

Raising the Village

...a blog to share ideas and inspiration among people who are committed to building vibrant communities.

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Raising Socially Responsible Kids - Interview with Dr. Michael Ungar



Dr. Michael Ungar

Our local school district hosted a book club during the time we were writing *Raising the Village*. The book chosen was *The We Generation: Raising Socially Responsible Kids* by Michael Ungar, Ph.D. The book, and more importantly the conversation that it inspired had us listing Dr. Ungar as someone we really wanted to learn more from. The concepts informed and challenged some of our thinking about families. He is the author of 9 books and more than 70 articles and book chapters. He has practiced for over 25 years as a Social Worker and Marriage and Family Therapist

with children and families in child welfare, mental health, educational and correctional settings. Now a University Research Professor, and Professor at the School of Social Work, at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada, he leads an international team of resilience researchers that spans more than a dozen countries on six continents. In addition to his research and writing interests, Dr. Ungar maintains a small family therapy practice for troubled children, youth and their families. He lives in Halifax with his partner and their two teenaged children.

As of this post, Dr. Ungar is hosting an international conference on resiliency in Nova Scotia - with over 550 delegates from around the world. He was gracious enough to fit some time in with us to share some of his thoughts that were most related to early years community development.

How do families and community members communicate value and a sense of belonging to children? What types of connections do children need that families and communities could consider?

(Ungar) Children are more likely to think “We” when provided with homes, communities, and schools that make connections easier. I see this happening all around the world. In the worst, most violent communities, I’ve seen school principals who greet all their students by name and make them feel like they belong at school rather

than installing metal detectors at the school doors. I've seen families move from sprawling suburbs to denser urban housing because it's safer! And their child can actually make a contribution to the family by going and buying a litre of milk at a store that is close enough to walk to. Of course, suburbs and large homes aren't necessarily bad. But when we provide our children homes, schools and communities that ask nothing of them—that allow them to think "Me" instead of "We"—that's when we get into big trouble. We need to create a world around our children that makes it easy for them to learn how to give back to others. I've met families who have a lot of advantages, but still want their children to avoid the perils of selfishness. They:

1. Put younger kids in daycare at least half a day a week to help them learn how to socialize
2. Downsize their homes so people interact more (they have one family room instead of three!).
3. They make sure their homes are places their children's friends feel comfortable dropping in.
4. They encourage their children to attend a neighborhood school so they can feel a part of their community.
5. They give their children chores that make them feel a part of their families. They don't pay them to do them either, but instead expect children to participate as full members of their households.

Early Years Community Development has a strong prevention focus. What do you suspect makes the most difference at a community level to prevent children and youth from becoming at risk? Given the importance of children having multiple relationships with many adults, how can parents and caregivers find suitable, safe adults to be in their children's lives?

(Ungar) As I pointed out in an earlier book, *Too Safe for their Own Good: How Risk and Responsibility Help Teens Thrive*, our children today are actually much safer from sexual exploitation than a generation ago. Fewer children are being abused, and fewer children kidnapped. Having relationships with safe adults is something parents should encourage their children to do. Of course, we still need to teach children how to assess situations. Ask your child, "How does it feel when you are with _____?" If a child never has an experience with other adults, then how will he ever learn to know how to talk to strangers, keep himself safe, or behave in different social situations? Having no contact with other adults actually puts children more, not less, at risk later in their lives!

There are lots of interesting adults for our children to encounter. Our extended families are full of colorful characters. Then there's coaches and teachers, most of whom now go through rigorous checks to ensure they are safe. If we are part of a religion, there's spiritual leaders too, many of whom now are trained in how to appropriately be with children in order to avoid the mistakes of the past. Still worried about sexual predators, especially on the web? Be sure your child's computer is somewhere you can monitor what they are doing and have open frank discussions about what can happen on line.

Many people/parents wish for a more intimate, village-like childhood for children, but it is often not possible. How can parents and communities create a village-like childhood for children?

(Ungar) If you have to drive your child everywhere, you are facing an uphill battle creating a village-like atmosphere for your child. What I've learned from children with whom I do research around the world is that a child who can navigate her way around her community is the child who feels connected. I don't mean a child who is left alone and unwatched. I mean a child who can go get a jug of milk at the store, or who can walk to school (where it is safe to do so). The children who survive best can do these things. They know how to get around their communities.

You can help your child by living in places where there is denser housing. Not possible? Then be sure your child is enrolled in activities with other children. Better yet, get your child to volunteer and help others in their community. I'm also a big fan of sleepovers for children because of the many things children learn when they are away from home. Meet the other child's parents, then encourage your child to spend the night. It will teach your child to trust other adults, and even better, how to behave in new situations. Don't be surprised if your child returns home feeling a little more independent.

June is recognized as Senior's month in many communities. Given that elders play an important role in "raising the village" what are some ways grandparents and senior's can contribute to the nurturing and sense of belonging that children need?

(Ungar) The advantages of knowing our grandparents, or an elder in our community, is the sense of place it gives us. For children, a grandparent's stories give a sense of continuity between the past and the present. They tell the child where he belongs. Strangely, I see grandparents that are being valued far more in other countries than my own. If your child does have a grandparent (or an elderly person who can be a grandparent substitute, like an older uncle, or family friend), be sure to have your child visit, or even better, have your child do an activity with them. My own daughter has spent afternoons cooking with her grandmother. And my son has travelled to see his grandfather just to get help with a special woodworking project he had underway. I meet other families that encourage lots of contact between generations. It's a win-win situation for everyone. Parents get a break. Kids get a sense of where they come from and the values that are important in life. And grandparents are told they are valued and have something to offer this next generation. Somewhere in that mix of interactions our children are sure to learn how to think "We".

check out Dr. Ungar's website:

<http://www.michaelungar.com/>

