lighted candles and fruitful trees; may they be pearls of the shells of providence; may they be stars of heaven. This is my supplication to God. This is my request from the Beauty of Abha: that He may submerge all of you in the ocean of His grace. (Abdu’l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 77)

Resources:

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The Ruhi Foundation, (2002) **Walking the Straight Path**, Royal Palm Beach, Florida: Developmental Learning Press.

ON-LINE references to Baha'i Junior Youth Programs:

- 1) Baha'i News article about Junior Youth Programs <<http://news.bahai.org/story/516>>
- 2) Impressive TV interview with a youth facilitator in Perth, Australia  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7BNvvs80eQ>>

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YMCA of the USA (2003) *Summary of the Commission on Children at Risk's Report: "Hardwired to Connect, the new scientific case for authoritative communities.* <[www.americanvalues.org/html/hardwired.html](http://www.americanvalues.org/html/hardwired.html)>