

Opening keynote for the White House conference on
Helping America's Youth

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Good morning. We enter into a rich and vibrant American tradition today by participating in this conference. The history of White House conferences focusing on young people dates back to the year 1909. Today at the behest of the First Lady, we reflect on ‘helping America’s youth’. And we are charged with a clear and daunting standard to which we must adhere: our actions and responses must be consistent with the evidence about what works.

So who are these young people, and in what ways do they need our help? Or, put another way, what are the major challenges to healthy adolescent development?

When the White House began focusing on young people nearly 100 years ago, America was receiving literally millions of immigrants, predominantly from Central and Eastern Europe. With dreams of education, employment, safety and prosperity for their loved ones, they faced the uncertainties of life in an entirely new setting. Today’s new arrivals come with the same aspirations, reflecting the deepest of human needs and desires for security, stability, and a future full of possibilities.

These new Americans arrive at a time of extraordinary challenge. They enter our society at a critical point where intense demographic competition is well underway:

We know that the size of the elderly population will grow as we baby boomers age. Simultaneously, an more and more ethnically diverse group of young people will compete for limited resources at a time when the need for evidence-based programs and services, responsive to the needs of these young people, is greater than ever before. The population of adolescents aged 10-19 will grow from the current 41 million, to a record 50 million teenagers by the year 2040.

We face the challenges and opportunities of a growing youth population at a time when the number of young people living in poverty has reached 13 million. This is completely unacceptable to all of us.

There are alarm bells, clear and insistent, coming from the most thoughtful of sources, including many of the advocates and researchers present with us today. From them, we hear that the healthy development of our young people is jeopardized by two

sources: adolescents' health and behaviors, and the social contexts in which they find themselves. Across America today, by age seventeen, about a quarter of our youth have engaged in behaviors harmful to themselves and others. Many are depressed: about a third of adolescents report they have contemplated suicide. Our most authoritative sources warn that 1 in 10 young people suffer from mental illness severe enough to cause some level of impairment. To put this in familiar terms, we're talking about three young people in every large-sized high school classroom in this country. But fewer than 1 in 5 of these youth in need, will actually receive treatment.

America is a study in complexity. Some of our youth already have the nutrients required to thrive in the second decade of life. Caring, capable families. Effective, safe and welcoming schools that provide an education preparing youth for life, now and in the future. Social networks of loving, competent adults. Community organizations that provide opportunities for fun, recreation, and meaningful contribution by young people. Freedom from witnessing and experiencing violence. And access to the resources and opportunities that not only allow our youth to *imagine* wonderful possibilities for themselves, but to pursue them with the encouragement and effective guidance of others.

For other adolescents, however, growing up in climates of fear and uncertainty, the prospects for healthy development are dramatically compromised. In the spirit of those White House conferences that have used these convenings as opportunities to inform the nation and to build an evidence-based agenda for young people, we hold an opportunity in our hands. Gone is the time when we can say we do not know what our youth need, or that we do not know who to align our actions with the evidence. Today, there is a base of scientific evidence that shows us that when we use *deliberate* strategies to promote healthy youth development, we can reduce the risky behaviors that threaten adolescent health and well-being. Beyond this, by providing opportunities to develop competencies, and have positive experiences with caring adults who have high expectations and a positive attitude toward youth, we increase the likelihood that these young people themselves will grow up as caring, capable adults. The evidence shows us where we must make our strategic investments in the community fabric that sustains our youth, particularly for those most vulnerable to the effects of poverty, isolation and despair.

This is what we mean when we talk about supporting healthy youth development. We are referring to an intentional, deliberate process of providing support, relationships, experiences, resources and opportunities that promote positive outcomes for young people.

Very importantly, we believe that this process of promoting healthy youth development simply cannot be left to chance. And it is a compelling truth that young people growing up in economic disadvantage, particularly those in segregated, separated neighborhoods and communities, simply cannot achieve their full potential if they have only their families to nurture them. Healthy adolescent development cannot be the responsibility of parents and family alone.

What have we learned from domestic and international research about the fundamental needs of young people? We have come to understand that there are clear protective factors that appear again and again in the research, protective factors that buffer young people from harm and enable them to develop the competence and confidence they need to succeed in a very complex and challenging world. These include:

- A strong sense of connectedness to parents, family and other adults; and here we are talking about adults who value and reward positive, pro-social behaviors, not anti-social behaviors.

- A strong sense of connectedness to school, where young people report: my teachers are fair; my teachers are interested in me as a person; my teachers have high expectations and care about my success;

- A sense of spirituality, meaning a sense of connectedness with a creative force in the universe; this is above and beyond any specific religious group or affiliation.

- A sense of optimism and possibilities girded by the capacity to read, write, problem-solve and engage in critical thinking, by opportunities to participate as a valued member of a household, school and community, and to develop a sense of accountability to others.

What an opportunity we have, in this tradition of White House conferences, to build an agenda that articulates priorities grounded in the evidence of what works, and what our young people need.

And when we return to our host communities and organizations, we must be fearless in our presentation of the evidence and not be afraid of controversy when we have that evidence to support us. We

must be persuasive about the importance of assuring the resources, the opportunities, and the evidence-based strategies that promote the healthy development of our youth.

What a difference it makes when there are imaginative advocates who refuse to see adolescents as a set of risk factors and problems. I see in this group here those who think as complexly and deeply about the population of young people, as they would about their own son or daughter.

This is the kind of imagination we need.

I want to conclude with a parable told by Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel, a parable meant for those facing great challenges. It teaches the lesson that no matter how complex or difficult the problem, there is always something at hand, always something we can do:

Once there was a very wise woman; it was said that she knew everything. She could speak the language of the flowers and the trees. She could hear the symphony of the stars. She could interpret the melody that the wind makes upon the water. She knew everything.

So the emperor sent for her and asked: “Is it true that you speak the language of the flowers and the trees?”

She replied: “I think so.”

“Can you hear the symphony of the stars?”

“I think so.”

“Can you read what is in my mind? and she said: “I think so.”

“All right,” said the emperor. “I am holding in my hand, behind my back, a bird...and I want you to tell me: is the bird living or is it dead?”

The wise woman was afraid. She was afraid that if the bird was still living, no matter what she said, the emperor would kill it, just to show his power.

So she thought for a long minute, smiled, looked him in the eyes, and said:

“Your Majesty, the answer is in your hands.”

Thank you.