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Another way of looking at teens:

positive youth development

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Teenagers. Let's think about that for a minute. What images, thoughts, or feelings does the word teenagers conjure up?

"Storm & Stress"

For a long time, the teen years have been seen as a time of "storm & stress". We assume that rangatahi cause problems; problems for themselves, and for those around them. Hormones are frequently blamed. Whānau and others need to cross their fingers and hope to make it out the other side. Preferably in one piece.

This view is widespread, reinforced by media, parents, and sometimes even 'experts' on adolescents. Parents of young children sometimes dread their tamariki becoming rangatahi.

This view has influenced the study of adolescents since early last century.¹ These ideas began to change as researchers started to realise that most rangatahi actually do pretty well during their teen years. NZ research found that about 80% of secondary school students were healthy and not engaging in high risk behaviours.²

Positive Youth Development

There is another way to look at this stage in a person's life. Positive Youth Development (PYD), shifts our view of rangatahi from 'problems to be solved'³ to 'resources to be developed'. Rather than focussing on preventing problems, adults need to actively assist rangatahi to develop the skills they'll need to thrive as adults. Just preventing young people from 'getting into trouble' is not enough.

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Negative stereotypes: at what cost?

Critical talk about rangatahi can create self-fulfilling prophecies, as they "live up or down to the expectations they believe we hold for them."⁴

When we expect the worst, we are more likely to get it. Studies have shown that the more parents expect their teen to be rebellious and take risks, the more likely this is to actually happen.⁵ Similarly, parents who believed that their teen was likely to drink, had teens who drank more.⁶ In other words, research suggests that not only are these negative stereotypes wrong much of the time, they can also contribute to poorer outcomes. The very thing we want to avoid.

¹ Hall, 1904, cited by Lerner et al., 2005

² Noel et al., 2013

³ Pittman et al., 2003

⁴ Ginsburg & Jablow, 2011, p.339

⁵ Buchanan & Hughes, 2009

⁶ Madon et al., 2006, cited by Steinberg, 2016





Rangatahi whose strengths are harder to see, might be those who most need an adult making the effort to find them.

While we can learn at any stage in the life-span, the plasticity of adolescence - that is, their ability to change and think differently - means that it is easier to do so at this stage, than it will be later. This plasticity is a strength shared by all rangatahi.¹⁰

The role of adults

To paraphrase John Donne: "No teen is an island." Rangatahi are not developing in isolation, but as part of their wider whānau and community.

While there are some internally-driven changes during this time, for example, to their bodies, including their brains, the way in which this development unfolds also depends on their environment. There is a two-way relationship between rangatahi and their world.¹¹ What rangatahi do affects those around them; equally, the experiences and relationships that rangatahi have, influence them.

Both the young person and their environment have strengths and resources that can contribute towards positive development.¹²

The way in which adults interact with young people influences their behaviour and development. This includes the things we can readily see, like their behaviour, and those we may not see, like their expectations. Effective social support provided by adults is a major asset for young people.¹³

What does this mean in practice?

- For some of us, this may mean a change in the ways in which we think and talk about and with rangatahi.
- It may also mean challenging the negative stereotypes and expectations about adolescents that are so common.
- If difficulties arise, e.g. substance use issues, mental health concerns, learning or behaviour difficulties, these need to be addressed. However, they should not be allowed to 'define' the person, or young people in general.
- An important role of adults is to recognise the strengths rangatahi already possess and support their ongoing development.

⁷ Steinberg, 2016

⁸ Larson & Tran, 2014

⁹ Pittman et al., 2003

¹⁰ Lerner et al., 2013

¹¹ Larson & Tran, 2014

¹² Lerner et al., 2013; Masten, 2014

¹³ Rhodes & Lowe, 2009, cited by Lerner et al., 2013

Nature & nurture

Human development is life-long, occurring as a result of both nature (the genes we are born with) and nurture (the environments, experiences, and relationships that we have). The way in which rangatahi develop in adolescence is influenced by earlier development during pregnancy and childhood. In turn, the relationships, experiences and skills developed in adolescence will help shape the adults rangatahi become.

When there are difficulties

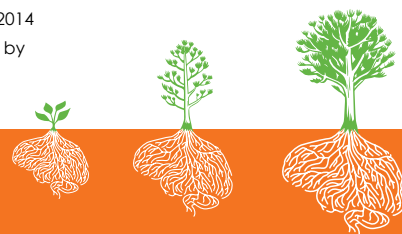
Some rangatahi do experience difficulties. At times these are serious and require specialist help. Even when this is the case, it is important to understand these difficulties are just one part of what's happening for the young person; it is not the whole picture of who they are, nor what they can become.

It's important to understand that the difficulties that some rangatahi experience are not an inevitable part of being a teenager; instead, they may have been heavily influenced by their experiences growing up.⁷

Strengths

PYD focuses primarily on the strengths rangatahi have.⁸ Another way of thinking about it is seeing the glass as half-full.⁹ For example, a teen may have leadership skills being used in a negative way to influence their peers, which could be harnessed to lead a positive group or activity.

Despite the issues some rangatahi face, they will also have strengths. When adults such as whānau and teachers can recognise these assets and help to strengthen them, they are supporting rangatahi to reach their potential. Sometimes strengths are easy to notice; for example, skill on the netball court or rugby field. At other times, strengths can be harder to see; loyalty to a friend, quietly helping out whānau. Rangatahi whose strengths are harder to see, might be those who most need an adult making the effort to find them.



Conclusion

The PYD approach focuses on supporting young people to develop their full potential by recognising their strengths, supporting them to develop further, as well as addressing problems when needed. Adults in the lives of rangatahi play a crucial role in supporting young people to make the most of this period of development.

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Glossary of Māori terms:

Rangatahi – youth, younger generation

Tamariki – children

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Understanding adolescents who have experienced early adversity

<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/understanding-adolescents-who-have-experienced-early-adversity/>

Explaining Social and Emotional Changes During Adolescence

<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/explaining-social-and-emotional-changes-during-adolescence/>



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