



Start with one child. Add a supportive, loving family, combined with caring relationships. Mix in opportunities for educational achievement and success. Finally, stir in a nurturing environment that values the child's strengths and potential. You have a recipe for the positive development of all youth.

But what if some, or most, of those ingredients are missing? What are the chances a youth will find his or her way through adolescence and into adulthood? Some would say the chances are limited, at best, without positive, supportive intervention.

The philosophy of positive youth development (PYD)—exemplified by the Work Appreciation for Youth (WAY) Scholarship program at Children's Village, Dobbs Ferry, New York—is rooted in the belief that the best way to



# THE WAY TO ADULTHOOD

*The WAY program helps youth in residential treatment make the transition to independent living.*

By Heather Banks



help young people who are considered at-risk is to provide the supports and services all youth need to develop into caring, competent citizens.

PYD services are aimed at increasing the skills all youth need, but especially those aging out of foster care or residential treatment. CWLA Youth Services Director Maria Garin-Jones says PYD-focused independent living programs should

- embrace total youth involvement,
- create healthy, safe environments,
- promote healthy relationships,
- help youth learn by doing,
- create community partnerships,
- realize that “interdependence” (independence, plus a reliance on and connection to others) takes time,
- value individual strengths, and
- build in feedback and self-assessment.

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## Successful Transitions to Adulthood

Programs like WAY that adopt PYD philosophy and practice have made great strides in helping young people achieve better outcomes as they transition to adulthood. Children's Village President and CEO Nan Dale says adolescents exiting residential care "need the steadfast devotion of a caring adult in their lives, no matter what."

Even those who return to live with family members often require far more support than their families can give them, Dale observes. "And, unfortunately," she says, "many of these kids do not stay home. They move around from community to community, living with friends, relatives, or girlfriends, so they often fall through the cracks in community-based services."

"For these kids," she says, "we have redefined the notion of wraparound services—we wrap a mentor around a youth and tell the mentor not to let go completely until the young person can stand on his own two feet."

Children's Village began helping youth in residential treatment make a successful transition to the community in 1984. "Twenty years ago, a prospective funder asked me what I would do if I had the money to do just one thing differently in providing care to the kids at Children's Village," Dale says, describing the program's genesis. "It took me about two seconds to reply: 'I'd provide really long-term aftercare services, especially to our adolescents, by well-trained, professional mentors.'"

The funder encouraged her to develop an "ideal program," Dale continues. "I knew it had to rest on teaching basic work ethics and a desire for educational achievement." Those elements became the heart of WAY.

WAY currently serves some 250 boys, ages 11 to 21, who are or have been in residential treatment at Children's Village because of severe emotional and behavioral problems. Although Children's Village serves boys and girls, its residential treatment center, and therefore the WAY program, serves only boys.

Almost all the boys—98%—are from New York City; 62% are black, 28% are Hispanic, and 10% are white. Most have been in special education classes, and 74% have been in many foster homes in addition to residential treatment. WAY mentor Carl Johnson points out, "When they arrive, few have any experience beyond a 10-block radius of their homes in impoverished inner city neighborhoods."

The use of paid professional mentors is a key component of the WAY Scholarship program. Currently, six mentors work with 20–25 boys each. Although many programs successfully use volunteer mentors, Children's Village believes these youth need paid counselors who will be there for them in tough times and who are accountable to the agency for delivering intensive, comprehensive services.

At right, recent WAY graduates and WAY Works Coordinator Ray Thomas (top) and WAY Counselor Saul Lichtine.

Private funding allows the mentors to follow each youth and provide services regardless of where the youth lives, how many times he moves, or what other system he enters—such as juvenile justice. This is in stark contrast to traditional community-based approaches, in which a youth starts over with each relocation or involvement in a new service system.

The following case history of "David" and his mentors illustrates how the WAY program works to help youth over a five-year period.\*

### David's Story

David came to Children's Village from the streets of Manhattan at age 14, leaving a family who had physically abused and neglected him. Now he was living on a 150-acre campus, in a cottage at the residential treatment center, with other boys and surrounded by a treatment team devoted to his needs.

David's father was only occasionally involved with the family. His mother had mental health problems and was often unable to care for him, so sometimes he had lived with other relatives. Because of frequent violent outbursts, David had lived with several foster families. Partly because of his academic deficiencies and his many suspensions and changes of schools, he was placed in special education classes.

David first took part in WAY Works, which emphasizes a progression of responsibility and work. (See the program overview on page 40.) He thrived in the clearly structured program. By the time he turned 16, David had lived at the residential treatment center for two years, had held a Level 3 job in the Children's Village store, and had performed well and received several promotions. Now he held two Level 4 jobs in the community—an early-morning paper route and a job at a local gas station.

Later that year, David was selected to be in the first group of youth in the five-year WAY Scholarship program. He and 14 other youth were formally introduced to their mentors as "scholars" at a special event, shortly before what has become an annual WAY Scholarship banquet. His mentor, Philip, a Children's Village staff member, already knew how hard David had worked in his WAY Works jobs.

A trained professional counselor who had previously worked in a juvenile justice facility, Philip met with David while David was still living on campus. They developed a relationship that would continue for many years after David was discharged. They met at least once a week, alone or in a group, either for a chat or for activities that might include a play, trips to New York City, or a ball game.

Johnson says, "New experiences, often inexpensive or free activities, are just huge for these kids. I take them to places I regularly go, and they just can't believe it. They have never eaten different foods and heard people speaking other languages. It is so important for them to learn about the world,

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\* "David," "Philip," and "Charlie" are pseudonyms and represent a composite case history.

# The Way Program

WAY consists of five sequenced levels designed to help youth develop the attitudes and skills needed to succeed.

The first four levels make up WAY Works. The primary goal is to teach work ethics through a series of jobs that increase in responsibility and pay at each level:

- Level 1, unpaid chores;
- Level 2, small jobs for token payment;
- Level 3, low-paying jobs on campus—in the computer lab, greenhouse, or campus store, for example;
- Level 4, paid jobs off campus, such as in local hospitals, stores, or day care centers.

WAY Scholarship, Level 5, is a five-year voluntary program for youth ages 13 to 21. Participants must read on at least a third-grade level, hold a WAY Works job at Level 3 or higher, obtain recommendations from their social worker and cottage supervisor, and anticipate discharge in no less than six months. Each year, a new class of 15–20 boys is inducted into WAY Scholarship.

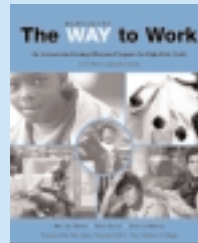
Way Scholarship sets the tone for higher expectations related to education and work. Its five core elements include

- long-term, individualized counseling and mentoring by a paid, professional WAY counselor to help participants meet challenges and solve problems;
- educational advocacy and tutoring to facilitate school success;
- work experiences and training in work ethics to enable participants to build work histories and a sense of themselves as workers;
- group activities and workshops to promote a positive peer culture and help youth develop life skills; and
- financial incentives, such as matched savings, to help youth plan and save for their futures.

As its name—Work Appreciation for Youth—implies, the WAY Scholarship program focuses on youth employment. But it also emphasizes dropout prevention, independent living, and the most important feature of the program—long-term mentoring.

Through the mentor, WAY provides a caring, responsible adult throughout adolescence for youth who are transitioning from care. WAY is designed to accommodate differences in ages, capability, and development by offering sequenced programs. Youth move from level to level when they are ready and able. Periodic performance evaluations, assessments by counselors and other staff, and each youth's interests determine whether he can move up the WAY ladder.

## Want to know more?



*The WAY to Work—An Independent Living/Aftercare Program for High-Risk Youth: A 15-Year Longitudinal Study.* (2000). By Amy J.L. Baker, David Olson, and Carolyn Mincer. Available from CWLA Press.

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multicultural diversity, and different ways of reacting in various situations. They have to learn not to get angry if someone bumps them on the subway.”

During crises, mentors call or visit the boys more often, even daily, and always coordinate their work with the youths' treatment teams. A major crisis for David was deciding to live with his mother again. David's social worker and Philip discussed discharge plans with David. They felt he was ready to leave the residential treatment center but were concerned about the consequences of returning to an uncertain family situation. Leaving Children's Village would also mean changing schools during his junior year, not playing on the high

school basketball team, and losing seniority in his Level 5 part-time job at a doughnut shop.

David was adamant, however. He felt he had learned enough life skills to succeed in any school and find a job anywhere. Philip assured David he would continue to be there for him, and even helped him move to the New York apartment his mother now shared with an aunt.

David quickly realized how difficult it was to change schools and find a new job on his own. And his mother had not improved as much as he had wanted to believe or the Children's Village staff thought she had. After a chaotic holiday season with his mother and aunt, David asked

Philip if he could return to Children's Village.

With Philip advocating for his return to care, David moved back to the residential treatment center for the rest of the school year. He was able to continue in his local high school and rejoin the basketball team. At Philip's urging, David also visited the doughnut shop. The manager gladly rehired him as a reliable, trained worker.

In his senior year, David moved to a group home run by Children's Village. He focused so much on basketball, however, that Philip suggested he work fewer hours in the doughnut shop so he could concentrate on his grades and consider applying to college. Philip helped with scheduling necessary tests, visiting campuses, filling out applications and financial aid forms, and planning for continuing part-time work while studying.

David's next crisis was a low score on the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT). Philip insisted the score did not reflect David's real abilities and that neither he nor David should accept mediocrity. Philip enrolled David in a weekend SAT prep course. David resented losing eight Saturday mornings, but both he and Philip were delighted when his SAT score improved by 280 points.

"I love watching these boys work through the struggle," Johnson observes. "Even moving from a D- to a C+ is great for some of these kids. They need to believe in themselves. They are all gifted in some way."

In May, Philip announced he would be leaving Children's Village, so WAY matched David with a new mentor,



Above, the Children's Village computer bus travels into the community with WAY participants as teachers. Below, the Children's Village greenhouse, a worksite on the campus of the agency's residential treatment center.



Charlie. The two mentors discussed David's case history and worked together with him for several weeks as he prepared for more independent living. Both mentors were present when David graduated from high school—the first member of his family to do so. Over the summer, David began attending the local community college part-time and sharing a transitional apartment with another WAY Scholar. David was proud that his matched savings, another component of the WAY program, enabled him to buy the computer he needed for college.

During his last 18 months in WAY, David decided to put college on hold and work full-time in the doughnut shop. He was soon promoted to assistant manager. Charlie proudly noted that David's longevity in this job attested to his hard work and responsibility. David also moved to an apartment with a friend from college.

At the annual WAY Scholarship banquet, held at a New York City hotel, new youth were inducted into the program. David, now 21, celebrated being a member of the first group to graduate from the five-year program. He was also one of many WAY scholars who received awards for special achievement. In recent years, he has attended the annual banquet several times to congratulate new and continuing WAY scholars and have a reunion with other WAY graduates.

In 1997, David was interviewed for a long-term follow-up study of the WAY program. Then 29, David was married, had two children,

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Asha Blake, cohost of MSNBC's *Later Today*, addresses a WAY awards dinner.

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and was co-owner of the doughnut shop. He had recently started taking college business classes. When asked what he believed was the most important aspect of the program, David answered, "It's the mentoring. One person cares and wants to see you become successful. I still stay in touch with my mentors a couple of times a year."

WAY Program Director Candace Rashada agrees. "The key is consistency and support. WAY gives long-term support to all the kids who participate in the program."

## Tracking Accomplishments

The first group of 15 boys began the WAY Scholarship program at the end of 1984. Every year for the next 10 years, a new group of 15–20 youth (a total of 155) entered the program. In the first six years, 76 youth were also recruited into a comparison group.

Empirical evaluations have compared the groups with each other and with national and New York City data. Some research analyses relate to the full sample of WAY Scholarship participants; others focus on the 118 youth (76%) who stayed in the program for at least 2.5 years.

A 15-year study showed that, for 103 youth who completed at least half of the five-year program, and for whom data are available, 95% were well on their way to self-sufficiency at the end of the five years—they were in school, working, or had obtained a high school diploma or GED. For 89 scholars with available data, 95% had no adult criminal history. Follow-up interviews with 39 former WAY scholars in 1997 found 80% were working; those with full-time jobs averaged \$22,510 in annual income.

The study compared educational achievement—defined as graduating from high school, completing a GED, or still being enrolled in school—among several groups. In the first six WAY classes, 54 participants (82%) met these educational achievement levels, compared with 40 youth (66%) in the comparison group. Compare these results with educational achievement in the groups from which WAY youth originated:

- 71% of youth in group foster care in the United States;
- 67% of black youth in New York City;
- 66% of Hispanic youth in the United States;
- 63% of Hispanic youth in New York City;
- 61% of youth in special education in New York City; and
- 53% of young people, ages 18–24, who are living below the poverty level.

For a remarkably low cost—about \$3,000 annually, or less than \$10 per day per youth—the WAY Scholarship program makes a substantial difference in youths' ability to complete high school, become employed at a living wage, and make a safe, successful transition to adulthood. None of the 300 WAY graduates, for example, was on public assistance as of 1999.

## Replication

Over the past 17 years, Children's Village has made relatively few modifications to the WAY program. "Much to our surprise, the original design was solid," Dale says. "We have tinkered here or there over the years but haven't made major changes to the original design."

One exception is that Children's Village thought five years of aftercare would suffice. "We found that kids actually need and want more," Dale reports, "especially those who go on to



Dateline Anchor Stone Phillips addresses a WAY awards dinner.



## What Is the Research to Practice Initiative?

CWLA's Research to Practice Initiative (R2P) identifies well-researched, effective practices that affect the lives of children, youth, families, and communities in a positive way. CWLA is disseminating information about these programs and practices, as well as strategies for implementation, to CWLA member agencies and the field through a variety of media, workshops, consultation, and development services.

R2P's initial focus will include youth development (such as the WAY Program), behavioral health, family reunification, brain research and early childhood development, and juvenile justice. R2P is also inter-

ested in obtaining information about research-based administrative innovations that have helped managers and staff do their jobs more effectively.

To encourage replication of effective programs in other communities, CWLA will offer consultation or information on programs or practices reviewed by R2P.

If you're familiar with a program or practice suited to R2P, or want further information on the R2P initiative, e-mail [R2P@cwla.org](mailto:R2P@cwla.org) or call R2P Program Specialist Sue Callaway at 202/662-4289 or Research Analyst Carrie McVicker at 202/662-4291.


college. The transition is difficult, and they need more support than the program intended to provide." The agency is now exploring increasing the aftercare component,

Aron Meyers, a 31-year-old professional and member of the first class of WAY Scholars, says, "Even at 21, you are just finding yourself, but you have nobody. Five years, from age 14 to 19 in my case, is just not enough."

Other programs have expressed interest in replicating the WAY model. Through its own staff and a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor, Children's Village has implemented four community-based models of WAY. Additional community-based and residential models are being developed and studied.

Children's Village has learned much about how to replicate WAY in different settings. Research Director Amy Baker explains, "We've learned about optimal program size and location, dealing with preexisting problems in the youth served, supporting staff development, and incorporating different models of the WAY program into the existing organizational structure of the host agency."

Dale notes recent government support for replication of WAY and other positive youth development programs. "The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 has created interest in the model because WAY is fundamentally an independent-living skills program," she says.

Additional research on and replication of the WAY program will no doubt lead to further refining services that meet the needs of high-risk youth—and ultimately to more success stories like David's. 

*Heather Banks is CWLA's Research to Practice Editor.*

## COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF CHILDREN'S VOICE

A photograph of a brown graduation cap with a tassel and a white diploma with a gold seal and purple ribbon. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

R2P will examine Philadelphia's Across Ages intergenerational mentoring program and Vista Del Mar's Health and Wellness Project in Los Angeles.