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Institute

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Top ten positive youth development

Protective factors in parenting and growing up

Introduction

Since the nineteen-eighties the attention of practitioners and policy makers has shifted. Besides attention for the prevention of risks and problems in the psychosocial development of young people, growing attention has been paid to factors which enhance their positive development. Until recently academic research was also primarily aimed at risk factors in connection with problematic development. Much less attention was paid to the factors which could protect children and young people and which contribute to a successful development. Research into the effects of interventions aimed at enhancing the positive development of youth is increasing gradually (Groenendaal & van Yperen, 1994; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak & Hawkins, 2004)

Practical, policy and academic focus on the factors that contribute to both the positive and the negative development of young people is growing. Programmes can not only be applied in order to prevent or decrease problematic behaviour, but also to expand the chances and opportunities of both children and their educators in order to achieve young people's positive development.

There is a plea to pay more attention to the various domains in which young people are active. Investments should not only take place in the work with children individually, in groups and in families, but also to influence and change the social environment of young people, in order to achieve their optimal development (Catalano et al, 2004, Durlak, Taylor, Kawashima et al, 2007, Kesselring, de Winter, Horjus, vande & van Yperen, 2012). It has been established that both risk and protective factors are present in the family, in groups of friends, in school and in the neighbourhood. It is important to pay attention to both social and environmental factors in order to support young people in growing up and realising their optimal development (Catalano et al, 2004, Durlak et al, 2007).

This document offers a brief overview of trends and theories which, from their own perspectives, offer an insight into the factors that may contribute to young people's positive development. Additionally we will look at research into the effects of interventions on influencing specific protective factors. Building on these views and studies, we outline a top-ten of protective factors that may serve as guidelines for the application of activities and interventions contributing to the positive development of youth. We will also present brief descriptions of *Communities that Care* and *Everybody a child-raiser* (in Dutch: Allemaal Opvoeders), two programmes aiming at both the child and neighbourhood level.

Positive youth development: theory & research

Academic research into the protective factors and the impact of interventions in this field is mainly of a relatively recent date. In recent years views and approaches have materialised which, each from a – partly – different angle, work towards enhancing the positive development of youth. Here you will find a brief description of the social development model, the Pedagogical Civil Society, the Framework of Developmental Assets, and the Positive youth development (PYD) movement.

The Social development model

The Social development model (Hawkins & Weis, 1985, among others) offers an insight into the factors contributing to the existence and the development of problematic behaviour of children and young people. The model is based on structural theory, social control theory, learning theory and developmental theory. The theoretical model relates the underlying (risk and protective) factors of problematic behaviour to the developmental phases of youth and the various educational domains in which they grow up (family, school, friends, neighbourhood). The model demonstrates how interacting protective factors can protect children and young people against risks.

Conditions for healthy development according to the social development model:

- **Healthy views and clear standards**
  Healthy development for children means that they grow up in an environment in which adults demonstrate and consistently live according to healthy views and clear standards of behaviour. These are standards demonstrated by the family and the community which oppose violence and enhance success in education, healthy behaviour and healthy development.

Bonding

Strong ties between children and the adults who are positive and meaningful to them and serve as examples, are essential to decrease the existence of problematic behaviour. Children and young people will tend to take over and follow opinions and standards if they have strong ties with their families, schools and the neighbourhoods in which they live.

### Opportunities, skills and acknowledgement

Social bonding depends on three conditions:

1. Children and young people need to be offered opportunities to participate in and to contribute in a meaningful way to the relationships that they are part of (family, school, neighbourhood).This should happen in a way that matches their level of development and gives them a sense of responsibility and of making a difference.
2. Children and young people need to be able to develop the (cognitive, social and motor) skills needed to make the most use of the opportunities they are offered and to be successful in their participation.
3. Children and young people should be acknowledged and appreciated for their involvement and effort.

Personal characteristics

Finally there are personal characteristics – such as intelligence, female gender, a positive social attitude, a flexible resilient character – which protect children from risks. These characteristics are difficult or almost impossible to influence, but their environment will have to take them into account (Hawkins, Catalano and Miller, 1992; Howell, Krisberg, Hawkins & Wilson 1995; Steketee, Jonkman, Mak, Aussems, Huygen, Roeleveld, 2012).

The development of healthy behaviour according to the social development model
(among others Steketee et al, 2012)
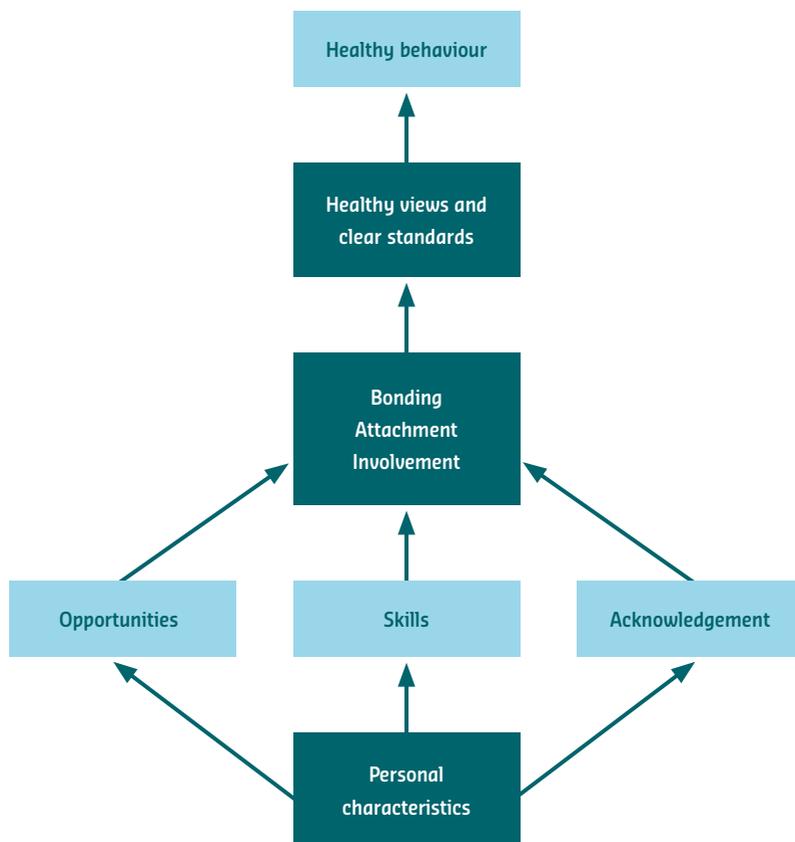
Pedagogic civil society

The risks and problems obstructing healthy development and upbringing of children and young people were considered to reside mainly in the family. Until recently policy and practice primarily focused on formal parenting support. Lately the emphasis has moved to facilitating and promoting informal support to parents. The point of departure is that, although parents are the primary educators, the responsibility for the optimal development of children does not lie only with them. The social environment surrounding the family is of crucial importance for the quality of upbringing which parents can offer. Informal support to parents by other (supportive) adults can contribute significantly to the well-being of children (Kesselring et al, 2012).

The term 'pedagogical civil society' refers to 'the significance that voluntary relation-ships and mutual involvement can have for growing up and for parenting' (Van Dijk & Gemmeke, 2010). More concretely this relates to the promotion of shared activities of citizens with regard to raising children and creating a strong social environment in which more adults have an interest in children's upbringing (Winter 2008 In: Kesselring, 2010). An environment characterised by warmth and support, clear boundaries and high expectations, shared responsibility for parenting and shared values, in which most of the upbringing is undertaken by non-professionals (Benson et all, 1998 In: Kesselring, 2010).

Four tasks of social support can be found in literature:
- Offering emotional support when parents have questions, doubts or problems
- Practical support (for instance child minding or housekeeping)
- Information support , giving advice, information or feedback which may increase parents' knowledge and skills
- Normative support, by setting standards of behaviour and proposing models for desired behaviour.

Regarding the effects of involvement and social support by adults in the child's environment (non-parental adults) on the quality of the parenting and on children's development, Kesselring et al (2012) refer to a study over thirty years (Werner, 1993) into the developmental paths of high-risk children. It showed that children with a supporting network of adults are more resilient and have a higher chance of developing into healthy adults. In addition, other studies demonstrate that children with more carers show more empathic behaviour, are better achievers in school, have more self-confidence and social skills and show less anti-social behaviour.

One condition for offering informal support to parents is that they are willing to accept support and involvement by other adults in the upbringing of their children. Kesselring et al (2012) conducted research to find out in how far parents are willing to share responsibility for the upbringing of their children with other adults and in how far they are willing to participate in parenting activities. The results of this study prove that parents are ambivalent about involving others in the upbringing of their children. A majority of parents feel that they are solely responsible and wish to take care of the parenting themselves, but they do feel that others can contribute to the upbringing.

Researchers indicate that parents seem to be willing to accept practical support, but that they see the instilling of standards and values to their children as something to be done by themselves. With regard to participating in parenting activities, parents seem interested primarily in activities aimed at practical support and undertaking shared activities with other parents and children. The research results attribute differences to subgroups of parents. There are indications that fathers and parents who experience more support from their environment and who offer more social support themselves, are more open to shared responsibility for upbringing. Non-western parents and parents who receive formal support are more interested in participating in parenting activities.

Framework of Developmental Assets

The 'Framework of Developmental Assets' (Benson, Lefffert, Scales & Blyth, 1998), based on large-scale research among pupils, offers a list of forty positive characteristics shown to be important for the healthy development of children and young people.

The study distinguishes external and internal characteristics. External characteristics concern relationships with adults and opportunities offered by adults. Internal characteristics are competences, skills and self-perceptions which young people develop over time and which are distilled from their own experiences.

External characteristics are:

- support (for instance support by the family, relationships with other adults)
- empowerment (for instance a community which sets great store by young people's contributions)
- boundaries and expectations (for instance positive role models, high expectations)
- constructive pastime (for instance taking part in creative activities, participating in youth programmes)

Internal characteristics are:

- commitment to learning (for instance ties with school, homework)
- positive values (for instance honesty, integrity)
- social competencies (for instance problem solving skills, cultural competencies)
- positive identity (for instance positive perspective on the future, self-respect)

The study proves that the more positive characteristics young people show, the less likely their chances of substance abuse, problems at school, antisocial behaviour and mental problems.

Although in this framework all characteristics mentioned are equally important for positive development, there is no strong underlying proof for this correlation. The strongest links have been found for: support, boundaries and expectations, constructive pastime and commitment to learning (Leffert, Benson, Scales, Sharma, Drake & Blyth, 2000).

Positive Youth Development (PYD)

Positive Youth Development is a framework offering an overview of the conditions children and young people need to ensure their optimal development. In this approach the emphasis is on the opportunities and chances young people have to develop into successful adults who contribute positively to their environment and to society.

PYD starts from a holistic view on development and growing up and pays attention to all aspects of development (physical, cognitive, social, emotional and moral development). An optimal development of young people takes place in an environment that boosts the development of competences and offers young people opportunities to use and generalise these skills (Catalano et al, 2004; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002; Durlak, 2007).
In the United States the PYD framework is meant for policy makers to flesh out their policies and to select those programmes that will have the strongest positive impact on the development of children and young people.

Programmes focused on positive youth development all aim to promote one or more of the following factors:

- Children's physical and mental safety
- Opportunities for involvement
- Positive social standards
- Skills development
- Cooperation and matching of interventions and activities in various domains (National Research Council, 2013)

Several studies demonstrate the effectiveness of interventions in enhancing social and emotional competences and promoting pro-social behaviour. Here we will consider two surveys which, from different angles, focus on interventions and protective factors that seem to contribute to the positive development of children and young people.

In a systematic review Catalano et al (2004) looked at which interventions achieve best results in boosting the positive development of children and young people and preventing problematic behaviour. Research into interventions aimed at positive development of children and young people and protective factors has only commenced recently; therefore follow-up data are not available yet. So we do not know in how far the effects remain consistent over a longer period.

This review found 77 well-researched interventions which answer to the criteria they listed for positive youth development programmes. Significant impact of interventions has been found in among others interpersonal skills, quality of relationships with adults and peers, problem solving and cognitive competences, personal effectiveness and educational achievement. Some interventions also showed impact on decrease of problematic behaviour, such as the use of drugs and alcohol, smoking, aggressive behaviour and other problematic behaviour in school.

Although various approaches lead to these results, the effective interventions showed a number of shared components. These interventions are aimed at:

- development of competences (social, emotional, behavioural, cognitive and moral)
- promoting personal effectiveness
- influencing clear standards of behaviour propagated by families and communities
- promoting healthy bonding with adults, peers and younger children
- offering opportunities for youth participation and acknowledgement of their effort and involvement.

Finally the researchers conclude that involving various areas of young people's lives in the intervention will also contribute to the level of effectiveness.

Durlak et al (2007) examined in how far interventions aim at system changes and their level of effectiveness. These changes are defined as attempts to influence roles, attitudes and relationships between members of one or more systems. The study distinguishes between interventions aiming at change on a personal level and interventions aiming at the micro and mesosystem level. The microsystem contains groups like the family, the school and various neighbourhood provisions. The interventions might focus on parenting support or social competence programmes to promote pro-social behaviour in class and in school. The mesosystem is concerned with the possible links between microsystems (for instance between family and school). An example of this could be the promotion of parental involvement and participation at school.

For this study 526 universal interventions aimed at development of competences of children and young people have been examined. Out of these, 64% aimed to achieve some level of change in the micro or mesosystem in order to positively influence children's and young people's competences.

A small number of the effect studies on these interventions (24%) offered quantitative data on the impact of the interventions on system changes. Based on these data, the researchers state that there are indications that attempts to accomplish change at system level may be successful. However, they also state that, due to the small number of studies, more research is needed to make certain. Also more research is needed into the impact of such system changes on the development of children and young people.

Top ten protective factors

On the basis of the theories and studies presented before, various protective factors can be defined that contribute to a positive development of children and young people and compensate the risks that young people are exposed to. Although the elements are described separately, they are often complementary and mutually supporting. Therefore it is necessary to use them coherently and complementary to each other. It is crucial that attention is being paid to these factors in the family, at school and in the neighbourhood or community.

In addition to individual (constitutional) characteristics (such as gender, social disposition and resilient nature), there are factors that relate to young people's skills. Other factors form part of young people's environment, more specifically in their relationship with important adults and institutions around them, and the opportunities offered to them from this environment.

1. Social bonding

Social bonding relates to the emotional bond and the commitment that a child has with social relationships in the family, the peer group, the school and the neighbourhood. More concretely, it involves warm, supportive, affective relationships with the family and non-parental adults around them (Garmezy, 1985, in: Howell, Krisberg, Hawkins & Wilson, 1995). It is founded on the relationships and interactions a child has with his parents and educators. The attachment and bonding a child experiences at an early age with parents and other educators, is the foundation for the ties that are created at a later stage with friends, school and community. The quality of the relationships with these other domains is of essential importance for developing into and growing up to be a healthy adult (Brophy & Good, 1986; Dolan, Kellam & Brown, 1989, Hawkins, Catalano & Miller, 1992 In Catalano et al, 2004).

2. Opportunities for engagement

Children and young people need opportunities to contribute in a concrete, meaningful and valued way to relationships that they are part of (family, school, community). In order to develop interpersonal skills, opportunities for interaction and participation need to be available (Howell et al, 1995; Hawkins, Catalano & Miller, 1992; Hawkins et al, 1987; Patterson, Chamberlain & Reid, 1982 In: Catalano et al, 2004).

3. Prosocial standards

In order to develop in a healthy manner, children need to grow up in an environment that sets and lives up to clear standards and values for positive behaviour. Rules and boundaries need to be clear to children (Hawkins et al, 1992; Howell et al, 1995; Catalano et al, 2004).

4. Acknowledgement and appreciation of positive behaviour

To strengthen their social behaviour it is extremely important that children's positive behaviour is acknowledged and appreciated. Positive confirmation determines young people's motivation to repeat this behaviour in future. People who confirm their social behaviour are essential for the development of positive behaviour. They can belong to the young person's family, school, peer group and community (Ackers et al, 1979; Bandura 1973 In: Catalano et al, 2004).

5. Support from important adults in the environment

Support by non-parental adults may contribute significantly to children's well-being. These are adults who contribute to children's well-being, either directly (for instance by offering emotional support and being a role model) or indirectly (by assisting parents to fulfil their parental obligations). Children with supporting networks are more resilient, better able to cope with stress inducing circumstances and have more chance of growing up to be healthy adults (Werner 1989 In: Groenendaal & van Yperen, 1994; Werner, 1993 In: Kesselring et al, 2012; Benson et al, 1998). The protective effect of social networks has been demonstrated specifically with children who are faced with a lot of risk factors for a problematic upbringing (Houkes & Kok, 2009 In: Bartelink, 2012).

6. Constructive pastime

Children's and young people's constructive pastime relates to the opportunities offered by the family and the community to participate in for instance creative activities (music, theatre) and youth programmes (such as sport, clubs or associations) in their leisure time. Ideally it concerns activities which bring young people in touch with adults who encourage them and support them to develop their talents and skills (Benson et al, 1998).

7. Competences

> **Social competences**

Social competences include a range of interpersonal skills that help young people to integrate feelings, thoughts and behaviour in order to achieve specific social goals. It relates to skills such as noticing and interpreting social signals, skills to solve interpersonal problems, and anticipating the consequences of one's own behaviour (Caplan et al, 1992 In: Catalano et al, 2004). Groenendaal & Van Yperen (1994) also mention as a part of social competences that children are able to select people (for instance peers, teachers) to model themselves on and to use as support to turn to in stressful circumstances.

> **Emotional competences**

Emotional competence is the capacity to identify one's own and others' feelings and emotional reactions and to respond to these properly. Concretely it relates to skills like identifying and naming feelings, expressing feelings, having control over feelings, delaying gratification and controlling impulses.

Social and emotional competences appear to contribute to success in school, prosocial behaviour, good relationships with friends and adults and less problematic behaviour (Greenberg et al 2003 In: Durlak et al, 2007).

> **Behavioural competences**

Behavioural competence refers to effective behaviour. Three dimensions of behavioural competence can be distinguished: non-verbal communication (by means of facial expression, intonation, etc.), verbal communication (for instance formulating clear questions, reacting effectively to criticism, expressing feelings clearly), and acting (helping others, turning away from negative situations, participating in positive activities).

8.   Cognitive skills

Two types of cognitive skills can be distinguished: general cognitive skills such as logical and analytical thinking and abstract reasoning, and specific cognitive skills, such as reading and mathematical skills that are important for success in school.

9.   Commitment to learning

This relates to a combination of personal convictions, values and skills that have been proven to contribute to school success (Scales, Benson, Leffert & Blyth, 2000). It concerns engaging in learning activities, bonding with school, commitment to achieving and positive expectations with regard to one's own success. Commitment to learning is influenced among others by parental attitudes, parental involvement and encouragement. Standards and values propagated by the community and the peer group are also important contributing factors (Benson et al, 1998).

10.   Positive identity

Positive identity relates to how young people see themselves in relation to the future, their self-respect and sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the conviction that one can achieve personal goals through one's own behaviour. The belief in self-efficacy is a decisive factor for motivation, affect and behaviour. The higher the belief in self-efficacy, the higher the goals people set themselves and the greater the motivation to achieve these goals (Locke et al 19984 In: Catalano et al, 2004).

How to use the top ten factors of positive youth development in youth policy?

Integrated youth policy should contribute to realising the mission that all children and young people grow up healthy and in safety (Van Yperen et al 2013). Until recently attention in both policy and practice was primarily aimed at prevention and decrease of risk factors in the development of children and young people. Now a gradual attention shift is taking place in the direction of protective factors in the lives of children and young people, in order to realise their positive development.

This top ten may assist municipalities and service providers to outline an offer of services that will bring about a positive development of young people while at the same time protecting them against risk factors. Services can be targeting one or more factors of the top ten at the level of the individual child. We recommend a combination with interventions or programmes focused on both child and neighbourhood level, like for instance *Everybody a child-raiser* and *Communities that Care*, two examples that will be explained in detail below.

Communities that Care is an example of an operating system that offers systematic and statistically substantiated insights in the risk and protective factors present at the neighbourhood level. Subsequently this information offers a foundation for the concrete design of youth policy, in collaboration with all providers targeting youth. It is important that participation, dropping out and effects are monitored systematically, to guarantee timely adjustments to the offer of services. In addition, it needs a willingness among providers to implement adjustments of their working methods whenever necessary.

Everybody a child-raiser, based on the ideas of Micha de Winter and the Dutch Council on Social Development (RMO), focuses on strengthening the social networks around children and families. In our demanding society families run the risk of becoming overburdened. Research shows that parents have a greater need for informal parenting support (De Winter, 2008). In neighbourhoods with higher social cohesion, risk situations – such as child abuse – are shown to decrease. Increasing the pedagogic quality of the neighbourhood is a protective factor against undesirable parenting behaviour. In 2010-2011 projects in the framework of *Everybody a child-raiser* were undertaken in eleven municipalities, concentrating on studying the role of the Youth and Family Centre (CJG) in this field (Gemmeke, 2011).

Communities that Care

Communities that Care (CtC) is an operating system for the development of systematic youth policies, based on scientifically proven relationships between protective and risk factors and problematic behaviour of adolescents. The long term goal is to create a safe and healthy neighbourhood in which young people are encouraged to make use of their capacities and develop to the optimum. CtC, developed in the United States, is in use in the Netherlands since 1999.

Communities that Care is based on the Social Development Strategy, in which the top ten of protective factors can be placed. In addition to the social development strategy the model of risk factors is being employed. CtC is based on nineteen risk factors (derived from results of longitudinal academic research) which may lie at the bottom of problem behaviour. Those risk factors need to be addressed to reduce problem behaviour in the long run. The risk factors are divided into the four domains in which young people grow up: families, schools, peer groups and neighbourhoods. Examples of risk factors are: problems with family management (family domain), lack of bonding with school (school domain), social standards that stimulate problem behaviour (domain neighbourhood) and contact with friends who use alcohol and drugs (domain peer group).

The CtC prevention strategy analyses a neighbourhood for protective and risk factors with which children are confronted, and for problem behaviour. The presence of sufficient protective factors decreases the chance of problem behaviour, the presence of risk factors increases the chance. By subsequently investing in effective interventions to prevent problem behaviour and promote protective factors, the buffer is strengthened.

CtC is an area-based approach because relevant persons, organisations and provisions in a neighbourhood are actively involved in the change process as much as possible. This creates broad-based support in the neighbourhood to sustain important changes. CtC searches for partnerships between institutions, organisations and residents in the neighbourhood to promote the healthy personal and social development of children and young people (Jonkman, 2006).

Summing up the core elements of CtC: epidemiological research of risk and protective factors, working with prevention programmes that have proved to be effective, and local implementation and evaluation of results (Steketee et al, 2012).

Effects of CtC

Evaluation research in the United States shows positive results. CtC delivers a higher quality of institutional planning and decision making and it shows positive outcomes on the health and behavioural problems of young people (among others Brown et al, 2007, 2008, 2011; Hawkins et al, 2012 In Steketee et al, 2012). A four-year experimental study took place into the effects of CtC in the Netherlands (Steketee et al, 2012). The effects on young people's behaviour proved disappointing. The CtC system failed to influence young people's behaviour in the Netherlands. However, there are obvious results in the cooperation between municipal parties and in their way of working. The study shows that CtC is primarily a strategic operating system. The following results demonstrate this:

- CtC contributes to effective and efficient collaboration between providers in multiple sectors working on prevention
- CtC offers handles for detailed problem analysis
- CtC promotes collaboration and offers tangible directions for a preventive approach

Several possibilities may explain the disappointing results with regard to young people's behaviour (Steketee et al, 2012; Van Yperen, 2013):

- The impact of preventive interventions on young people's behaviour do not become visible until years later
- Of the interventions that were applied in the neighbourhoods only a few show proof of effectiveness in preventing and/or diminishing problem behaviour
- No data are available on the number of young people and parents who took part in the interventions, nor on the drop-out rate, the satisfaction and shifts in problems, knowledge, skills or attitudes
- Although the collaboration between providers does improve through CtC, institutions do not seem to make many changes in their own way of work. There are few actions geared at improvement in the municipal youth policy and in the quality of provisions offered.

Van Yperen states that the CtC strategy might lead to better results if the municipality, the residents and the providers agree beforehand which concrete results they will be aiming for, and the participating providers monitor results during the process and feed them back to the teams and the responsible authorities. This would allow for timely organisation and implementation of improvements and adjustments in the offer of services.

Everybody a child-raiser

The programme *Everybody a child-raiser* (in Dutch *Allemaal Opvoeders*) is a collection of activities aimed at enhancing the pedagogic quality of children's and young people's environment. The activities should stir up residents' willingness to contribute to children's upbringing and education as co-parents . In this way they help to establish a well-functioning pedagogic civil society (Kesselring et al, 2013).

Since 2010 various municipalities have started experiments to strengthen the pedagogic civil society. A particular point of attention was the role the Youth and Family Centre (CJG) could play in boosting citizens' involvement in education. The activities that

formed part of the experiments all facilitate encounter, dialogue and mutual support, for instance parents' rooms at school and living rooms in the CJG, meetings of parents to talk about educational subjects, a project for residents to volunteer as street mentors, etc.

A number of those activities may be new to the community, while others build on what was already there. Characteristic of *Everybody a child-raiser* is its effort to enlarge the range of activities to allow as many groups as possible to take part and to gain by it. Eventually the idea is that networks are created or strengthened that may support parents in their parenting duties.

It is important that the activities contribute to a well-functioning pedagogic society and discourage bad functioning. For meetings, dialogue, collaboration and networks can also have a negative impact, if for instance they take place with antisocial intentions. Adults can function as negative role models if they display violent or other antisocial behaviour. The objective is to create protective activities that facilitate positive development and compensate for risk factors.

The programme *Everybody a child-raiser* dovetails with a number of protective factors in our 'top ten'.

- **Social bonding (1).** The programme aims to establish supportive relationships between the young persons and the parents with other adults in the neighbourhood.
- **Prosocial standards (3).** As indicated, the programme focuses on bonding with adults who contribute to a positive educational climate. Exposure to adults representing negative role models is prevented as much as possible.
- **Support from important adults in the environment (5).** This concerns adults who contribute to children's well-being either directly (by offering emotional support and being a role model) or indirectly (by helping parents to fulfil their parental obligations).

The University of Utrecht is currently conducting research into the effectiveness of the programme. The results will presumably become available in 2014.

To conclude

In 2014 we will produce a supplement to this document in which we outline a number of interventions (if available) and good practices for every factor of the Top Ten. We will make use of the latest views from research into effectiveness of interventions.

We hope this Top Ten of factors that promote the positive development of children and young people may prove useful to you. We welcome your comments and criticisms, which will be used in a following edition.

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